

BALAVAGE, ELYSIA C., Ph.D. *Annihilation and Utter Night: W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and a Modern(ist) Old Nihilism*. (2019)
Directed by Dr. Anthony Cuda. 265 pp.

“What is the source of refreshment in nihilism?” T. S. Eliot asks in a 1950 interview with Leslie Paul. Although Eliot was perhaps speaking rhetorically, his question is a perceptive one. After all, if nihilism depends on humans’ empty existence to exist, then how can such an idea sustain itself? How can we resuscitate God after Friedrich Nietzsche infamously declared Him dead in 1882, an event that paved the way for the ominous nihilism of *The Will to Power* (1901)? More broadly, how can nothing function not only as something, but the thing that will save modern value systems from the infinite abyss? To address these quandaries, it takes an intimate and extensive knowledge of two competing perceptions of nihilism: Nietzsche’s “new” 20th-century nihilism, an idea that declares all values meaningless, and the “old” nihilism that Nietzsche abandons. For Nietzsche, nihilism is a cataclysmic event, and the nothingness left behind is absolute. It stands menacingly on the other side of the threshold, threatening modernity with complete collapse. On the other hand, Benedict de Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, and Georg W. F. Hegel—the philosophers of old nihilism—see creative potential in nothing and interpret God not as deceased, but reimagined. In this dissertation, I argue that W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot each pose similar questions in their work, and their knowledge of nihilist philosophers guide them toward a generative view of nothingness.

My project expands and complicates the impact of Nietzsche's nihilism on modernism. Through a brief historical exploration of nihilism, I show that the new Nietzschean nihilism commonly understood to have heavily influenced modernism—both as a literary and philosophical movement—is contested by a productive nihilism which predates Nietzschean publication and subsequent influence, thus eliciting divergent interpretations of loss and nothingness. While much scholarship focuses on modernism from the perspective of Nietzschean nihilism, I identify a countercurrent within literary modernism that draws upon an “old” tradition of nihilism that removes the negativity of nothingness, reclaims absolute annihilation, and instead imbues it with the generative capability to resist total emptiness and desolation. Specifically, my project analyzes Eliot's and Yeats's readings of Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel, who all participate in an “old” tradition of nihilism that Nietzsche abandons. The poets' readings of “old nihilism” forge a generative view of nothingness in their work, which thus shields them from the loss of value that the new nihilism fosters. In this way, the metaphysical notion of God is not “dead” for modernism, but reimagined.

ANNIHILATION AND UTTER NIGHT:
W. B. YEATS, T. S. ELIOT, AND A
MODERN(IST) OLD NIHILISM

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro
2019

Approved by

Committee Chair

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APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Elysia C. Balavage has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

“What is the source of refreshment in nihilism?” T. S. Eliot asked in a 1950 interview with Leslie Paul.¹ Eliot may have been posing a rhetorical question, but it is nonetheless an incisive one. After all, if nihilism depends on the vacuity of human existence, if it relies upon emptiness for its own fulfillment, how can such an idea sustain itself? How can we resuscitate God after Friedrich Nietzsche infamously declared Him dead in 1882,² an event that paved the way for the ominous nihilism of *The Will to Power* (1901)? More broadly, how can nothing function not only as something, but the thing that will save modern value systems from collapse? To address these quandaries, it takes an intimate and extensive knowledge of two competing perceptions of nihilism: Nietzsche’s “new” 20th-century nihilism, a philosophy that declares all values meaningless, and the “old” nihilism that Nietzsche abandons. For Nietzsche, nihilism is a cataclysmic event, and the nothingness that it leaves in its wake is absolute. It stands menacingly on the other side of the threshold, threatening modernity with complete collapse.³ On the other hand, Benedict de Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, and Georg W. F. Hegel—the philosophers of old nihilism—see creative potential in nothingness and interpret God not as dead but

¹ Leslie Paul, “A Conversation with T. S. Eliot,” *The Kenyon Review* 27, no. 1 (1965). *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4334503. 11.

² Nietzsche first writes the phrase “God is Dead” in *The Gay Science* (1882), section 108. The death of God enables the possibility of nihilism because there is nothing to fill the void left by His absence.

³ Nietzsche uses this metaphor in section one of *The Will to Power*.

reimagined. W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot each pose similar questions in their work, and their knowledge of nihilist philosophers guides them toward a view of nothingness that is, ironically, generative and creative.

The careers of Yeats and Eliot physically intersected at a lunch on early December 1922, but the pair also aligned themselves intellectually through their fascination with nothingness. The poets met for the first time before 1915 during Eliot's ventures in London and, after not seeing each other for seven years, they dined together in London's Savile Club in 1922.⁴ Eliot, who desired prominent contributors for his then-fledgling *Criterion*, seemed to enjoy their meeting greatly. In a letter to Ottoline Morrell, he showed appreciation for his private, extended conversation with Yeats, and called the elder poet "one of a very small number of people with whom one can talk profitably about poetry, and I found him altogether stimulating."⁵ For his part, Yeats remarks that he felt "charmed" by Eliot, so the positive feeling was evidently mutual. Each poet experiences encounters with nothingness that leave him feeling both fascination and fear. The young Eliot of "Silence" (1910) saw a metaphysical revelation in the "terrifying" emptiness of an urban stillness. In *The Trembling of the Veil* (1918), Yeats sees nothingness as a state that will reveal a truth about the self. He envisions St. Simon

⁴ Eliot knew Yeats since at least 1915. In a letter to Isabella Stewart Gardner from that year, Eliot revealed some details of his literary life in London: "The last time I was here I had the pleasure of meeting Yeats: he is now in Ireland, I believe because a play of Lady Gregory's is coming to the Abbey. I am hoping for his return – he is a very agreeable talker."

⁵ T. S. Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Vol I*, eds. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (New Haven: Yale University Press), 2011. 806.

Stylites “upon his pillar” and St. Antony “in his cavern,” both saintly figures committed “to know themselves for fragments, and at last for nothing; to hollow their hearts out till they are void and without form” and finally to “summon a creator by revealing chaos.”⁶

Their interest in nothingness only intensified through a shared and extensive study of philosophy, with both poets encountering philosophers who pose generative views of nihilism. Eliot’s studies at Harvard led him to discover minds like Benedict de Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Friedrich Nietzsche; Yeats’s interest in mysticism, Platonism, and philosophical idealism garnered a similar result. Yeats considered Spinoza a mystical philosopher above all else and observed that Hegel “made all things end in God’s realization of himself.”⁷ In Nietzsche, Yeats found a “strong enchanter” whom he read so much that it “made [his] eyes bad again”.⁸ The pair also commented on each other’s philosophies on multiple occasions. Eliot expressed admiration for Yeats’s *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1918), a work of philosophic reflection, in a review for *The Egoist*. The younger poet likens Yeats’s argument to a series of mazes and admits to being “lost” in the book’s second half, as if “in some delicious soft mist as that in which Venus enwrap her son.”⁹ Eliot also compares the

⁶ W. B. Yeats, “The Trembling of the Veil” in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, eds. Richard J Finneran and George Mills Harper (New York: Macmillan), 1989. 128.

⁷ Robert Snukal, *High Talk: The Philosophical Poetry of W. B. Yeats*. Cambridge England: University Press, 1973. 16.

⁸ Letter from Yeats to Lady Gregory in 1902: “I have not read anything with so much excitement since I got to love Morris’s stories which have the same curious astringent joy.”

⁹ T. S. Eliot, “Unsigned reviews of poetry and prose by James Joyce, Clive Bell, T. Sturge Moore, and William Butler Yeats” in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Apprentice Years, 1905–1918*, eds. Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald

Irish bard to a “phantasm” of divinity in his review of *A Cutting of an Agate* (1919), a “fantastic avatar supported by adepts and *narthekophoroi*.”¹⁰ Here, Eliot positions Yeats as a harbinger of change, an embodiment of a Dionysian spirit that unearths wisdom from dream-like musings. In his “Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*” (1936), Yeats observes similar characteristics in Eliot’s writing and calls the younger poet a “satirist” who rejects “all rhythms and metaphors of the more popular romantics.”¹¹

The poets’ interest in change shows in their work; both Yeats and Eliot perceive the desacralization and loss of value in modern Europe and they express their concerns similarly. Eliot wrote *The Waste Land* in 1922 and through a “heap of broken images” managed to hauntingly articulate the philosophical, social, and cultural pitfalls that afflicted his world. Likewise, Yeats evaluates this era of philosophical modernity in *A Vision* (1925) where he criticizes artistic deterioration:

Personality is everywhere spreading out its fingers in vain or grasping with an always more convulsive grasp a world where the predominance of physical science, of finance and economics in all forms, of democratic politics, of vast populations, of architecture where styles jostle one another, of newspapers where

Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 2014. <https://muse.jhu.edu/>. 724.

¹⁰ The “*narthekophoroi*” were low-ranking Dionysiac worshippers; T. S. Eliot, “A Foreign Mind. A review of *The Cutting of an Agate*, by W. B. Yeats” in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: The Perfect Critic, 1919–1926*, eds. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 2014. <https://muse.jhu.edu/>. 73.

¹¹ W. B. Yeats, “Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*” in *Later Essays: The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, V. 5, eds. Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux and William H O'Donnell (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons), 1994. 195.

all is heterogenous, show that mechanical force will in a moment become supreme.¹²

Rather than focusing on Eliot's disconnected fragments, Yeats highlights another form of nothingness, which is a flattening or conformity that results despite a heterogeneous landscape. The consequence is a tension between creation and lethargy resulting from a generalized modern desire for placation rather than a higher truth.¹³ On one hand, both Eliot and Yeats perceive the new nihilism's shadowy presence, and this presence shows in their work; on the other hand, neither poet demonstrates an explicit acceptance of (or resignation to) the new nihilism.

Yeats and Eliot convey a sense that truth, or something akin to truth, is a possibility, a sentiment that new nihilism would prohibit. As such, both poets convey resistance to new nihilism in their poetry and prose. Such resistance becomes clearer as the poets mature. When Eliot declares that "human kind / Cannot bear very much reality" in "Burnt Norton" (1935), he highlights the difficulty of attaining absolute authenticity and truth rather than their nonexistence or humanity's unwillingness to "bear" them. Furthermore, Yeats bases his entire view of history on the existence of a consistent, overarching patterns and cycles in *A Vision*, and like Eliot, he sees "truth" as a meaningful aspiration. In a January 1939 letter to Lady Elizabeth Pelham, Yeats writes

¹² W. B. Yeats, *A Vision (1925)*, *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, V. 13, eds. Catherine E Paul, and Margaret Mills Harper (New York: Scribner), 2008. 206-7.

¹³ Nico Israel, *Spirals: The Whirled Image in Twentieth-Century Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press), 2015. 86.

“Man can embody truth but he cannot know.”¹⁴ On one hand, his statement seems as bleak as Ernest Hemingway’s empty “nada”; however, as Calvin Thomas argues, if we view Yeats’s phrase with the old nihilism in mind, we can see the implied inverse of the assertion, which would read something like, “The truth does not exist at all unless it is—and as it is—embodied in and by man.”¹⁵ Creation therefore begins with a search for truth in an otherwise empty space that an individual then fills with pattern and structure. In this way, Eliot and Yeats actively put their shoulders to the metaphorical plow, but they do so to cultivate order and certainty, not merely to destroy.

In this dissertation, I explore the complicated relationship between modernism and nihilism, an idea heavily influenced by Nietzsche’s *Will to Power* (1901). To do this, I first show that the idea of loss and nothingness is as much of a philosophical problem as a theological issue. While much scholarly discussion focuses on modernism’s relationship with religion and secularity, the connection between modernism and nihilism is, by comparison, glaringly overlooked. I also trace nihilism’s evolution from its pre-Socratic origins to a 20th-century interpretation of the concept. I demonstrate that Nietzsche’s “new” nihilism is heavily shaped by a Russian interpretation of the concept, a theory of revolution that stresses the destruction of social institutions. Nietzsche applies this destruction not only to social institutions but to the existence of every value and

¹⁴ W. B. Yeats to Lady Elizabeth Pelham. January 4, 1939. W. B. Yeats, *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, eds. Allan Wade (New York: Macmillan), 1955. 922.

¹⁵ Ernest Hemmingway, “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” *Hemingway: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert P. Weeks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall), 1962. 73; Calvin Thomas, “Knowledge and Embodiment in Yeats,” *South Central Review* 4, no. 4 (1987): 53-60. <http://doi.org:10.2307/3189027>. 53-54.

presumed certainty ultimately underwritten by them. Thus, Nietzsche deviates from the term's centuries-old understanding in the history of ideas. While the new nihilism's shadow may undeniably hover over 20th-century Western culture, I argue that the "old" nihilism of Benedict de Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel influence a current within modernism that demonstrates a desire for an ordered, rational world and a reimagining of value systems. This old nihilism sees nothingness as provisional and prolific, and frames God not as a Judeo-Christian, all-powerful deity, but an absolutely negative guiding force. The old nihilists' philosophies concerning vacancy and void, the Absolute, and sublime transformation extract the generative properties from nothingness that Nietzsche overlooks.

The first chapter, "'The Desert Is in the Heart of Your Brother': Modernism's New and Old Nihilism," outlines the complex connection between modern and nihilism. It establishes the modernist readership's submission to Nietzsche and the new nihilism, but also shows a rising countercurrent of an old nihilism that challenges the new. Through poets like Yeats and Eliot, whose readings of nihilism are shaped by Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel rather than Nietzsche, I show that modernism is not a hopelessly empty space, but a time ripe for creation. "'The Dark Grow Luminous': Yeats Reading Nihilism" turns exclusively to Yeats and attempts to chart his understanding of nihilism. Using his letters and prose, the chapter first acknowledges the poet's lifelong interest in Nietzschean philosophy but concludes that he ultimately rejects the new nihilism. Instead, Yeats extracts the mystical quality from old nihilism and uses it to form a transformed god-like entity in *A Vision* (1938). "'Surely Some Revelation Is at Hand':

Yeats, Disaster, and the Generative Void” continues to investigate Yeats’s interaction with old nihilism. It interrogates images of disaster and catastrophe in his poetry and argues that he borrows these concepts from Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel. Through disaster, Yeats mines the creative generative capacity from nothingness and uses it to create a renewed system of reality.

Chapter four, “‘They All Go into the Dark’: T. S. Eliot Reading Nihilism” shifts focus to Eliot and his understanding of nihilism. It draws upon my archival research at the King’s College, Cambridge Archive Center to reconstruct Eliot’s reading of old nihilism and shows that Eliot ultimately rejects Nietzsche as a gripping philosophical mind. Instead, his reading of Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel lays the foundation for the poet’s return to belief in 1927 and demonstrates his view that nothingness is indeed generative. Finally, “‘Neither Plentitude nor Vacancy’: Eliot, Absolute Negation, and the Generative Void” continues to investigate Eliot’s use of old nihilism in his work. It looks at his early poetry from the *March Hare* notebook through to the *Four Quartets* and shows that Eliot views nothingness as a prolific void throughout his career. This prolific void is most clear in the *Quartets*, where Eliot establishes the “still point” as reality’s metaphysical foundation.

In the years following their lunch at the Savile Club, Eliot’s and Yeats’s successes continued. Yeats won the Nobel Prize one year later and became the author of *A Vision* and *The Tower* (1928), while Eliot evolved into one of the most powerfully influential poets and critics of the twentieth century; he had written *The Waste Land*, become a member of the Church of England in 1927, and won his own Nobel prize in 1948. Their

careers changed dramatically subject-wise and their personal lives evolved to include unrequited love, strained marriage, and finally, a sense of peace, but their resistance to the new nihilism remains consistent. Both poets read Nietzsche and the philosophers of old nihilism to varying degrees. Eliot's graduate studies introduced him to each of these philosophers, while Yeats encounters the old nihilists more organically through his interest in mysticism and idealism. Each poet succeeds in capitalizing on old nihilism's generative space, and they built their own patterns, cycles, and structures in the emptiness that Nietzsche's new nihilism left. Looking back now, Nietzsche's new nihilism obscures what Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel were trying to say, and thus overlooks the value construction that Eliot and Yeats demonstrate. The emptiness left after God's death, therefore, is not Joseph Conrad's "horror," but a space of salvation.¹⁶ As Yeats concludes in "Anima Hominis" (*Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, 1918), "I shall find ... the void fruitful when I understand I have nothing."¹⁷

¹⁶ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Hampson (New York: Penguin), 1995. 112.

¹⁷ W. B. Yeats, *Mythologies*, (New York: Macmillan), 1959. 332.

CHAPTER II

“THE DESERT IS IN THE HEART OF YOUR BROTHER”: MODERNISM’S NEW AND OLD NIHILISM

Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?
—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (1901)

Where got I that truth?
Out of a medium’s mouth,
Out of nothing it came...
Out of dark night
—W. B. Yeats, “Fragments” (*The Tower*, 1928)

I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
—T. S. Eliot, “The Burial of the Dead” (*The Waste Land*, 1922)

Introduction

In his essay “The Literature of Nihilism” (1966), Paul de Man argues that “A literature of nihilism is not necessarily nihilistic” (164).¹⁸ While this idea may seem like a contradiction—indeed, what is nihilism if not nihilistic?—it raises an important issue. Even though an author writes a narrative that evokes themes or images usually associated with nihilism—nothingness, despair, empty space—it does not mean that the text falls

¹⁸ Paul De Man, “The Literature of Nihilism,” *Critical Writings, 1953-1978*, ed. Lindsay Waters (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1989. 164.

prey to a modern conception of nihilism. Thematic influence can in fact indicate exploration, or even resistance. This is the case with certain modernist authors and their engagement with modernism's "literature of nihilism."

The aim of this chapter is to illuminate the complicated relationship between literary modernism and nihilism. To do this, I will first show that the disintegration of values is as much of a philosophical problem as it is a theological issue. While much scholarly discussion focuses on modernism's relationship with religion and secularity, the connection between modernism and nihilism is glaringly overlooked. Then, through a historical exploration of philosophical nihilism, I show that the new Nietzschean nihilism commonly understood to have heavily influenced modernism—both as a literary and philosophical movement—is contested by a productive nihilism which predates Nietzschean publication (and subsequent influence), and challenges us to interpret a loss of value quite differently in the modernist period. This "new" nihilism is broadly shaped by Friedrich Nietzsche's conception of the idea, which he outlines in *The Will to Power* (1901). Alfred Orage's *New Age* played a significant role in disseminating Nietzschean philosophy to a wide modernist audience, and not long after, authors verbalized the destruction and collapse that they noticed transpiring in western society. However, this nihilism is heavily molded by a Russian tradition and thus deviates from the term's centuries-old place in the history of ideas. While much scholarly discussion focuses on modernism's relationship with new nihilism, the connection between modernism and a generative, "old" version of nihilism necessitates further exploration. This leaves an incomplete image of the simultaneous metaphysical disintegration and reconstruction that

transpired in Western Europe during the first half of the 20th-century. Through focusing on modernist literature and identifying the influence of Benedict de Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, whose “old nihilism” was abandoned by Nietzsche, I show the creative potential of nihilism that *The Will to Power* overshadowed. While the new nihilism’s shadow may undeniably hover over modernism, I investigate a generative current within literary modernism— a current that demonstrates a desire for an ordered, rational world and a reimagining of value systems—is tangible through the works of W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot. These writers, both avid readers of philosophy, see creative potential in nothingness and challenge the idea that as an aesthetic movement, modernism is largely infused with Nietzsche’s deceptive, negative, and veiled nihilism.¹⁹

The differences between the old and new nihilisms can be conceived in terms of creation and destruction, and order and chaos. These two contrasting strengths leave modernists caught in the middle of two opposing forces: The Apollonian, a force that privileges the old nihilism’s value-positivity, rationalism, and idealism, and the Dionysian, a force that is dark, violent, and “hides behind the cheerful Apollonian façade.” It is the Dionysian that some scholars argue pervades much of literary modernism.²⁰ For Nietzsche, the corrosiveness of the new nihilism could be countered, and he proposes Dionysian energy as the antidote that will cure this disease. As Weller suggests, “The nihilism-countering force of this Dionysian art lies not in its power of

¹⁹ Kathryne V. Lindberg, *Reading Pound Reading: Modernism After Nietzsche* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1987. 24-25.

²⁰ Robert Gooding-Williams, *Zarathustra’s Dionysian Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 2001.

imitation (mimesis) but rather in its power of transfiguration. In short, art for Nietzsche constitutes the overcoming of nihilism in its being free of morality and in its affirmation of life not through the faithful representation of that life but through its radical transformation.”²¹ This is perhaps a mistake in Nietzsche’s logic for a number of reasons, however.

Leading Nietzschean scholar and translator Walter Kaufmann argues that in *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche attempts to clearly position himself as a philosopher “who is not an Alexandrian academic nor an Apollonian sage, but Dionysian,” an act that only emphasizes Nietzsche’s misplaced faith in the Dionysian.²² Indeed, the Dionysian holds the capacity to beckon the abyss, the all-consuming negative space that annihilates human importance at its core. Furthermore, Nietzsche’s Dionysian wisdom represents only a concord between two forces that is brief and transitory, and that such energies will nevertheless stay separate perpetually.²³ Therefore, there is no solution that will result in permeant harmony or the reason.²⁴ The Apollonian, on the other hand, has the ability to cover over the abyss, channel a higher truth, and attain self-knowledge.²⁵ For Gillespie, Hegel’s “absolute knowledge” provides the “basis of permeant reconciliation.”²⁶ Though

²¹ Shane Weller, *Modernism and Nihilism*, 40.

²² Walter Kaufmann, “Editor's Introduction” in *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage), 1967. 202.

²³ Michael Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1995. xxi.

²⁴ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, xxi.

²⁵ John Sallis, *Crossings: Nietzsche and the Space of Tragedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1991. 3.

²⁶ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, xxi.

Nietzsche, for instance, considered the Dionysian to be the more powerful facet of the dichotomous pair as well as the ideal response to modernity and culture, the Apollonian allows for a reimagining of the societal and cultural disorder present during the modernist movement. As Gillespie states, “under the influence of Apollo, man has an unshaken faith in all things, including himself” (205).²⁷ Yeats and Eliot are truth-seekers, artists who need a permanent solution to the threat of nothingness that looms over their historical space. Neither Nietzsche’s new nihilism nor his Dionysian remedy offer the type of resolution they need.

Modern Loss of Value: An Issue of Philosophy and Faith

The “Death of God” is a troubling prospect; it is an idea that leaves emptiness in its wake. Those left behind must contend with the vexed question of “where do we go from here?” Modernists were forced to try to answer this existential query in a historical space that was anything but stable. After the Age of Enlightenment, the modern crisis of belief and the political upheaval that mounted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries caused modern voices to cry out in anxiety over this loss of faith and stable value systems. Scholars and modernist authors alike highlight the early 20th century as the retrospective, perceived year that such tumultuous change began. Virginia Woolf reflects in her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924) that “On or about December 1910, human character changed”²⁸ and German poet Gottfried Benn wrote “1910, that is

²⁷ Michael Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 205.

²⁸ Virginia Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth), 1966. 319-337.

indeed the year when all scaffolds began to crack.”²⁹ Charles Péguy asserts in a 1913 essay that “the world has changed less since Jesus Christ than it has changed in the last thirty years,” and as Jane Goldman fittingly indicates, this places the modernists’ first critique of society in the 1880s (39).³⁰ Roger Griffin, however, identifies Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) as the point when literary modernism reacts to these new issues most clearly for the first time. He argues that Nietzsche’s critique “goes beyond sphere of aestheticism and contemplative philosophy to the realm of cultural criticism and metapolitics, the antechamber of social and political action.”³¹ Here, nihilism’s significance as a historical event—a force that has now penetrated outside the realm of metaphysical supposing and into human experience—seems well-defined, and the earth-shattering changes that Woolf, Benn, and others sense bring that force to life.

A deicide of any sort perhaps courts a theological interrogation at first, so it is unsurprising that modernism’s relationship with religion and secularism has received much scholarly attention.³² That is, now that society must contend with secularity, what will replace those religious structures? As Norman Podhoretz explains, the theological

²⁹ Thomas Harrison, “Introduction,” in *1910: The Emancipation of Dissonance* (University of California Press), 1996. 1-18.

³⁰ Quoted in Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France, 1886 to World War I* (Freeport, N.Y: Books for Libraries Press), 1972. 1.; Goldman, Jane. *Modernism, 1910-1945: Image to Apocalypse* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan), 2004. 39.

³¹ Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning Under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 2007. 94.

³² There are of course many other studies, but see Lewis, Pericles. *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010 and Wexler, Joyce P. *Violence Without God: The Rhetorical Despair of Twentieth-Century Writers* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic), 2017.

response to a modernist moral crumbling resembled the following statement: “[Writers’] creative works are legitimate but uninformed fumbling after solutions to problems of the spirit, works which could have been more efficiently ordered and more accurately construed had the author...been working within the framework of a well-articulated worldview.”³³ However, this statement’s reasoning is circular and fails to consider the problem of value loss: it implies that spiritual questions and a lack of faith in a stable world are solved by having a stable, lucid perspective. If faith could no longer offer the ubiquitous solace it once did, then modernists could use this opportunity to interrogate the conflict between secularity and religion and reimagine an outcome that moves beyond that dichotomy. Matthew Mutter argues precisely that; he suggests that the “power” of several modernist writers including Yeats, Virginia Woolf and Wallace Stevens comes from “their dramatization of the tension between religious and secular emotions.”³⁴ His conclusion indicates a compelling point, that modernism’s problem with religion is not the “explicit belief or disbelief in God” but “the entire fabric of thought and feeling implicit in the religious or secular imaginaries where belief situates itself.”³⁵ A similar point can perhaps be applied to modernism’s “problem” with new nihilism’s nothingness and the despair that follows.

³³ Norman Podhoretz, “The New Nihilism and the Novel,” in *Doings and Undoings* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Co.), 1953. 161.

³⁴ Matthew Mutter, *Restless Secularism: Modernism and the Religious Inheritance* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 2017. 3.

³⁵ Mutter, *Restless Secularism*, 4.

While nihilism and secularism may seem similar, they are decidedly different ideas—nihilism invites a philosophical discussion, while secularism necessitates a theological examination—and as such, they require separate critical inquiries. Just as some critics like Pericles Lewis argue that rampant secularism does not define modernism, all modernists do not blindly accept the new nihilism.³⁶ While Nietzsche’s philosophy was widely read and disseminated, Eliot and Yeats absorbed a substantial amount of the old nihilist tradition through their reading of Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel. For instance, in his essay “Bishop Berkeley” (1931), Yeats shows both intimate familiarity with and admiration for “the movement of philosophy from Spinoza to Hegel,” which he calls “the greatest of all works of intellect.”³⁷ Eliot methodically read all three of these philosophers as a graduate student at Harvard, and even further distances himself from the new nihilism by dismissing Nietzschean philosophy as a “chaotic and immature intellectualism.”³⁸ As Mutter suggests, an “ambivalence,” an unsureness or inconsistency regarding an idea itself, exists in modernism concerning secularization’s character and eventual outcome.³⁹ If this is the case, then this same ambivalence also presents in modernists’ engagement with the new nihilism. Nihilism, an idea that has undergone shifts in philosophical denotation and connotation throughout the

³⁶ In his book, Lewis argues that rather than resigning themselves to secularism, modernists instead verbally invoked the sacred without directly naming it, thereby changing the way the sacred is discussed, not omitting it from the discussion altogether.

³⁷ W. B. Yeats, “Bishop Berkeley,” in *Later Essays: The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, V. 5, eds. Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux and William H O'Donnell (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons), 1994. 103.

³⁸ Matthew Mutter, *Restless Secularism*, 4.

³⁹ Matthew Mutter, *Restless Secularism*, 2.

centuries, is perhaps going to court some inconsistency both through its textual representations and the through the reactions that it elicits.

Nihilism and Modernism: The Uncanniest of Guests and an Unstable Host

Human history is certainly no stranger to nihilism. Nihilism, that “uncanniest of all guests” has plagued, hassled, and burdened minds since Gorgias wrote his famous trilemma in *On Non-existence*.⁴⁰ Even though nihilistic subject matter captured writers’ attention previously, no other point in literary history seems so consumed with questions of nothingness and purposelessness than modernism. Articulating the relationship between two concepts with such enigmatic definitions is no small task, but leading nihilism scholar Shane Weller examines precisely this in *Modernism and Nihilism* (2011). In this study, Weller demonstrates the relationship between nihilism and modernism—including literary modernism—by arguing that it is impossible to garner a comprehensible understanding of literary modernism without acknowledging the decisive role nihilism played within.⁴¹ Invoking David Harvey’s contention that modernism is a “troubled and fluctuating aesthetic response to conditions of modernity produced by process of modernization,” Weller states that such “fluctuations” are nowhere more evident than in the history of modernism’s relationship to nihilism.⁴² On one hand, then,

⁴⁰ i. Nothing exists

ii. Even if existence exists, it cannot be known iii. Even if it could be known, it cannot be communicated. There is still debate concerning the nihilistic undertones of Gorgias’s statement. See McComiskey, Bruce. *Gorgias and the New Sophistic Rhetoric*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois, 2002.

⁴¹ Shane Weller, *Modernism and Nihilism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2011. 9

⁴² David. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell), 1989.

aesthetic modernism views itself and is viewed as the “counterforce to the nihilism of modernity” but on the other hand embodies the inherent material of nihilism.⁴³ This situating of modernism and nihilism demonstrates how the two philosophies are inextricably linked and reinforces the claim that literary modernists wrote during a time when nihilism, old or new, could not be ignored.

The voices of modernist literary critics themselves also acknowledged the presence of the “new nihilism” and its effects on contemporary modernist culture. For instance, Elliot Paul, a co-editor of *transition* magazine, contemplates nihilism’s effect on modernism in his essay “The New Nihilism” (1927). He muses that as a result of the First World War, “old values had become meaningless.”⁴⁴ While Paul fails to directly cite Nietzsche in his essay, he draws upon the same tradition of the idea that Nietzsche used: a nineteenth-century Russian nihilism that breaks with the existing aesthetic, moral, and metaphysical institutions.⁴⁵ More than two decades later, Norman Podhoretz argues a similar point in an essay of the same title (1958). He notes that the new nihilism and the loss of value it brings “informed almost every poem and novel of the modernist movement” to the point of nearly becoming a cliché.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Herbert Read asserts in his introduction to “A War Diary” (1962) that “nihilism—nothingness, despair” was literary modernism’s “universal state of mind.”⁴⁷ He argues that the main challenge

⁴³ Weller, *Modernism and Nihilism*, 9.

⁴⁴ Elliot Paul, “The New Nihilism.” *transition* (May 1927), 166.

⁴⁵ Shane Weller, “Nietzsche among the Modernists: The Case of Wyndham Lewis.” *Modernism/modernity* 14, no. 4 (2007): 625-643. <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

⁴⁶ Norman Podhoretz, “The New Nihilism.” *Partisan Review* 15 (Fall 1958).

⁴⁷ Herbert Read, *The Contrary Experience* (New York: Horizon Press), 1974. 69.

facing society after the death of God is the “conquest of nihilism,” but admits the world has failed to advance that agenda since Nietzsche’s declaration in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, God has not yet “risen from the dead” and society still lingers in uncertainty. All of these voices latch onto the palpable nothingness and hopelessness in modernist literature that new nihilism seems to consistently provoke.

Read, Paul, and Podhoretz’s observations offer an insightful glimpse into the anxiety that new nihilism reflected in literary modernism; however, these reactions were all written retrospectively, and the critics had time to process the feelings and reactions that they observed. Modernist authors, though, expressed their unease and recorded observations at the time they happened. In “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” (1933), Ernest Hemingway replaces the now-deceased God the Father with “nada,” Yeats cries that “the center cannot hold,” and Joseph Conrad’s Marlowe shudders against “the horror” that resides at the center of a corroded soul.⁴⁹ These writers and critics were not nihilists themselves—they acted merely as vessels and expressed the value loss that the new nihilism contained.

Naming Nihilism: Jacobi’s Critique of Fichte’s Idealism

If modernist responses to the new nihilism are difficult to conceptualize, the ambiguity of the term “nihilism” is perhaps in partially to blame. While the seed of

⁴⁸ Herbert Read, *The Contrary Experience*, 69.

⁴⁹ Ernest Hemingway, “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.” *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. New York: Scribner, 1966; W. B. Yeats, “The Second Coming,” 4; Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 112.

nihilism was planted as early as pre-Socratic Greek philosophy, the concept did not receive a direct definition until the late 18th century.⁵⁰ As Adorno and Martin Heidegger both suggest, nihilism did not receive a proper philosophical definition until March 21, 1799 when German philosopher and novelist Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi wrote an open letter to Johann Gottlieb Fichte. In this letter, Jacobi accuses Fichte of “nihilism” due to his idealism’s leaving the “transcendental ego” intact but eradicating everything else.⁵¹ Jacobi writes,

Since outside of the mechanism of nature, I come across nothing but miracles, mysteries, and signs and have a terrible aversion to Nothingness, the absolutely indefinite, the utterly empty...particularly as the object of philosophy or goal of wisdom...I therefore do not see why I...should not be allowed to prefer my Philosophy of Not-Knowing to the Philosophical Knowing of Nothing, even if were only in *fugam vacui*.⁵²

While Jacobi’s indictment of Fichte’s idealism gives nihilism a proper name, this letter is partially responsible for concept’s corrosive reputation. Such corrosiveness and aggressiveness characterizes the nihilism that Nietzsche discusses in *The Will to Power*, and by extension, exemplifies the version that modernism must contend with. It might be tempting to argue, then, that Nietzsche is just as much of a victim of this nihilism as the modernists, given Jacobi’s definition. However, Jacobi’s indictment was an epistemological criticism of Fichte’s idealism, not a full-scale foreshadowing of a possible cultural end. For Fichte, the “abyss” represents one’s inner self, and he

⁵⁰ Weller, *Modernism and Nihilism*, 19.

⁵¹ Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, “Open Letter to Fichte,” trans. Diana Behler, *Philosophy of German Idealism*, ed. Ernst Behler (New York: Continuum, 1987). 136.

⁵² Jacobi, “Open Letter,” 136.

advocates for the stripping away of any impediments that block an individual from this infinity. Through this destruction, one moves toward the infinite by discovering an own unlimited freedom. Nietzsche picks up on a pessimistic but conceivable hazard of this idealism by the time he writes *The Will to Power*. Jacobi thus gave the term a philosophical definition and Nietzsche espoused it from Russian newspaper clippings.⁵³ An act that may have seemed innocuous on Nietzsche's part therefore bore weighty consequences for the term's new, modern definition, and it is what Adorno describes as Nietzsche's "adoption" of the term where it undergoes a "radical inflation."⁵⁴

The New Nihilism: Nietzsche and His Russian Influences

The topic of this section—Friedrich Nietzsche's formulation of the new nihilism that hovers over literary modernism—is too immense to conquer even in an entire book. Nietzsche's philosophy occupies a central place in literary modernists' critique of modernity, particularly during interwar years.⁵⁵ Scholars have cited the philosopher as a driving force behind the modernist movement and as the twentieth century commenced, his ideas posthumously distinguished him as the "liberator from religion and the prophet of the coming of the Superman."⁵⁶ Nietzsche's implementation of nihilism encapsulated

⁵³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Seabury Press), 1973. 379.

⁵⁴ Shane Weller, *Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism: The Uncanniest of Guests* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2008. 2.

⁵⁵ Nietzsche's impact on a modernist readership has received substantial critical attention. David Thatcher's *Nietzsche in England* (1970) charts Nietzsche's influence on an early twentieth century British audience.

⁵⁶ Robert Gooding-Williams, "Nietzsche's Pursuit of Modernism," *New German Critique*, No. 41, Special Issue on the Critiques of the Enlightenment, (1987): 95–108; David Thatcher, *Nietzsche in England, 1890-1914: The Growth of a Reputation*. University of Toronto Press, 1970. 27-29.

the very spirit of the modern condition, which is why his appraisal of modernity as nihilistic wields a greater impact than any other philosopher of the age. With all of this in mind, it is clear Nietzsche's touch on the idea is undeniably strong; indeed, the enduring grip of his "new nihilism" extends even beyond literary modernism without much of a challenge. For instance, existentialist Albert Camus branded nihilism as the most distressing problem of the 20th century, a statement that his essay *The Rebel* (1951) plainly enlivens. Here, Camus renders a frightening image of the new nihilism conquering society after the collapse of metaphysical systems ends in total negation, leaving a landscape plagued by absolute destruction, deep animosity, and a desire to depress and negate. And for Nietzsche himself, modernity is undoubtedly in a condition of nihilism, a nihilism that threatens to negate everything. The philosopher sees Western civilization as trapped within a "debilitating and demoralizing nihilism" that calls into question and even erases the central reality of our world.⁵⁷ After society's trust in the very fabric of metaphysical and epistemological concepts shatters, nothing is left but nothing itself.

Nietzsche is perhaps infamous for his varying and at times even contradictory arguments in his philosophy, which makes him tedious and even exasperating to read. John Davidson, arguably the first British man of letters to pay attention to Nietzsche's work, sums up the philosopher's inconsistent language quite effectively. He asserts, "[Nietzsche] starts from nothing and ends in nothing. He proves and disproves, believes

⁵⁷ Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker: The Perfect Nihilist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1994. 7.

and disbelieves everything; and he is as uncertain of the Nihilism to which he always harks back as he is of witchcraft.”⁵⁸ With this in mind, I do not mean to suggest that Nietzsche identified as a nihilist; rather, he struggled to avoid such an outcome and proposed methods to combat nihilism. Through the recurring idea of *amor fati*, which he articulates in *The Gay Science* (1882), for instance, Nietzsche advocates that individuals accept their past, present, and future decisions and “love” their fates. If one loves his/her own fate, this places worth on something and prevents a collapse into nihilism. Other authors and philosophers also recognized this positivity in Nietzsche. In an 1891 essay in the *Speaker* titled “The New Sophist,” Davidson claims that Nietzsche regarded his nihilism as a “preface to a positive doctrine” rather than merely a finite conclusion that leads to nothingness.⁵⁹ While Davidson’s point might be a bit too bold—Nietzsche largely viewed and feared nihilism as an ultimate outcome, not a precedent—he recognizes that same threat in Nietzsche: that he meant to caution against nihilism rather than advocate for it. Despite his inconsistencies, or the inconsistent ways in which he is read, Nietzsche’s importance to the new nihilism nevertheless stands: Modernist authors and critics, including Yeats, Ezra Pound, and D.H. Lawrence, still read and disseminated his ideas to a Western audience.

While Davidson perhaps took notice of Nietzsche first, Alfred Orage, the editor of *New Age* literary magazine from 1907-1922, arguably gave him the widest readership. Scholars like David Thatcher have thoroughly demonstrated Orage and *New Age*’s

⁵⁸ John Davidson, *Sentences and Paragraphs* (New York: Dodd, Mead), 1895. 82.

⁵⁹ John Davidson, *Sentences and Paragraphs*, 82.

dissemination of Nietzschean material, but I wish to connect this to a spreading of the new nihilism across a modernist readership. Orage disseminated Nietzsche's philosophy to a modernist British audience through his magazine, an instrumental publication for contextualizing the social and political matters that temper modernism.⁶⁰ Orage studied Nietzschean philosophy from 1900-1907, and through his study, he noticed Nietzsche's influence on contemporary British writers. In *Friedrich Nietzsche, the Dionysian Spirit of the Age* (1906), Orage declares:

Friedrich Nietzsche is the greatest European event since Goethe. From one end of Europe to the other, wherever his books are read, the discussion in the most intellectual and aristocratically-minded circles turns on the problems raised by him... Already half a dozen well-known English writers might be named who owe, if not half their ideas, at least half the courage of their ideas to Nietzsche.⁶¹

Under the direction of Orage, *New Age* became a promoter for Nietzschean philosophy, and given the wide readership among Yeats and Eliot as well as other prominent modernist writers like D.H. Lawrence, H.D., and Ezra Pound, Nietzsche finally had the opportunity to become a reckoning force in literary theory and execution. As Orage claimed, "Nietzsche...is taken seriously in Germany; and, though handicapped by the advocacy of certain of his prophets, will have to be taken seriously here [in Britain]."⁶² It was not long after Orage introduced Nietzsche to a British audience that Woolf saw a "change" in human character and Benn noticed the "scaffold" beginning to "crack."

⁶⁰ Robert Scholes, *Paradox of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 2006. 84.

⁶¹ A. R. Orage, *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Dionysian Spirit of the Age* (London: T.N. Foulis), 1906. 11.

⁶² Orage, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, 305.

Nietzsche's new nihilism's impression on literary modernism, therefore, was certainly potent and spread rather swiftly.

The "new nihilism" that Read, Podhoretz, and Paul all reference is exactly that—a reconceptualized version of nihilism that Nietzsche outlined in *The Will to Power*. Beginning with this text, Nietzsche introduced his perception of nihilism to the philosophical scene. In this text, he maintains that nihilism represents the fundamental rejection of all imposed values and *a priori* meaning. While the definition of nihilism in *The Will to Power* is indeed attributed to Nietzsche, it is important to remember how and when the work was published. Nietzsche died in 1900, so *The Will to Power* consists of fragments and selections from his notebooks that were compiled and published posthumously by his sister, Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche, who used one of Nietzsche's outlines to arrange the portions of unfinished text.⁶³ She maintained that the published version would bring his intended masterpiece to life, which Nietzsche had hoped to compose and name "The Will to Power, An Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values." Since Förster-Nietzsche rather than Nietzsche himself is responsible for the book's arrangement, some of the accusations against Nietzsche regarding its material are perhaps too severe. Its publication history notwithstanding, *The Will to Power* still holds a place of significance for shaping modernism's view of nihilism.

While certainly not the sole subject discussed in *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche rather exhaustively deliberates on nihilism in the book. Nietzsche asks in its early pages,

⁶³ Carol Diethe, *Nietzsche's Sister and the Will to Power: A Biography of Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 2003. 95.

“What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devalue themselves.”⁶⁴ So, even the uppermost and seemingly steadfast mores will eventually lose their importance when faced with nihilism. For Nietzsche, objective order and structure do not exist, and so the world possess no inherent meaning. The nihilist, an individual who determines that all values are unsubstantiated and that logic and sense are powerless in such a world, must then break through the façades that shoulder all beliefs. He states,

The most extreme form of nihilism would be the view that every belief, every considering-something-true, is necessarily false cause there simply is no true world. Thus: a perspectival appearance whose origin lies in us... To this extent, nihilism, as the denial of a truthful world, of being, might be a divine way of thinking.⁶⁵

New nihilism, then, in its purest implementation, denies the existence of every value, construct, and presumed certainty. Furthermore, through his use of “divine,” Nietzsche even seems to suggest that such a disposition is ideal. Given the extremity of Nietzsche’s statement and the ubiquitousness of his new nihilism, it is not surprising that some modernist writers internalized these ideas. Hemingway’s statement “Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada...Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee” drains the meaning from religion and even existence itself, replacing them instead with metaphysical emptiness.⁶⁶ Likewise, in the “Eumaeus” episode of *Ulysses* (1922), James Joyce complicates the idea of objective,

⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 9.

⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 14-15.

⁶⁶ Ernest Hemingway, *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, ed. Finca Vigía (Charles Scribner’s Sons), 1987. 291.

practical meaning through the symbol of sounds. Stephen Dedalus muses that “Sounds...are impostors...Like names, Cicero, Podmore, Napoleon, Mr. Goodbody, Jesus, Mr. Doyle, Shakespeares were as common as Murphies. What’s in a name?” Chaos, then, flourishes through the epistemological crisis that nihilism fosters.

According to Nietzsche, it is not enough for individuals to passively accept the universe’s lack of innate value and consequence. Rather, an individual should actively will and seek total negation. For Nietzsche, nihilism is not a problem of credible belief or an intellectual crisis, but as a pathology of human desire: either as a collapse of desire altogether or a self-deceit concerning what we actually desire.⁶⁷ In effect, nothing is important or worth wanting. He claims that

Nihilism does not only contemplate the ‘in vain!’ nor is it the belief that everything deserves to perish; one helps to destroy one actually puts one’s shoulder to the plough; one destroys. This, if you will, is illogical, but the Nihilist does not believe in the necessity of being logical.⁶⁸

“Illogical” here suggests that such a nihilist relies on feeling rather than reason and reaches judgments that are derived from sensational perceptions, not intrinsic truths. Again, it is then perhaps understandable why modernism enveloped by Nietzsche’s nihilism; any hope for a logical, predictable pattern running the world seemed lost.

However, for Eliot and Yeats, Nietzsche’s argument seems deficient. For instance, when Eliot declares that “human kind cannot bear much reality” in “Burnt

⁶⁷ Robert Pippin, *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2010. 181.

⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 18.

Norton” (1935), he highlights the difficulty of attaining absolute authenticity and truth rather than their nonexistence or humanity’s unwillingness to “bear” such concepts. The journey to discovery may not be forthright, but the truth is achievable. Furthermore, Yeats bases his entire view of history on the existence of a consistent, overarching patterns and cycles in *A Vision* and like Eliot, he sees “truth” as a meaningful aspiration. In a January 1939 letter to Lady Elizabeth Pelham, Yeats writes “Man can embody truth but he cannot know.”⁶⁹ On one hand, his statement seems as bleak as Hemingway’s empty “nada”; however, if we view Yeats’s phrase with Heraclitus and by extension Hegel in mind, we can see the implied inverse of the assertion, which would read something like, “The truth does not exist at all unless it is—and as it is—embodied in and by man.”⁷⁰ Value-creation therefore begins with a search for truth in an otherwise empty, illogical space that an individual then fills with pattern and structure. In this way, Eliot and Yeats actively put their shoulders to the metaphorical plow, but they do so to cultivate order and certainty.

Nietzsche’s Russian Influences

It is clear that, given Nietzsche’s distrust in the modern system of values and truth, his nihilism draws upon a genealogy that shares his dubiousness even more strongly than Jacobi’s in his critique of idealism. This genealogy includes two of the most widely regarded writers on Russian nihilism: Ivan Turgenev and Fyodor Dostoevsky.

⁶⁹ *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (New York: Macmillan), 1955. 922.

⁷⁰ Calvin Thomas, “Knowledge and Embodiment in Yeats.” *South Central Review* 4, no. 4, 1987, www.jstor.org/stable/3189027. 53-55.

Elisabeth Kuhn traces Nietzsche's sources to a few different texts, and each posits a nihilism that allows for nothing but negativity.⁷¹ In the summer of 1873, Nietzsche read Prosper Mérimée's French translations and published comments on Turgenev's novels *Fathers and Sons* (1862) and followed with *Virgin Soil* (1877) several years later. Both of these novels outline a nihilism that specifically emphasizes the renunciation of a manufactured political and theological faith. Strengthening his interpretation of nihilism, Nietzsche followed these readings with Paul Bourget's *Essays in Contemporary Psychology* (1883).⁷²

Although these texts proved to be instrumental in determining his thoughts, it was Nietzsche's reading of Dostoevsky in 1887, however, that most profoundly shaped his conception of nihilism, and this encounter explains the "explosion" of the term "nihilism" in the last two years of Nietzsche's productive life.⁷³ In particular, passages from Dostoevsky's *Demons* (1872) reappeared consistently in Nietzsche's notebooks from 1887-1888, including the phrase "I am a nihilist, but I love beauty."⁷⁴ As Dostoevsky biographer Joseph Frank observes, the target of Dostoevsky's critique of nihilism in *Demons* takes aim at Western rationalism, which includes the philosophies of Kant and Spinoza. Dostoevsky viewed rationalism as "inevitably leading to the replacement of the

⁷¹ Scholarly consensus indicates that Kuhn's study is a seminal work in the etymology of Nietzsche's nihilism. See Kuhn, Elisabeth. 1984. "Nietzsche's Quelle des Nihilismus-Begriffs." *Nietzsche Studien* 13:253-278.

⁷² Weller, *Modernism and Nihilism*, 29.

⁷³ Weller, *Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism*, 28.

⁷⁴ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Vintage Classics), 1995. 418.

Godman Christ, with his morality of love, by the Man-god of egoism and power.”⁷⁵ The rationalist, then, simply “replaces” Christ as a moral foundation. As the personification of “rational egoism,” Dostoevsky’s nihilist is therefore, anti-Christian and anti-rationalist. This distrust in an established Christian tradition translates to Nietzsche’s denouncement of organized religion, and also perhaps informs his decision not to consider old nihilism when formulating his own understanding of the term.

All of these events and ideas form the framework of Nietzsche’s complex and modified rendering of nihilism. He does not adopt the initial definition that Jacobi delivers, nor does he help us to grasp the tradition that Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel work within. Rather, Nietzsche deviates from a perception of the idea that boasts a history that is hundreds of years long and instead adopts an approach that borrows from early Russian existentialism. This was not necessarily a deliberate obscuration on his part, just perhaps an investigation of a nihilism that he believed more accurately characterized the modern condition. Additionally, while it might seem too harsh to accuse Nietzsche of “misunderstanding” nihilism as Gillespie suggests—he did not participate in publishing *The Will to Power*, for instance, and therefore had no say in the final version of the arguments it contains—his interpretation nevertheless places modernism’s tradition of nihilism in the Russian existential mode instead of within a lineage that sees the usefulness of nothingness. The old nihilism, however, has not been banished from

⁷⁵ Joseph Frank, “Demons,” in *Between Religion and Rationality: Essays in Russian Literature and Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2010, 60.

modernism altogether, as writers like Eliot and Yeats form a countercurrent that creates and challenges the new nihilism's emptiness.

Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel: An Old Nihilism to Challenge the New

After investigating Nietzsche's new nihilism and its modernist readership, I now want to examine the tradition of old nihilism that Nietzsche's philosophy obscured. Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel, all of whom pose systems of thought that extract the creative potential from nothingness, lead this charge for modernism. By deviating from an understanding of nihilism that originated in the fourteenth century, Nietzsche posed a departure from a view of a philosophical concept that existed for centuries. Therefore, "old" here does not necessarily mean outdated or departed, but instead, a "previous" tradition that existed before Nietzsche's *Will to Power*. This tradition may appear forgotten by modernists due in part to the wide array of people who read Nietzsche and that his philosophy seems to correspond with the events surrounding modernism, which include traumatic war, degradation of art and culture, and existential doubt in religion. If considered more deeply, however, the old nihilism resurfaces in modernism as a countercurrent to the new, and it challenges the nothingness and fills it with potential. It is a nothing such as this—the nothing of Kant, Spinoza, and Hegel—that makes creation possible.

The great wars and totalitarian regimes that plagued Western society since *The Will to Power*'s publication lends credence to society's acceptance of his nihilistic vision. Nietzsche's death of God does appear to facilitate a world that permits all things to

transpire. However, as Gillespie argues, we need to reimagine what the “death of God” actually signifies. For Nietzsche, God’s death is both liberating and frightening; on one hand, this event eradicates the western world’s reliance on religion as a source of morality, but it also leaves emptiness in its wake. This emptiness then breeds the valueless state of new nihilism that seeped its way into modernist art and literature. The tradition of nihilism before Nietzsche, though, focuses instead on a reclamation of nothingness: to see “nothing” as provisional and prolific. The desolation of new nihilism fades, leaving instead a human will and self-avowal that fills the empty space and prepares for construction rather than annihilation. While they never mention the subject by name, Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel all do precisely that: they posit a value-positive nihilism that captures a philosophical rather than theological *Creatio ex nihilo*.

A philosopher whose contemporaries accused of atheism and pantheism, Spinoza enjoyed a boost in popularity in 19th and 20th century Europe, just in time for a modernist audience to take notice.⁷⁶ His substance monism and consideration of plenitude and vacancy, which are two component parts of his system of ideas, especially portray the old nihilism’s value of value. Sometimes called the “One Substance,” a portion of his “Theory of Attributes” discussed in the *Ethics* (1677), Spinoza claims that one infinite substance—he calls this substance “God” or “Nature”—is the only substance that exists. In what seems like a contradiction, however, this one substance possesses endless

⁷⁶ For instance, Karl Marx liked Spinoza’s account of the universe, interpreting it as materialistic. George Santayana also demonstrated a significant interest in Spinozan philosophy, and he wrote an introduction to the *Ethics*.

attributes. Additionally, while the individual attributes exist autonomously and separately from each other, they are all nonetheless a part of the same metaphysical substance. Therefore, each one of the attributes yields the possibility of explaining the entire universe and everything in it. Concerning this notion, Spinoza posits that existence itself is “conceived as an eternal truth, just as is the essence of a thing, and therefore cannot be explicated through duration or time, even if duration be conceived as without beginning and end.”⁷⁷

Through his methodology, Spinoza perhaps leads us to the edge of the abyss of absolute emptiness, but he does not leave us there. Indeed, as Thomas Altizer claims, Spinoza’s substance monism does not reject nothingness’s creative capacity. Rather, he is instead one of the only modern philosophers who refuses to succumb to the “nihil,” the complete abyss, and instead aims to “deconstruct a uniquely modern nothingness.”⁷⁸ He argues that Spinoza, rather than maintaining an abyss filled with nothing, removes the “negativity of nothingness” and that he “renders it as divine plenitude.” If so, this seems to concur with the “very logic of nihilism,” which is to condense the “something into metaphysically nothing and to attempt to have the nothing perform as something.”⁷⁹ To extrapolate further, it appears that Spinoza’s brand of nihilism discussed in the *Ethics*

⁷⁷Benedictus De Spinoza and G. H. R Parkinson, *Ethics*, Oxford Philosophical Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2000. 32.

⁷⁸ Thomas Altizer, *Godhead and the Nothing* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 2003. 119-120.

⁷⁹ Altizer, *Godhead and Nothing*, 139.

interprets the void and nothingness as having the potential for promoting an order that contrasts with the chaos of the new nihilism.

If Spinoza's vacancy and substance monism remove the negativity of nothingness, then Kant opens up the human subject for an epistemological "emptying out" with an idealistic twist. Eliot's familiarity with Kant is substantial; he read the *Critiques* in his graduate seminar with Charles Montague and wrote three papers. Yeats latched onto Kant's idealism. Kant's system of ideas is foundational: it is even the space where nihilism perhaps initially manifests in post-Enlightenment philosophy, and his thought lies heavily behind philosophical modernism.⁸⁰ Even the "death of God," an event often attributed to Nietzsche, finds its foremost expression in Kantian antinomies, in which a whole generation of thinkers found "an unabridged gap between God and man."⁸¹ Kant's formulation of nihilism takes a rational approach as defined in his three *Critiques: The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *The Critique of Judgment* (1790). Perhaps fittingly, nihilism enters the discussion through an act of disappearance, where for Slavoj Žižek, the Kantian subject becomes "a non-substantial void" where Kant "asserts that the transcendental subject is unknowable, empty."⁸²

This fading of the subject is not a simple undertaking and the process requires an epistemological regression, so to speak, to complete it. In the first *Critique*, Kant wants

⁸⁰ Weller, *Modernism and Nihilism*, 20.

⁸² Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso), 1996. 124.

to stake a claim about the truth, and in doing so, he reduces the world to mere appearance. As Cunningham suggests, the world must dissolve before the Kantian subject can make any assumptions, to “say” anything.⁸³ The second *Critique* steals nature away from the subject to examine “the good life” without any phenomenal intrusion, and thus the subject has lost the ability to “do” anything.⁸⁴ Finally, in the third *Critique*, the subject’s world loses all “visible objects,” and so he/she can no longer “see” anything.⁸⁵ It is through these formulations that the Kantian subject will be the site of, what Cunningham calls, a “triple vanishing.” Through this vanishing, the “non-substantial void” that Žižek perceives has purged itself and, like Spinoza’s space between vacancy and plenitude, Kant provides us with a “nothing.” This “nothing” gives the subject, now completely “vanished,” the space to start the building process and construct an epistemological foundation that can later hold value and meaning.

Hegel deepens Spinoza’s and Kant’s renderings of nihilism, as he takes the “nothing” they posit and makes it function as “something” of value. He recognizes the danger of romantic nihilism and attempts to overcome it by showing that the principle of negation does not lead to meaningless and despair; rather, it yields absolute knowledge and a rational, methodical ethics. Hegel extends Spinoza’s ideas on substance and the Kantian system of ideas and through his endeavor, he shows that nihilism is perhaps inevitable and even favorable. To contend with this inevitability, Hegel postulates a “true

⁸³ Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism, Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology* (London: Routledge), 2002.74.

⁸⁴ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 74.

⁸⁵ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 75.

nihilism” that “recognized and participated in the absolute” and “rejected the divine omnipotence in favor of the true omnipotence and dialectical rationality of absolute spirit,” which is based on negativity.⁸⁶ For Hegel, the world, nature, and life are the manifestation and externalization of *Geist*, or the “Absolute Idea.”⁸⁷ He states, “*Geist* is immortal; without it there is no past no future, but an essential now.”⁸⁸ Furthermore, when connecting the *Geist* to the realm of particulars, nothingness becomes essential. Hegel declares, “Nothingness is the principle of all things...all proceeded from and returns to Nothingness...To obtain happiness, therefore, man must seek to assimilate himself to this principle by continual victories over himself; and for the sake of this, do nothing, wish nothing, desire nothing.”⁸⁹ After establishing nothingness as the essence of existence, Hegel then proposes how this thing that nearly a century later will plague modernists can be used to support a carefully designed reality.

To do this, Hegel must maneuver negation into functioning as “something,” a thing that has potential on its own. In his *Science of Logic* (1816), he outlines his view of absolute negativity:

Becoming in essence, its reflective movement, is the movement of nothing to nothing, and so back to itself. The transition, or Becoming, sublates itself in its transition: that Other which arises in the course of this transition is not the Not-being of a Being, but the nothingness of a Nothing, and this, to be the negation of a nothing, constitutes Being — Being only is as the movement of Nothing to Nothing, and as such it is Essence; and Essence does not have this movement

⁸⁶ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 116.

⁸⁷ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 106.

⁸⁸ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, eds. Charles Hegel, and J. Sibree (Kitchener: Batoche Books), 2000. 79.

⁸⁹ Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 168-169.

within it but is this movement, as a being that is itself absolutely illusory, pure negativity, which has nothing without it that could negate it, but negates only its own negativity, which is only in this negation, which latter is only in this negating.⁹⁰

For Hegel, the absolute is the nothing that negates itself, or, the annihilation of annihilation. However, this annihilation is not the harbinger of absolute destruction, though it may appear this way. Instead, Hegelian annihilation is not finite, and it does indicate a condition that, for the new nihilism, has the power to trap its inhabitants in a condition of tumult. Indeed, to recognize and understand such obliteration is to overcome it, according to Hegel. Hegel's overcoming leaps directly from the void, born into the world as an opportunity for creation; he declares, "out of this abyss of nothing...the feeling: God is dead...the highest totality in its complete seriousness and out of its deepest ground, at once all-encompassing and in the most joyful freedom of its form can and must arise."⁹¹ In other words, no finite or infinite being exists, but all things are collapsed into the idea of negation itself, which then allows for a surmounting to take place. This is a form of nihilism that rebounds and reconstitutes itself as the most comprehensive order.⁹² Through Hegel, nihilism is given the attribute of potential creation, a characteristic that Spinoza and Kant built toward. Their three philosophies together help to form the "true nihilism," a part of the history of ideas that Western

⁹⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Science of Logic* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis), 2014. 346.

⁹¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Faith & Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 1977. 358.

⁹² Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche*, 117.

society in the early 20th century nearly misses thanks to Nietzsche's reimagination of the concept.

Conclusion

Even currently, Western culture largely associates nihilism with disaster, destruction, and obliteration largely thanks to *The Will to Power*. However, as I have shown, nihilism is vastly more complex and multifaceted than Nietzsche's work projects. John Xiros Cooper makes the accurate claim that nihilism is not a synonym for chaos and anarchy.⁹³ It is instead often understood as a historical event, particularly of late-modern Western culture, when confidence in our "highest values"—religious and moral values—rapidly deteriorates. If we consider Cooper's remark, then modernist writers can respond in two possible ways to such an event: either through Nietzsche's valueless conception that threatens modernism, or a response that sees potential in emptiness and endeavors to use nothingness as a space for creation. For Nietzsche, this tension of modernity's answer to nihilism will elicit either a "decline and recession of the power of the spirit" or an "increased power of the spirit," though he gives no clear answer to which result will win.⁹⁴ On one hand, modernism must contend with God's death, which engenders strong theological and moral implications, as well as the socioeconomic ramifications of capitalism, which highlight a culture where art is devalued and commodified. On the other hand, while the etymology of nihilism is based in "nihil," there is more than one

⁹³John Xiros Cooper, *Modernism and the Culture of Market Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2004. 5-6.

⁹⁴Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 17.

way to rationalize and engage with nothingness and perceived value loss. Indeed, Cunningham calls nihilism “post-apocalyptic” because it is beyond being apocalyptic.⁹⁵ That is, it is an entity beyond the scope of mere negativity.

French philosopher and theorist Maurice Blanchot begins his *Writing of the Disaster*, which connects old nihilism, and Hegel’s view of absolute negativity in particular, to history’s cataclysmic events. He begins with the statement “The disaster ruins everything, all while leaving everything intact.”⁹⁶ This seems like a contradictory statement, and Blanchot’s next declaration does little to illuminate it. He continues, “When the disaster comes upon us, it does not come.”⁹⁷ While this seems like a paradox, Cunningham answers that “nothing” has the power as both the disaster and preserver, something that is always already present and absent.⁹⁸ This speaks to the recurring observations about nihilism: that the idea, historically speaking, emphasizes the positivity of nothingness rather than an complete negativity that came with Nietzsche. The question we must ask is this: What can possibly simultaneously devastate and shield everything? The answer to Blanchot’s quandary thus is “nothing.” Old nihilism’s disaster, which promises a provisional nothing, fails to remain bound to physicality.

⁹⁵ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 240.

⁹⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 1986. 2.

⁹⁷ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 2.

⁹⁸ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 240.

CHAPTER III

“THE DARK GROW LUMINOUS”: YEATS READING NIHILISM

I think profound philosophy must come from terror. An abyss opens under our feet; inherited convictions, the pre-suppositions of our thoughts, those Fathers of the Church...drop into the abyss. Whether we will or no we must ask the ancient questions: Is there reality anywhere? Is there a God? Is there a Soul?
—W. B. Yeats, “Modern Poetry: A Broadcast” (1936)

Introduction

In his essay “Bishop Berkeley,” (1931) Yeats strongly expresses admiration for the philosophers of old nihilism. He declares that “no educated man will doubt that the movement of philosophy from Spinoza to Hegel is the greatest of all works of intellect.”⁹⁹ This is indeed an audacious statement: Yeats implies that only a fool would object to his point, and his work substantiates the proclamation. Right around the point that Yeats began to read old nihilism, his poetry and prose incurred a noticeable stylistic and thematic shift. He moved away from the Romantic-infused language of his earlier volumes and toward a questioning of metaphysical truths and a less formal structure. This is perhaps unsurprising; by the time he published *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917), Yeats was approaching middle age and had surrendered the years-long mirage of marrying his muse, Maud Gonne. He had spent the winters of 1913-1916 at Stone

⁹⁹ W. B. Yeats, *Later Essays*, eds. Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux and William H. O’Donnell, *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, V. 5 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons), 1994. 396.

Cottage with Ezra Pound where the younger poet served as his secretary; at the cottage, the pair could immerse themselves in their projects uninterruptedly. This volume is then fittingly infused with discussions of old age and deteriorating masculine gallantry and, as Terence Brown suggests, signals a man in deep personal, existential crisis.¹⁰⁰ In *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), however, Yeats thunderously reveals the knowledge that he collected through his studies of the occult, mysticism, and philosophy with a forceful poetic voice.¹⁰¹ Importantly, at this volume's publication, Yeats had been reading Benedict de Spinoza for at least a few years. The ideas that preoccupy nihilism are at their strongest in *The Tower* (1928), where Yeats communicates his disillusionment with the limitations of the physical world and the relationship of the mind and body. At this point, Yeats had read all three old nihilists—Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, and Georg W. F. Hegel—in careful detail. Since these topics did not surface with such strength when he began reading Nietzsche many years earlier, I suggest that the old nihilists helped Yeats engage with such concepts and form an expressed response to them.

The aim of this chapter is to interrogate Yeats's engagement with nihilism by predominantly using his letters and prose. I shall first investigate Yeats's expansive reading of Friedrich Nietzsche and his potent admiration for the philosopher's bold ideas. I establish Havelock Ellis's "Nietzsche Series" as his initial introduction to Nietzsche and show that the series incited his lifelong love of the philosopher. While Yeats undeniably

¹⁰⁰ Terence Brown, *The Life of W. B. Yeats: A Critical Biography* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell), 2000. 249.

¹⁰¹ Brown, *The Life of Yeats*, 277.

incorporated facets of Nietzschean philosophy into his poetic system, however, I argue that the poet resists *The Will to Power's* new characterization of nihilism as bleak and empty. In fact, Yeats extracts Nietzsche's generative concept of *amor fati* from the philosopher's work, a disposition promoting a "love" of individual "fate" that modernist readers seemed to overlook. I then chart Yeats's reading of the old nihilist philosophers Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel, whose generative understanding of the idea removed nothingness's negativity and imbued it with generative capabilities. Using its knowledge of mysticism, transcendental idealism, and the Absolute Spirit, Yeats uses old nihilism to establish a system of ideas that removes the negativity of nothingness and positions itself for transcendence rather than the destructive despair of modernism's new nihilism. Finally, this chapter shows that Yeats proposes a renewed deific entity in *A Vision* that fills the emptiness left by Nietzsche's "death of God" and makes divinity palpable for human understanding. As Michael Gillespie shows, the problem of nihilism lies in a "nominalist" conception of God that is terrifying and omnipotent, but when Nietzsche declared this God dead, the modern landscape had nothing else to fill the vacancy. Herbert Read acknowledged this problem, and while the main challenge facing society after the death of God is the "conquest of nihilism," he maintains that the world has failed to advance that agenda since Nietzsche's pronouncement.¹⁰² Consequently, society still dawdles in ambiguity because God has not yet "risen from the dead."¹⁰³ While the new nihilism left the idea of God deceased for a modernist audience, I argue that through his

¹⁰² Read, *The Contrary Experience*, 69.

¹⁰³ Read, *The Contrary Experience*, 69.

image of the ethereal, enigmatic Thirteenth Cone, Yeats employs Spinoza's substance monism, Hegel's Absolute Spirit, and Kant's transcendental idealism to propose a new kind of God that old nihilism reimagines for a modern age. This new divinity fills the barrenness that the new nihilism instigated and replaces it with procreative, transcendent qualities.

Yeats In Context: The Modern Nihil

If any one of the modernists are outwardly perfect candidates for embracing the new nihilism, it is perhaps Yeats. He not only contended with the aftermath of the Great War but also survived the period in Irish history known as "the Troubles," a particularly calamitous interlude when Ireland fought for and won its independence from its colonizer.¹⁰⁴ Bloody battles like the Easter Rising of 1916, the War of Independence from 1919-1921, and the Civil War of 1922-1923 deeply marked Ireland's physical landscape and collective consciousness, wounds that carved their way into Yeats's poetry. Political uncertainty and turmoil lasted well after war formally ended, which bred continued unease and struggle. As Sarah Cole argues,

For the Ireland of the modernist era, three elements converge in this imaginary: a general tone of nihilistic resentment, sharing some of its language with the anarchist movement; a cycle of vengeance that superseded the ideal of generativity, especially potent in the post-Rising and post-First World War years; and, perhaps most simply, the possibility of being motivated by hatred.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Anthony Bradley, "W. B. Yeats and the Angel of History: *The Tower (1928)*, *The Winding Stair and Other Poems (1933)*" in *Imagining Ireland in the Poems and Plays of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2011. 98.

¹⁰⁵ Sarah Cole, *At the Violet Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2012. 163.

With political uncertainty and shared, unveiled disgust came metaphysical doubt, and also for Yeats, as Anthony Bradley argues, the Nietzschean sense that European culture was “moving toward a great catastrophe,” and that nihilism embodied the age’s leading “ethos” perhaps seemed like a logical philosophical disposition.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, he states that although Yeats’s body of work is not consumed by it, his poetry “meditates on more profound issues than the pragmatic issues of politics, and is for a time suffused with the nihilism that was to some extent the currency of literary modernism.”¹⁰⁷ As Yeats himself says, “I feel that an imaginative writer whose work draws him to philosophy must attach himself to some great historic school. My dreams and much psychic phenomena force me into a certain little-trodden way but I must not go too far from the main European track.”¹⁰⁸ Considering Ireland’s contentious atmosphere and Yeats’s personal struggle with war’s repercussions, it might be tempting to see him as continuing down the “main European track” into the abyss of new nihilism.

However, a clear current in Yeats’s writing shows that he considers nihilism as procreative rather than the empty result of complete destruction. Yeats’s interest in nothingness recurs in his work from his early writings until *Parnell’s Funeral and Other Poems* (1935), his last published volume of poetry. And from the beginning, there are glimpses of his portrayals of nothingness possessing potential for value. In “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry” (1900), Yeats considers his “unshakable belief” and

¹⁰⁶ Bradley, *Yeats and the Angel of History*, 98.

¹⁰⁷ Bradley, *Yeats and the Angel of History*, 99.

¹⁰⁸ W. B. Yeats, *W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: Their Correspondence 1901-1937*, ed. Ursula Bridge (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge), 2017. 149.

asserts that “whatever of philosophy has been made poetry alone is permanent, and that one should arrange it in some regular order, rejecting nothing as the make-believe of the poets.”¹⁰⁹ This emphasis on creation as knowledge is an early indication of Yeats seeing “nothing” as having value-potential. In “Anima Hominis” (*Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, 1918), Yeats concludes his discussion of the relationship between the self and the mask with a lucid realization. He affirms, “I shall find the dark grow luminous, the void fruitful when I understand I have nothing, that the ringers in the tower have appointed for the hymen for the soul a passing bell.”¹¹⁰ His metaphor is condensed and vivid: only after negating the world’s fleeting images through a death knell can the “soul” achieve its “hymen” and begin to create. This idea—the conception of an absolutely empty but prolific void—reappears throughout all of his writing and highlights his desire to create, an idea that runs directly counter to the new nihilism. In “A General Introduction for My Work” (1937), published less than a year before his death, Yeats declares, “A poet is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete.”¹¹¹ The word “intended” here is particularly important. Yeats, looking back on a poet’s existence, sees the abstract idea as ultimately presiding over an early, “incoherent” iteration that drinks his coffee in the metaphorical morning. The “reborn idea” is patterned and refined, leaving the early version’s chaotic element out of the discussion. The “we” in Yeats’s statement instead is

¹⁰⁹ W. B. Yeats, *Early Essays: The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, V. 4, eds. Richard J Finneran, and George Bornstein (New York: Scribner), 2007. 65.

¹¹⁰ W. B. Yeats, *Mythologies*, 334.

¹¹¹ Yeats, *Later Essays*, 509.

the orderer, the architect that ascribes meaning to all things, and therefore understands all things.

Yeats's meditation on nothingness extends beyond his prose and recurs in his dramatic works and poetry as well. In his early tragedy *Where There Is Nothing* (1902), Paul Ruttledge preaches a new religion that clashes with civilization and counsels the demolition of all laws, cities, and churches. The townspeople, however, demand that he and his followers live outside of town. Through Ruttledge, Yeats establishes a fascination with "nothing" that manifests as both a finitude and the revelation of a positivity beyond that abyss. Ruttledge declares in his dying line, "Remember always where there is nothing, there is God."¹¹² Furthermore, in "Meru," one of his final published poems, Yeats interrogates the multifaceted nature of human existence:

Civilisation is hooped together, brought
Under a rule, under the semblance of peace
By manifold illusion; but man's life is thought,
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease
Ravening through century after century,
Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come
Into the desolation of reality.¹¹³

Using "hooped," a term that conjures images of his cyclical view of history, Yeats calls attention to the multifarious artifice that connects peoples and places. The aural openness

¹¹² W. B. Yeats, *Where There Is Nothing* in *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats*, eds. Russell K. Alspach and Catharine C. Alspach (New York: Macmillan), 1966. 471-72.

¹¹³ W. B. Yeats, "Meru," in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997), 289.

and looseness of “hooped” underscores this point: it suggests a slackness that words like “woven” or “entwined” would fail to capture. The things that do the hooping, the “rule” and “peace,” now function as fragile and even false concepts that ought to be cast aside. Since these concepts are loose and unable to hold civilization together, humanity diligently forges through to discover a more meaningful metaphysical reality. By deploying “ravens” twice, Yeats calls upon frenzy and almost animal-like hunger to describe the desire to reach the core beyond the artifice. The “terror” and “desolation” of reality, capturing that horror at the center of existence, do not deter humanity from repeatedly clawing until reaching that core, despite the core being empty of meaning. As Richard Ellman argues, the individual feels obligated to “strip illusion away” despite the terrifying nothingness that she/he will undoubtedly eventually discover.¹¹⁴ Therefore, “the horror” that viscerally upset Mr. Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* after the veil is lifted is necessary for the people in “Meru.” However, that journey to the center is frightening. Yeats writes, “I am alarmed at the growing moral cowardice in the world, as the old security disappears—people run in packs that they may get courage from one another and even sit at home and shiver.”¹¹⁵ Yeats’s language does not reflect a gleeful anticipation of the old guard’s destruction. Rather, descent into annihilation disturbs him.

¹¹⁴ Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 1978. 54.

¹¹⁵ W. B. Yeats, *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (New York: Macmillan), 1955. 873.

“That Great Enchanter”: Yeats Reading the New Nihilism

Yeats’s captivation with the philosophy of Nietzsche, “that great enchanter,” is undeniable and widely studied. The purpose of this section, therefore, is not to recapitulate that influence but instead to investigate Yeats’s first encounter with Nietzsche, to identify which Nietzschean texts he read, and to show that he does not view nihilism, or nothingness, as the barren, nonredemptive wasteland that *The Will to Power* forecasts. Unlike fellow modernists like James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence, for instance, who also read Nietzsche and responded to nihilism in that new tradition, Yeats interestingly interacts with the idea in the old tradition.¹¹⁶

Scholars still debate Yeats’s first exposure to Nietzsche’s ideas because his own words conflict with the textual evidence. For instance, Yeats attributes his first reading of Nietzsche’s philosophy to John Quinn, a New York lawyer and benefactor of arts and literature. In a letter dated May 15, 1903, Yeats affirms this when he tells Quinn, “you have been the first to introduce me to Nietzsche.”¹¹⁷ Yeats’s statement is only partially true, however. While Quinn is likely the first person to *gift* Nietzsche’s writings to Yeats, including copies of *The Case of Wagner* (1888) and *A Genealogy of Morals* (1887) as well as his personal copy of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1891) all before the end of September 1902, Otto Bohlmann remarks that Yeats may have meant this statement “diplomatically” so that Quinn would continue to support the poet’s work, and it thus

¹¹⁶ See Cosgrove’s *James Joyce’s Negations: Irony, Indeterminacy and Nihilism in “Ulysses” and Other Writings* and Colin Milton, *Lawrence and Nietzsche: A Study in Influence*. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987.

¹¹⁷ Yeats, *Letters*, 403.

should not be taken as truth.¹¹⁸ In fact, Yeats probably read Nietzsche for the first time several years prior. Sometime between latter 1900 and 1902, Yeats purchased a pamphlet that contained English translations of Nietzsche's writings.¹¹⁹ However, for Bohlmann and Yeats biographer Terence Brown, Yeats's initial encounter with Nietzsche's philosophy instead might have occurred as early as April 1896, where his "Rosa Alchemica" and "Two Poems Concerning Peasant Visionaries" were published in *The Savoy*¹²⁰ alongside the first article in physician Havelock Ellis's "Friedrich Nietzsche" series.¹²¹

If Yeats did first encounter Nietzsche through Ellis's articles, it is perhaps unsurprising that he appreciated the philosopher's intoxicating and vigorous ideas from the start. Ellis describes Nietzsche in a way that casts him as innovative, heroic, and one of the loftiest thinkers in the history of philosophy. Yeats knew Ellis and the two men shared mutual acquaintances, and while Ellis was away from London in the summer of 1895, Yeats and Arthur Symons, editor of *The Savoy*, shared the physician's lodging in Fountain Court, Temple.¹²² In his first article, Ellis largely focuses on Nietzsche's biography, from his family history to his leaving Basel though the last nine years of life

¹¹⁸ Otto Bohlmann, *Yeats and Nietzsche: An Exploration of Major Nietzschean Echoes in the Writings of William Butler Yeats* (London: Macmillan), 1982. 1.

¹¹⁹ Brown, *The Life of Yeats*, 151.

¹²⁰ Yeats described *The Savoy*'s fellow contributors as "outlaws" and believed that the magazine waged "warfare on the British public at a time when we had all against us."

¹²¹ Havelock Ellis was an English physician, writer, intellectual, and social reformer who studied human sexuality. His interest in Nietzsche's philosophy stemmed from Nietzsche's call for an individual to live a full and fulfilled life.

¹²² Yeats, *Letters*, 196.

travelling and spending time at health institutions (92).¹²³ Ellis then pushes beyond the biographical and casts Nietzsche in a visionary light, calling him “mystical” and a man who experienced “prophetic dreams” since he was a boy.¹²⁴ He specifically calls *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* “the most extraordinary of [Nietzsche’s] works” and names its style “mystical in form, and recalling of the oracular aphoristic manner of the Hebrews.”¹²⁵

With such a mark for mystical aptitude, perhaps Yeats became drawn to Nietzsche because of Ellis’s characterization of the philosopher as “mystical,” a quality that the poet intensely privileged in his own writing.¹²⁶ Yeats and Ellis appeared together in *The Savoy* again in July of 1896, where Ellis’s second “Nietzsche” article treats him even more favorably. Ellis begins this article by articulating that Nietzsche’s purpose for philosophy differs from “the average modern philosopher’s” preoccupation with “books and study,” which positions Nietzsche as someone above his contemporaries. It is Nietzsche’s focus on “a life to be lived” and “the essentials of fine living” that sets him apart.¹²⁷ Finally, Ellis makes his most profound statement for Nietzsche’s philosophical aptitude in his third essay in *The Savoy*’s August 1896 issue, again appearing alongside Yeats’s poetry. Here, Ellis acknowledges that Nietzsche did indeed succumb to madness, but in a bold

¹²³ Havelock Ellis, “Friedrich Nietzsche – I,” *The Savoy: An Illustrated Monthly* (London), April 1896. 92.

¹²⁴ Ellis, “Nietzsche – I,” 93.

¹²⁵ Ellis, “Nietzsche – I,” 92.

¹²⁶ It should be stated that Ellis did not call Nietzsche a mystic. Indeed, in his second article, Ellis claims just the opposite. Nietzsche’s writing, on the other hand, exhibits mystical qualities to Ellis.

¹²⁷ Havelock Ellis, “Friedrich Nietzsche – II,” *The Savoy: An Illustrated Monthly* (London), July 1896. 68.

rhetorical choice, he includes this malady as an indication of a martyrdom for the cause.

He states,

No doubt it was a consolation that Socrates was poisoned, that Jesus was crucified, that Bruno was burnt. But hemlock and the cross and the stake proved sorry weapons against the might of ideas even in those days, and there is no reason to suppose that a doctor's certificate will be more effectual in our own.¹²⁸

To compare Nietzsche to Jesus Christ and a pair of eminent martyrs is indeed daring and even inflammatory. Nevertheless, it is a statement that increases Nietzsche's ethos by proxy, since Ellis includes him among the greatest thinkers of Western culture. When placed in the company of Socrates, the beloved father of Western philosophy, Jesus Christ, and celebrated martyr of science Giordano Bruno, Nietzsche's ideas appear unstoppable despite his deteriorating mental state.

After Yeats read Ellis's unflinchingly positive portrayal of Nietzsche, he formed a enduring affection for the philosopher and was inspired to delve more deeply into Nietzsche's work. He read Nietzsche's most eminent texts, including *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in 1902 and after he finished that, Yeats continued his reading in 1903 and devoured *The Case of Wagner*, *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (1895), *The Twilight of the Idols* (1889), *The Antichrist* (1895), *On the Genealogy of Morals*, and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* for the second time.¹²⁹ Yeats did not read *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) until

¹²⁸ Havelock Ellis, "Friedrich Nietzsche – III," *The Savoy: An Illustrated Monthly* (London), August 1896. 63.

¹²⁹ Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, 168.

1904, and even then, as Surette observes, he only studied select sections.¹³⁰ After consuming this expanse of Nietzschean philosophy so swiftly, it is not difficult to determine how quickly Nietzsche's ghost began to drift behind Yeats's work. For Yeats, a man who was encouraged by occultist rites, mystical experience, and "elitist doctrines," Nietzsche acted as a "councilor who gave instruction in self-mastery and the dominance of others in social contexts where mere hierarchy...could not be depended upon to enforce submission."¹³¹ In a September 1902 letter to Lady Gregory, Yeats expresses just how much he admires the German philosopher. He calls Nietzsche "that strong enchanter" and essentially blames his lack of correspondence with Gregory on Nietzsche, in whom he states that Lady Gregory has a "rival." He praises Nietzsche further and declares that he "completes Blake and has the same roots."¹³² Terence Brown asserts that between 1902-1903, Yeats would undoubtedly become familiar with "the world of continuous struggle which he so compellingly evoked, included the struggle to create a mask."¹³³ The "will to power" that Nietzsche hailed could gain a tangible articulation in two "related forms of mastery: over self and others, which is made possible by heroic self-mastery."¹³⁴ From the Nietzschean books he read, Yeats also absorbed the idea of an era's end and the trouble that potentially awaited humanity on the other side of that termination. While he credits his spiritual "instructors" with inspiring and cultivating his interpretation of history and its end, Surette remarks that Yeats derived "some of his

¹³⁰ Surette, *The Birth of Modernism*, 168.

¹³¹ Brown, *Life of Yeats*, 153.

¹³² Yeats, *Letters*, 379.

¹³³ Brown, *Life of Yeats*, 176.

¹³⁴ Brown, *Life of Yeats*, 177.

apocalyptic imagery” from a “more secular source”: namely, through Nietzsche’s images.¹³⁵

Yeats, Nietzsche, and Tragic Joy

Though Nietzsche cast a lifelong spell on Yeats and shaped the poet’s ideas on multiple points, Yeats did not ascribe to Nietzschean nihilism. Yeats rather plainly rejects the new nihilism in 1903, just one year after he enthusiastically narrated his reading of Nietzsche to Lady Gregory. At this instant, he appears to express a preference for the Apollonian, an energy that inspires creation rather than destruction. In another letter to John Quinn, he expresses his dissatisfaction with *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903), where Yeats mentions that the book’s ideas are “no longer true for him” because it is “too lyrical, too full of aspiration after remote things,” and “too full of desires.”¹³⁶ Instead, he resolves that his next work will “be more creative” and he will communicate his ideas “by that sort of thought that leads straight to action” and “some sort of craft.”¹³⁷ He states, “I have always felt that the soul has two movements primarily: one to transcend forms, and the other to create forms. Nietzsche...calls these the Dionysiac and the Apollonic, respectively. I think I have to some extent got weary of that wild God Dionysus, and I am hoping that the Far-Darter will come in his place.”¹³⁸ Yeats equates Dionysus with transcendence and Apollo with creation, and interestingly, the mode that will lead him to achievement and artistry. His word “weary” implies that Yeats had

¹³⁵ Surette, *Birth of Modernism*, 171-72.

¹³⁶ Yeats, *Letters*, 403.

¹³⁷ Yeats, *Letters*, 403.

¹³⁸ Yeats, *Letters*, 403.

engaged with the Dionysian, but that mode failed to yield the results he desired. Contrarily, Nietzsche's aversion of the Apollonian mode is well documented, and he prefers instead the passionate but destructive Dionysian. While this statement is not enough to negate Yeats's alignment with Nietzsche on certain principles, including the images of apocalypse in his works, his preference for the creative, stabilizing, Apollonian force rather than the frenzied obliteration of the Dionysian is a piece of evidence that distances Yeats from the destruction that exemplifies the new nihilism of *The Will to Power*.

Even further separating Yeats from the new nihilism is the poet's captivation with Nietzsche's idea of *amor fati*, a concept that perhaps becomes buried for a modernist audience beneath the weighty nothingness and despairing aspects of the philosopher's nihilism. Though he does not use the term specifically, I suggest that *amor fati* lies beneath several of Yeats's ideas that imbue his later aesthetic projects, including "tragic joy" and the "heroic." By engaging with *amor fati*, Yeats reemphasizes his commitment to value in a climate that questioned the possibility of an existence beyond existential despair. Though he would eventually claim otherwise near the end of his life, Nietzsche never advocated for the new nihilism to occur, but instead cautioned against it.¹³⁹ Through *amor fati*, the "love of fate" that Nietzsche introduces in *The Gay Science*, the individual places value on something—in this case, his/her fate—and thus can prevent the collapse into nihilism. As *Orbis Litterarum* points out, the phrase "tragic joy" only

¹³⁹ Near the end of his life, Nietzsche exclaimed that he "became a nihilist after all." I'm looking for the primary source to confirm this

appears once in Yeats's poetry, but nevertheless remains a crucial component of his system of ideas. Jahan Ramazani even connects tragic joy with the sublime, since the sublime transforms "the painful spectacle of destruction and death into a joyful assertion of human freedom and transcendence."¹⁴⁰ Additionally, as Terence Brown highlights, Yeats expresses his definition of tragic joy most clearly in "A General Introduction for My Work." While discussing Shakespearean tragedy, Yeats declares:

The heroes of Shakespeare convey to us through their looks, or through the metaphorical patterns of their speech, the sudden enlargement of their vision, their ecstasy at the approach of death. The supernatural is present, cold winds blow across our hands, upon our faces, the thermometer falls, and because of that cold we are hated by journalists and groundlings. There may be in this or that detail painful tragedy, but in the whole work none. I have heard Lady Gregory say... 'Tragedy must be a joy to the man who dies'.¹⁴¹

For Yeats, the specific instances of poor fortune that a character experiences fail to characterize their entire existences as "tragic." Rather, existence is not holistically tragic and should be loved and valued regardless of individual negative events. Yeats, then, shifts focus from the "fate" component of *amor fati* to an appreciation of whole existence. This appreciation of existence itself underscores tragic joy.

Yeats demonstrates the authority of tragic joy in "Lapis Lazuli" (*New Poems*, 1938) where he reclaims tragic Shakespearean characters and positions them as "loving"

¹⁴⁰ Jahan Ramazani, "Yeats: Tragic Joy and the Sublime," *PMLA* 104, no. 2 (1989): 123. <https://doi.org/10.2307/462502>.

¹⁴¹ Yeats, *Essays*, 360.

their existences. The speaker describes the scene of a play and the temperament of the actors who perform their tragic roles:

All perform their tragic play,
There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,
That's Ophelia, that Cordelia;
Yet they, should the last scene be there,
The great stage curtain about to drop,
If worthy their prominent part in the play,
Do not break up their lines to weep.
They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;
Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.¹⁴²

The speaker assuredly labels Hamlet and Lear as blissful despite their violent ends. The stanza's steady, melodic rhyme underscores this delight and lulls the reader into a contentment that matches that of the speaker. Yeats's decision to highlight the actors' perspectives rather than the viewpoints of the characters themselves is noteworthy: It shows that not only do the characters revel in their existences, but the actors perceive this, too. This recognition enables the actors to deliver their lines without becoming overwhelmed with grief and actively transforms the "dread" of the scene into merriment. If the characters can love their fates, then the speaker and audience share that same ability.

Iterations of *amor fati* also manifest themselves in Yeats's heroic, which extends his construction of values beyond the general idea of "tragic joy" and to the specific. Although it is difficult to fashion a single definition that fits all of Yeats's heroic figures,

¹⁴² Yeats, "Lapis Lazuli," 294.

as John Byers has observed, they generally fall into two camps. The first are self-conscious and impetuous because their roles necessitate an intensity for life and the second possess an “earth force” tenacity, and boldness, as well as “spiritual intensity.” Despite their differences, though, neither type of Yeats’s tragic hero succumbs to darkness and despair, but instead finds the worth in calamity. Yeats makes this clear in a 1929 letter to T. S. Moore:

The one heroic sanction is that of the last battle of the Norse Gods, of a gay struggle without hope... Our literary movement would be worthless but for its defeat. Science is the criticism of Myth. There would be no Darwin had there been no Book of Genesis, no electron but for the Greek atomic myth; and when the criticism is finished there is not even a drift of ashes on the pyre... We free ourselves from obsession that we may be nothing. The last kiss is given to the void.¹⁴³

Amor fati, then, becomes the expression of the Yeatsian tragedy that advocates for value rather than worthlessness. The notion that Yeats latched onto *amor fati* rather than Nietzsche’s new nihilism, though he read and grasped both ideas’ respective texts, underscores his commitment to creation in a modern landscape that questions its existence.

A Mystical, Transcendent Experience: Yeats Reading Old Nihilism

The political turmoil that he experienced as an Irish national and an admitted love for Nietzsche’s philosophy outwardly casts Yeats as an ideal candidate for adopting the “new” attitude toward nihilism. However, his proclivity toward mysticism and the

¹⁴³ W. B. Yeats, *Moore Letters*, 153.

plentitude of vacancy, transcendental idealism, and an Absolute, guiding Spirit shows Yeats instead engaging with the old nihilism of Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel. As he did for Nietzsche, Yeats spoke enthusiastically about the philosophy of the three old nihilists, and he read their work in detail. Despite this, their influence on his view of nihilism appears inadequately considered. Furthermore, just as his interest in Nietzsche's philosophy did not depend on the thinker's new nihilism, Yeats did not read the three old nihilists specifically for their thoughts on nothingness's creative potential. Despite this, his detailed reading of their philosophies did shape his consideration of concepts that are closely connected to nihilism, including the nature of reality, existence, and the divine. Ultimately, his reading of Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel helped lead Yeats away from the abyss and toward a summit.

To understand Yeats's engagement with the old nihilism of Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel, we must first consider what initially attracted him to their philosophies. That is, their association with mysticism and the sublime, two concepts that are related to nihilism. Yeats's interest in mysticism as well as questions of existence and meaning manifested before his reading of either old or new nihilism, and as Graham Hough argues, his fascination with such quandaries developed at least as early as his involvement with the Theosophical Society beginning in 1885.¹⁴⁴ Though his affiliation with the Society was brief compared to that of the Hermeneutic Order of the Golden Dawn, its significance endures because it was the first "esoteric system" that Yeats

¹⁴⁴ Graham Hough, *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press), 1984. 38.

interacted with.¹⁴⁵ The Golden Dawn's teachings functioned as an edifice that enabled him to place most of his subsequent interests within a general context, even once the content of its teachings had been modified or rejected.¹⁴⁶ This includes an early interest in, what Hough deems, a version of God that is "boundless, Absolute, impassible, unknowable, and indescribable," with the world existing as "emanations" from this "Absolute."¹⁴⁷ By extension, individual "souls" are small sprites or disconnected pieces of that single, infinite substance.¹⁴⁸ To feel whole, those disconnected pieces are thus compelled to remerge with the god-like "One" from which they came, but to accomplish this they must undergo a "long pilgrimage through many incarnations, live through many lives both in this world and beyond."¹⁴⁹ These mystical subjects only intensify as Yeats's career progressed, and again in 1892, the poet articulates his acute interest in mysticism when he writes to John O'Leary. He states, "the mystical life is centre of all that I do & all that I think & all that I write. It holds to my work the same relation that the philosophy of Godwin help to the work of Shelley & I have all-ways considered my self a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaissance [sic]—the revolt of the soul against the intellect—now beginning in the world."¹⁵⁰ Though a Nietzschean voice echoes in the background of Yeats's words—through a revolt of sorts—these ideas pull the mystical

¹⁴⁵ Hough, *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats*, 38.

¹⁴⁶ Hough, *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats*, 38.

¹⁴⁷ Hough, *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats*, 38.

¹⁴⁸ Hough, *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats*, 38.

¹⁴⁹ Hough, *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats*, 39.

¹⁵⁰ Yeats, *Letters*, 303.

undertones from old nihilism rather seamlessly and further separate Yeats from new nihilism several years before he read either.¹⁵¹

The mystical “One” or “Absolute” that attracted Yeats merges qualities of Spinozan and Hegelian nihilism. Indeed, mysticism and nihilism are closely connected, and for Michael Hinden, represent the “two opposing poles of the Dionysian experience” with perhaps a significant deviation: mysticism begins with the destruction of subjectivity and the world of the subject.¹⁵² In this way, the mystical experience begins with nihilism, but moves toward infinite affirmation through that same experience. Contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou discusses this relationship in greater detail. He states:

Mysticism is a form of transmission that occurs outside of the rational transmission or communication of language. It consists of a pure experience of the infinite or, if you like, god, within the nothingness of being. The mystic immediately finds god when he destroys himself, his ego, and so on. It is only by accepting our finitude and accepting our fundamental and primordial nothingness that we can open up access to the glory of god.

As we shall see, mysticism’s combination of nothingness and an experience of an infinite god-like entity is plainly discernable in Spinoza’s substance monism and Hegel’s idea of the Absolute Spirit. Given the existence of such entities in their philosophies, it is perhaps

¹⁵¹ See Harry Hunt, *Lives in Spirit: Precursors and Dilemmas of a Secular Western Mysticism*, State University of New York Press, 2003. Even though he does not speak of “mystical experience” concerning his philosophy specifically, it should be noted that scholars have also associated Nietzsche with mysticism because of his repeated use of terms like “ecstasy, intoxication, and creative frenzy.” However, he grounds these experiences in the worldly rather than otherworldly.

¹⁵² Michael Hinden, “The Five Voices of ‘The Birth of Tragedy’,” *Comparative Drama* 22.2 (1988): 98. www.jstor.org/stable/41153342.

expected and even fitting that Yeats viewed these thinkers as both philosophers and to an extent, mystics. Through his sustained interest in mysticism and by grasping onto similar qualities in Spinoza's and Hegel's writings, Yeats's conception of nihilism develops in an old, generative vein rather than through the negative reading conception of the term.

Furthermore, the relationship of the sublime to nihilism's old tradition in particular is equally strong.¹⁵³ That greatness beyond possible quantification, the sublime reaches beyond an aesthetic response and taps into the realm of reason, and like nihilism, wrestles with metaphysical and epistemological questioning.¹⁵⁴ Similar to mysticism's relationship to nihilism, both nihilism and the sublime respond to a comparable idea.¹⁵⁵ William Slocombe visualizes these two responses as opposite sides of one coin. On one side rests "the sublime face" and represents individuals who "saw the ascent of man in their culture," while the other side holds the "nihilistic" face of "those who saw the descent of God."¹⁵⁶ Accordingly, while most individuals perhaps interpret nihilism as the "negative signifier" and the sublime as the "positive signifier," these ideas are not as

¹⁵³ Just like nihilism, "the sublime" underwent various changes in definition over the years. Therefore, as Slocombe argues, when reading formulations of the sublime we should always be aware that it is only a reading and that, as such, it is heavily reliant upon our understanding of the period at hand. Likewise, when we speak of "styles of the sublime," we must also understand that we are speaking of stylized forms of the sublime within ideological constructions. If the sublime is an ideological construct, then what one period considers sublime is not necessarily sublime in another, and "the sublime, rightly understood, is not all things to all men.

¹⁵⁴ Kant's definition

¹⁵⁵ Will Slocombe, *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern: The (hi)story of a Difficult Relationship from Romanticism to Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge), 2006. Xii.

¹⁵⁶ Slocombe, *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern*, xii.

dissimilar as we might believe.¹⁵⁷ This dissimilarity becomes even more apparent in Kant's philosophy; his rendering of the sublime is noticeably absorbed in the "triple vanishing" of the Kantian subject, which is one of the strongest components of Kant's nihilism.

As with the term "nihilism," Yeats does not explicitly use "sublime" to describe any specific facet of his system of ideas, but he nevertheless follows a tradition of Romantic sublime that is rooted in Kant.¹⁵⁸ When he states in "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" that "it is only by ancient symbols...that any highly subjective art can escape the barrenness and shallowness of too conscious arrangement," Yeats taps into a tradition of the sublime that, as Ramazani argues, descends from Blake and Shelley, both of whom draw on Kant's sublime for definition.¹⁵⁹ Yeats uses facets of the sublime to answer questions concerning human existence, but like Kant, also calls upon what Kant calls "transcendental idealism" to negotiate what seem to be contradictory elements of reality. By combining the old nihilism of Kant with Spinoza and Hegel, Yeats forms a conception of the divine that embraces infinite but generative negativity and reimagines the terrifying "God of will" that Nietzsche's new nihilism declared dead without proposing a solution to the emptiness left behind.

¹⁵⁷ Slocombe, *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern*, xii.

¹⁵⁸ Jahan Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death: Elegy, Self-Elegy, and the Sublime*. (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1990. 105-6.

¹⁵⁹ Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death*, 105.

The Pantheistic Mystic: Yeats and Spinoza

Of the three old nihilists, Yeats most likely encountered the accused pantheist and atheist Spinoza first, and he saw the philosopher as innovative and a thinker who shattered conventional modes of contemplation. In his notes to *The Words Upon the Window-Pane* (1936), Yeats declares, “We should see certain men and women as if at the edge of a cliff, time broken away from their feet. Spinoza ... stood there free at least from all prepossessions and touched the extremes of thought” (*Variorum* 965).¹⁶⁰ Yeats read Spinoza by at least 1918, and in a May letter to his wife, relays that he just returned from Coole Park and had recently finished reading his medieval history books. In the same breath, he eagerly mentions that he “shall take to Spinoza next.”¹⁶¹ Yeats indeed appeared to follow this direction, and his 1920s library contained at least a copy of the 1916 edition of Spinoza’s *Ethics and de Intellectus Emendatione*. This edition combines the *Ethics* with the philosopher’s meditation on the problem of knowledge and the possibility of the mind’s perfection. In *de Intellectus*, Spinoza constructed a philosophical method that aims to aid the mind in creating sharp, well-defined ideas so that it may reach faultlessness. Unfortunately, according to his daughter Anne, whole cartons of books from Yeats’s library may have been lent to other authors or lost in repeated shuffling, and since his copy of *Ethics and de Intellectus Emendatione* is among this lost portion, it

¹⁶⁰ Yeats, *The Words Upon the Window-Pane*, 965.

¹⁶¹ W. B. Yeats, and Georgie Yeats, *W. B. Yeats and George Yeats: The Letters*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2011. 19; As Ann Saddlemyer notes, this was study in relation to the philosophy they were developing out of George Yeats’s automatic writing.

cannot be checked for annotations.¹⁶² We can thus assume that Yeats read this book, which contains Spinoza's substance monism—the One Substance—plentitude, and vacancy, all of which comprise the foundation of his nihilism.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the mystical qualities of Spinoza's philosophy caught Yeats's attention.¹⁶³ In a June 1918 letter to his father, Yeats calls Spinoza a "great heterodox mystic" of 17th-century ideas and claims that either "nearly all our popular mysticism derives from" his philosophy or from "a movement he was first to explain."¹⁶⁴ To return to *Where There Is Nothing*, while Bohlmann argues that this play possesses Nietzschean echoes before Yeats read Nietzsche in great detail, and the protagonist's advocating for the destruction of all law and order certainly gives merit to this point, Rutledge's final line that "where there is nothing, there is God" is also Spinozan in concept. Spinoza contends that the One Substance—which he also calls "God"—leads us to the abyss of emptiness but turns that nothingness into divine plentitude, therefore imbuing it with infinite possibility. So, this line gestures toward the possibility of creation after Rutledge's life seems to be left in as much collapse as the "ecclesiastical ruins" that

¹⁶² O'Shea's "The 1920s Catalogue of W. B. Yeats's Library" includes a list of the 521 entries that are missing from the current 1920s library, which after the death of Anne Yeats in 2001, is maintained by the National Library of Ireland.

¹⁶³ Broadly, rational mysticism is a branch of study that interrogates how altered states of consciousness or transcendence such as trance, visions, and prayer occur. The term was used as early as 1911 in Henry W. Clark's article "Rational Mysticism and New Testament Christianity", *Harvard Theological Review*, July 1911, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 311-329. In his book *Hellenistic Ways of Deliverance and the Making of Christian Synthesis* (1970), pragmatist John Herman Randall, Jr. associated Spinoza with this branch and called the philosopher a "rationalist with overtones of rational mysticism" (3).

¹⁶⁴ Yeats, *Letters*, 650.

he and his band inhabit. When everything else is stripped away and only nothingness remains, infinite, divine plentitude flourishes.

Spinoza's enemies and followers alike ruthlessly levied charges of pantheism against the philosopher for centuries, but Yeats admired this quality.¹⁶⁵ Donning the mask of Michael Robartes, Yeats associates Spinoza with pantheism in his typescript to *A Vision* when he states, "at eleven one discovers now a pantheistic image of a man little more precise than my own legs when I study them through water where I am bathing and now the reason[ed] conviction of Spinoza."¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, he asserts in *A Vision* that

In Spinoza one finds the phase in its most pure and powerful shape. He saw the divine energy in whatever was the most individual expression of the soul, and spend his life showing that such expression was the world's welfare and not...a form of anarchy.¹⁶⁷

Yeats recognizes the order and clarity in Spinoza's system that courted the pantheism accusations, and his admiration for these qualities is palpable. For the pantheist, God is indistinguishable from the world and nature, and while labeling Yeats as such might be too extreme, he, like Spinoza, did demonstrate pantheistic sentiments. In "Among School Children" (*The Tower*, 1928), for instance, Yeats ends his interrogation of opposing forces that comprise existence with a pointed rhetorical question:

¹⁶⁵ Scholars still debate whether Spinoza was indeed a "pantheist," and if so, to what extent.

¹⁶⁶ W. B. Yeats, *Yeats's Vision Papers*, eds. George Mills Harper, and Mary Jane Harper Basingstoke (Hampshire: Palgrave), 2001. 31.

¹⁶⁷ W. B. Yeats, *A Vision: The Revised 1937 Edition*, eds Margaret Mills Harper and Catherine E. Paul (New York: Scribner), 2014. 50.

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?¹⁶⁸

Here, Yeats's implication is pantheistic. The leaf, blossom, and bole collapse into one image, with each distinct part indistinguishable from the next. He then extends his inquiry to stake a claim about the constitution of the divine: that one indeed cannot extricate the "dancer" that is nature from the god-like "dance." The mystic and pantheistic elements that Yeats pulled from Spinoza's philosophy aids in his construction of divinity that becomes most apparent in *A Vision*. This figure comprises boundless but procreative nothingness that follows an old nihilist tradition and reforms God in a way that makes sense for Yeats.

The Sublime and Nihilism: Yeats and Kant

If Yeats saw Spinoza as a pantheistic mystic whose One Substance allowed for creative potential, then Kant acted as his articulator of the sublime and transcendental idealism. In a 1928 letter to T. Sturge Moore, he states that from Kant "descended two great streams of thought, the philosophy of will in Schopenhauer, Hartmann, Bergsen, James, and that of know-ledge [sic] in Hegel, Croce, Gentile, Bradley and the like."¹⁶⁹ In Yeats's mind, this places Kant as a driving force behind many of the great modern philosophers, counting several whom Yeats himself read, such as Hegel, Croce, and Bradley. As with most ideas, Yeats's own interaction with the sublime through tragic joy

¹⁶⁸ Yeats, "Among School Children," 215.

¹⁶⁹ Yeats, *Moore Letters*, 124.

descends from a rich tradition of ideas that were shaped by years of critical inquiry. While it is well established that Nietzsche's philosophy also molded Yeats's view of tragic joy, if we limit our understanding to purely a Nietzschean one, we neglect the inspiration of Kant's old nihilism present in the concept. Since Yeats owned a 1911 copy of *The Critique of Judgment*, we can accept that he was familiar with Kant's consideration of the sublime, even though he did not annotate the text.¹⁷⁰ As Jefferson Holdridge argues, Kant's idea of "negative pleasure" and Yeats's "terrible beauty," "tragic ecstasy," and "tragic joy" share a common experience in their "coincidence of the negative and positive in any experience of the sublime."¹⁷¹

The sublime and old nihilism share a link through generative negativity. It is a concept that can both inspire the negative feeling of "terror" and elevate an object to a state of magnificence. To say that Kant's interpretation of the sublime is a complex subject is an understatement, and scholars still tirelessly debate its true nature.¹⁷² However, the sublime's importance to his old nihilism, including the vanishing of the subject appears quite strong. What is clear, though, is that the "terrible" component of the sublime preoccupies Kant's meditation on the subject. Whereas other thinkers like

¹⁷⁰ See Edward O'Shea, *Descriptive Catalog of Yeats's Library*, item no. 1053: *Kant's Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*.

¹⁷¹ Jefferson Holdridge, *Those Mingled Seas: The Poetry of W. B. Yeats, the Beautiful and the Sublime* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press), 2000. 31.

¹⁷² For examples of divergent views concerning Kant's sublime, see Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime* (1989); Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste* (1993, ch. 7); Malcolm Budd, "Delight in the Natural World: Kant on the Aesthetic Appreciation Of Nature: Part III: The Sublime in Nature," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 38: 233–250 (1998); and Henry Allison, "Kant's Antinomy of Teleological Judgment," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 30 (2000): 25–42.

Edmund Burke argue that sublimity ascends from an object that provokes terror, Kant's depiction shows an object existing as objectively terrifying, but the individual viewer does not truly fear it. This may seem contradictory, but through this paradox, Kant reveals a vital feature of the sublime: that it is vast, but humans can indeed understand its immensity.¹⁷³ By demonstrating such an understanding, Kant transforms the sublime from a terrifying object of nature to something intricately connected to the rational mind.¹⁷⁴ He clarifies this point in *The Critique of Judgment* (1790) when he declares, "Nothing, therefore, which can be an object of the senses is to be termed sublime ... The sublime is that, the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense."¹⁷⁵ "Transcendence" stands out as an integral power of the sublime; for Kant, it "raise[s] the energies of the soul above their accustomed height" and imbues humans with the courage to confront nature itself."¹⁷⁶ This power thus casts the sublime as part of the "supersensible" world, unbound by temporal and corporeal constraints, and formless and free.¹⁷⁷ Its nebulous properties and detachment from the physical realm make the sublime a vehicle that helps thrust the subject away from "visible objects" and toward a nonsubstantial void. This means that, for Kant, the sublime "is found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of limitlessness, yet with

¹⁷³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, ed. Nicholas Walker Oxford, World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2007. 70.

¹⁷⁴ Kant, *Judgment*, 68-75.

¹⁷⁵ Kant, *Judgment*, 98

¹⁷⁶ Kant, *Judgment*, 100.

¹⁷⁷ Holdridge, *Those Mingled Seas*, 33.

super-added thought in its totality.”¹⁷⁸ Kant’s dense language aside, the sublime’s connection with old nihilism distills to this: negativity yielding positivity. The sublime incites terror in the human subject, but though that terror, it yields transcendence.

The sublime, though, does not solve the problem of nihilism for either Kant or Yeats. For Kant, transcendental idealism represents a reconciliation between humans and the divine that would both acknowledge negativity and enable the subject’s vanishing. What he framed as the answer to his antinomies,¹⁷⁹ quandaries that expose an insurmountable chasm between humans and the divine, Kant defined transcendental idealism in *The Critique of Pure Reason* as the view that “space and time are merely formal features of how we perceive objects, not things in themselves that exist independently of us, or properties or relations among them.”¹⁸⁰ Rather, “objects in space and time are said to be ‘appearances’, and we know nothing of substance about the things in themselves of which they are appearances.”¹⁸¹ Matthew Gibson explains further and highlights that Kant’s transcendental idealism was a “result of the a priori forms of the mind which bestowed continuity to phenomena and allowed the mind to make cognitive

¹⁷⁸ Kant, *Judgment*, 35.

¹⁷⁹ Kant’s antinomies, outlined in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, are contradictions which he believed follow necessarily from our attempts to conceive the nature of transcendent reality. There are four of these: two “mathematical” and two “dynamical.” They are connected with (1) the limitation of the universe in respect of space and time, (2) the theory that the whole consists of indivisible atoms (whereas, in fact, none such exist), (3) the problem of free will in relation to universal causality, and (4) the existence of a necessary being

¹⁸⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, eds. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 1998. 33.

¹⁸¹ Kant, *Reason*, A239.

judgments of experience.”¹⁸² Although it is uncertain how much of *The Critique of Pure Reason* that Yeats read, his 1915 copy of the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783) offers several telling clues that show his acquaintance with the chief components of Kant’s transcendental idealism. In the book, Yeats marked a passage that delineates Kant’s antinomies in the section “First Part of the General Transcendental Problem” and dog-eared several other pages.¹⁸³

The intrigue that Yeats scribbled onto the pages of his book awakens in his own writing as well, and he appears quite troubled by these antinomies, as he demonstrates on multiple occasions in *A Vision*. Though he does not explicitly call his solution to the antinomies “transcendental idealism,” Yeats’s response appears quite similar to Kant’s original formation. To reference “A General Introduction for My Work” again, Yeats continues his meditation on knowing through creation by quoting from the Chandogya Upanishad, a sacred Hindu anthology that focuses on the importance of speech, language, song and chants to humans’ quest to answer metaphysical questions and premises as well as knowledge and salvation. Yeats writes: “A wise man seeks in Self those that are alive and those that are dead and gets what the world cannot give” and comments, “The world knows nothing because it has made nothing, we know everything because we have made everything.”¹⁸⁴ While W. J. McCormack notes the negativity in Yeats’s transcendental statement, this collapsing of “everything” and “nothing” shows the dissolution of

¹⁸² Kant, *Reason*, A104.

¹⁸³ See Edward O’Shea, *Descriptive Catalog of Yeats’s Library*, item no. 1052: *Kant’s Critical Philosophy*. Vol. 2.

¹⁸⁴ Yeats, *Essays*, 509-10.

everything that the subject knows.¹⁸⁵ It removes all that the subject can assume, do, and see, thus giving the subject the ability to redefine the world. The sublime in Kant, combined with transcendental idealism, Yeats executes a counter to nihilism that allows for the vanishing of the subject and a reimagined view of the divine.

The Absolute Spirit: Yeats and Hegel

In addition to Spinoza's substance, Yeats applies Hegel's Absolute Spirit, or Geist, to fashion his conception of God in a modernist landscape that where God was already declared dead. Of the three old nihilists, Yeats held the most books on Hegel in his personal library. These texts encapsulate and interrogate the major components of Hegel's philosophy, including his conception of the Absolute Spirit, his view on history, and the Hegelian dialectic, which evidently influenced Yeats's theory of the Mask.¹⁸⁶ Though Yeats did not encounter Hegel until later in his life and the philosopher's influence over his system of ideas perhaps appears ostensibly limited even after this first encounter, Hegel's thought lingers in the background of Yeats's most extended and complex ideas.¹⁸⁷ This belatedness, as Barry Sheils suggests, characterizes Yeats's

¹⁸⁵ See McCormack, W. J. *Blood Kindred: W. B. Yeats: The Life, the Death, the Politics*. Pimlico, 2005.

¹⁸⁶ According to O'Shea's catalog, these texts include *What Is Living and What is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel* (1915) by Croce; *A Commentary on Hegel's Logic* (1910) by McTaggart; *Studies in Hegelian Cosmology* (1918) by McTaggart; *Studies in the Hegelian Dialectic* (1922), by McTaggart; and *Prolegomena to the Study of Hegel's Philosophy and Especially His Logic* (1894) by Wallace; For more information on Hegel and the Mask, see Joseph Valente, "Nation for Art's Sake: Aestheticist Afterwords in Yeats's Irish Revival." Marjorie Howes & Valente, Joseph. *Yeats and Afterwords* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 2014.

¹⁸⁷ Barry Sheils, *W.B., Yeats and World Literature: The Subject of Poetry* (London: Routledge), 2016. 163.

position as “one of the self-designating last romantics” who preferred to dwell on mature, weighty topics—being an “old man persisting into a new age”— that contrasted with the whimsical topics of other romantic poetry, and it is within Yeats’s “primary image of late decline—this caricature, / Decrepit age [...]”— where he plants his “most vigorous and modernist tropes.”¹⁸⁸ Something stirred Yeats as he reached his middle years, and the old nihilism of Hegel helped form a vehicle and trajectory for his changing, forceful designs.

Yeats uses the Hegelian dialectic to shape his theory of the Mask, but the poet revises Hegel’s Absolute Spirit, which extends Kant’s formulation of the idea, to shape an infinite being of negation that encompasses reality’s entirety. Given the breadth of books on Hegel’s philosophy in his library, Yeats was familiar with his concept of the Absolute Spirit and its importance to the thinker’s view of negativity and nihilism. For Hegel, the Absolute Spirit’s connection to nothingness is essential. He declares, “Nothingness is the principle of all things...all proceeded from and returns to Nothingness...To obtain happiness, therefore, man must seek to assimilate himself to this principle by continual victories over himself; and for the sake of this, do nothing, wish nothing, desire nothing.”¹⁸⁹ Before interrogating Hegel’s conception of the Absolute, we must first investigate the idea’s inception in Kant. In *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant considers humans’ impossible but insatiable yearning for the Absolute—the ultimate, unconditioned reality as it is in itself, not distorted by projection through the conceptual mechanisms of thought—despite the empirical realm’s ever present grasp:

¹⁸⁸ Sheils, *Yeats and World Literature*, 163.

¹⁸⁹ Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 168-69.

“The light dove cleaving in the air in her free flight, and feeling its resistance, might imagine that flight would still be easier in empty space.”¹⁹⁰ Though the dove might think it would be more desirable to fly in complete nothingness, it is the air, that resistance, that enables the dove to fly in the first place. For Kant, then, *a priori* truth upholds the absolute and does not allow for complete nothingness to exist. Our own mental apparatus orders space and time, and supplies the concepts by means of which we understand experience.¹⁹¹

Yeats shares a similar “yearning” for the Absolute and desires a method for epistemologically ordering the world around him, and this desire forged a large portion of his interest in such a concept. As Robert Snukal perceptively highlights, Kant’s solution for interacting with the Absolute can be turned into Yeats’s insistence that the world is a product of the human mind. Space, time, the laws of causality, are all forms of thought which create the world.¹⁹² Continuing his pursuit for the Absolute, Yeats drew from Hegel’s nihilism a negation that will sustain creation and support a reformed image of divinity. Through the Absolute Spirit, Hegel posits a fundamental reality through a “metaphysico-religious” interpretation of God. Hegel’s own conception of Absolute Spirit, like Spinoza, courted charges of pantheism and even outright atheism against the philosopher, and thus he is considered by some to be the “grandfather of the death of God

¹⁹⁰ Kant, *Reason*, 8.

¹⁹¹ Robert Snukal, *High Talk: The Philosophical Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (Cambridge England: University Press), 1973. 5.

¹⁹² Snukal, *High Talk*, 7.

theology.”¹⁹³ Such a situation stems from Hegel’s desire to escape the understanding of God as something “over and against creation,” and by doing this, as Cunningham argues, Hegel releases his philosophy from ontotheology.¹⁹⁴ As a result, Hegel’s conception of the divine, his Absolute Spirit, is not bound by a “creator/creation distinction,” which allows this entity to exist “beyond ontic categories.”¹⁹⁵ For Hegel, the Absolute is rooted in negativity:

The end that is sought is the Absolute itself. It is already present- how could it otherwise be sought? Reason produces it only insofar as Reason frees consciousness from limitations. This subsuming of limitations is conditioned by the pre-supposed unlimitedness.¹⁹⁶

From his notes to *Fighting the Waves* (1930), after he read Hegel’s conception of the Absolute, Yeats has this to say about the concept:

Move upon Newton’s town,
The town of Hobbes and of Locke,
Pine, spruce, come down
Cliff, ravine, rock:
What can disturb the corn?
What makes it shudder and bend?
The rose brings her thorn,
The Absolute walks behind.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹³ In *God in Exile: Modern Atheism* (1968), Corlelio Fabro equates Hegel’s philosophy with pantheism (534). For further reading on atheism accusations against Hegel’s philosophy, see Kojeve, Alexandre. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. (London: 1969) Cornell University Press. 71. For further reading on Hegel as the grandfather of the death of god philosophy, see Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (1975): 495.

¹⁹⁴ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 101.

¹⁹⁵ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 101.

¹⁹⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Difference between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*, trans. H.S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany: State University of New York Press), 1977. 49.

¹⁹⁷ Yeats, *Variorum*, 570.

While we cannot be certain, it seems logical that Yeats obtained this concept of the Absolute from Hegel since Newton, Hobbes, and Locke did not consider the concept in such terms. The rose, the recurring symbol in Yeats that connects the poet's subjective feelings to a divine essence, brandishes the thorn of truth that will force the corn, society, to lose its illusion and reach the Absolute, Hegel's end-in-itself. While none of this has transpired in the context of the poem, the image of the Absolute "walking behind" indicates that such an outcome is forthcoming. Through Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel, Yeats forged a generative foundation that was not influenced by *The Will to Power*. This foundation of old nihilism gave Yeats the philosophical tools to fashion a new god-like figure for a modernist audience that comes to fruition in *A Vision*.

The New God of Old Nihilism: *A Vision's* Thirteenth Cone

From his early works until his last volume of poetry, Yeats sees the creative potential in nothingness, a perception that contrasts with modernism's new nihilism. This positive flow of an otherwise negative space assembles the foundation of Yeats's conception of the divine: an ethereal figure that materializes most lucidly in *A Vision* (1925; 1937). In this text, the mysticism, execution of an absolute, guiding spirit and positioning of the sublime in Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel all collide to birth such an entity. The all-powerful, fear-inducing God who Nietzsche declared dead therefore finds a reimagination in Yeats's Thirteenth Cone, an entity built with the pieces of the three old nihilist's philosophies. Unlike Nietzsche, Yeats follows the old nihilist tradition that

refuses to leave the world with nothing in God's place; rather, he devises a figure of infinite but generative nothingness that can foster all of reality.

The story of *A Vision*'s inception is familiar tale, if not a peculiar one. What Terence Brown has called "one of the strangest acts of imaginative collaboration in all literary history," it is a project born in 1917 from the automatic writing experiences of Yeats and his new wife, George.¹⁹⁸ Though the "fragmentary messages" from the "unknown communicators" seemed initially unclear to the pair, they rapidly transitioned into revealing "little less than a whole philosophy of life and death."¹⁹⁹ Those "communicators," who Yeats also names "instructors," represent a transmission between the living and the dead for the poet, a dialogue beyond this temporal and spatial plane, and the information they exposed showed the foundation of reality itself. This "system," as Yeats calls it, merges the poet's aesthetics, his philosophy of history, and occult and mystical interests in a work that dominates his mental energy for the remaining twenty years of his life.²⁰⁰ *A Vision*, as Alan Gillis points out, doubles as a "sub-Viconian blueprint of the plot of world history, and a supposedly comprehensive catalogue of psychological possibility."²⁰¹ For Yeats had long been seeking, and in *A Vision* finally found "a system of thought that would leave [his] imagination free to create as it chose

¹⁹⁸ *A Vision* is not a direct transcription of the automatic writings, Yeats indicates that "the documents [the automatic writings] are very confused, and what I have written is less based upon what they say than upon my knowledge of the system as a whole"

¹⁹⁹ Hough, *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats*, 61-62.

²⁰⁰ Hough, *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats*, 62.

²⁰¹ Alan Gillis, "W. B. Yeats: Among the Deepening Shades" in *Irish Poetry of the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2005. 160.

and yet make all that it created, or could create, part of the one history and that the soul's."²⁰²

While the Nietzschean influence on *A Vision* is undeniable, the presence of Kant, Spinoza, and Hegel appears equally as strongly and imbues the book with its old nihilistic characteristics. By the time he published the first version in 1925, Yeats had already read all three old nihilists in detail, and their influence only deepened in the 1937 edition. In *A Vision*, Yeats created a complex system of spirituality, using the image of interlocking gyres to map out the development and reincarnation of the soul. To do this, he incorporated the mystical, pantheistic qualities that he admired in Spinoza; puzzled over Kant's antinomies and deployed the philosopher's transcendental idealism and sublime; and borrowed heavily from Hegel's view of history and his model of an Absolute Spirit. The three old nihilists are shades in the background in *A Vision* 1925 (referred to as *AV A* henceforth), gently guiding Yeats toward generative negativity, and their inspiration on his conception of the divine in *A Vision* 1937 (referred to as *AV B* henceforth), the Thirteenth Cone, shows that behind his system is an old nihilism that pushes away the shadow of the new.

Spinoza's presence in *AV A* is concentrated but strong, and his apparition only increases in *AV B*. In both editions, Yeats uses Spinoza as an example of Phase Eleven, where the Will is exemplified by "the Image Burner," the Mask by Rejection and Moral Indifference, the Creative Mind by Moral reformation and self-assertion, and the Body of

²⁰² W. B. Yeats, *A Vision* (1925), Xi.

Fate by enforced belief. In this phase, Yeats condemns organized belief, calling it a “contagion,” and names the man of this phase as “half-solitary” and “one who cannot inhabit the solitude he defends.”²⁰³ This association of Spinoza with a man who upholds but cannot participate in solitude casts the philosopher as a champion of difference, but one who cannot fully enjoy its benefits. Spinoza proposes a modified version of God that emphasizes all-encompassing negation, and was condemned for it. Yeats elaborates on Spinoza embodying Phase Eleven, claiming that

His Mask, under the *Body of Fate*, would have forced him to seek happiness in submission to something hard and exterior; but the *Mask*, set free by *Creative Mind*, that would destroy exterior popular sanction, makes possible for the first time the solitary conception of God.²⁰⁴

This further connects this philosopher with offering a renewed deity, one that Yeats seems to favor, in the face of opposition. As John Herman Randall succinctly summarizes, Spinoza’s enterprise culminates in a “vision, a ‘Oewpta’, of the logical structure of the world” whose “ultimate goal” is to “see the part of your own human reason and mind in that structure-to perceive the union that obtains between the human mind and the whole of Nature.”²⁰⁵

Spinoza’s connection with a transformed deity of negativity is clear in *A Vision*, and equally as distinct is Kant’s visage. This philosopher’s antinomies puzzle Yeats in the book’s two editions, and he meticulously ruminates over them twice. In the section

²⁰³ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), 50.

²⁰⁴ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), 50.

²⁰⁵ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), 9.

titled “Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends: An Extract from a Record Made By His Pupils,” Yeats dons the mask of Robartes and levies his first attempt to reconcile the antinomies, an approach that focuses on love. He muses, “Love contain all Kant’s antinomies, but it is the first that poisons our lives. Thesis, there is no beginning; antithesis, there is no end. Exhausted by the cry that it can never end, my love ends; without that cry it were not love but desire, desire does not end. The anguish of birth and that of death cry out in the same instant.”²⁰⁶ Due to its sheer brevity, love cannot offer the reconciliation that Robartes needs: no sooner does “one love die” than “another takes its place,” rendering it an inadequate concept to rest reality.²⁰⁷ However, of greater consequence to Robartes, and perhaps by extension Yeats, is Kant’s third antinomy. As Harper and Paul note, Yeats underlined Kant’s third antinomy in his copy of *Kant’s Critical Philosophy for English Readers* (1915). Again speaking through Robartes, Yeats interrogates the third antinomy:

...thesis: freedom; antithesis, necessity; but I restate it.²⁰⁸ Every action of man declares the soul’s ultimate, particular freedom, and the soul’s disappearance in God; declares that reality in a congeries of beings and a single being; nor is this antinomy an appearance imposed on us by the form of thought but life itself which turns, now here, now there, a whirling and a bitterness.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), 29.

²⁰⁷ Elizabeth Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats’s Love Poetry* (Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press), 1993. 221.

²⁰⁸ Kant’s language in *The Critique of Pure Reason* is as follows:
Thesis. There are in the World Causes [acting] through *Freedom* [Liberty].
Antithesis. There is no Liberty but all is *Nature*.

²⁰⁹ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), 37.

Yeats distills Kant's antinomy to its most basic parts: freedom and necessity. He acknowledges that "death cannot solve the antinomy" because "death and life are its expression."²¹⁰ Returning again to the idea of love, Robartes momentarily posits that marriage may solve this antinomy, but he quickly retracts that proposition: "The marriage bed is a symbol of that eternal instant where the antinomy is resolved. It is not the resolution itself."²¹¹ This statement, according to Guinn Batten, reveals the irony at the core of Kant's antinomies: human knowledge and imagination "exceed any experience, given the finitude of human embodiment."²¹² While marriage might be the antinomy's resolved form, it is an unattainable solution because "were more than a symbol could man there lose and keep his identity, but he falls asleep." That "sleep," for Yeats, is the same as "the sleep of death," which momentarily leaves the antinomy unsolved.²¹³ Neither Robartes nor Yeats answer this problem at this point, but "belief is renewed continually in the ordeal of death" indicates that out of the void comes generation.²¹⁴

While Spinoza's and Kant's specters permeate *A Vision's* content, Hegel's dialectical method in *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* seems to underpin the groundwork of Yeats's system. For the philosopher, human history and culture are manifestations of Geist's in the world. More specifically, he grants individual humans,

²¹⁰ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), 37.

²¹¹ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), 37.

²¹² Guinn Batten, "Afterwardsness: Yeats in Love and the Imaginary of Community" in *Yeats and Afterwords*, eds. Marjorie Howes and Joseph Valente (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 2014. 170.

²¹³ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), 37.

²¹⁴ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), 38.

and particularly world history's eminent epic heroes, the ability to facilitate change, while whole cultures and civilizations exemplify each historical phase. Yeats structures *A Vision* quite similarly, with iterations of the Four Faculties presiding over each phase and specific individuals, both past and present, exemplifying those characteristics.²¹⁵ Furthermore, Hegel associated history's beginning with Asia and its end with Europe, with "nature" epitomizing Asian culture.²¹⁶ As Yeats observes, when Hegel "identifies Asia with Nature; he sees the whole process of civilization as an escape from Nature; partly achieved by Greece, fully achieved by Christianity."²¹⁷

He continues to borrow from Hegel's *Lectures* to say "Oedipus—Greece—solved the riddle of the Sphinx—Nature—compelled her to plunge from the precipice, though man himself remained ignorant and blundering," a definition that Yeats "accepts."²¹⁸ Even though Yeats writes that he disputes Hegel's alignment of Asia with Nature in the

²¹⁵ Yeats also encapsulates the *Faculties* as 'Thought and will . . . effort and attainment' (*AV B* 135) and 'Thought and inclination, fact and object of desire' (*AV B* 183), so that one can roughly equate *Creative Mind* with thought, *Will* with inclination or bias, *Mask* with what we strive for or desire, and *Body of Fate* with fact or attainment.

²¹⁶ From *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*: "a myth more generally known is that of the Phoenix as a type of the Life of Nature; eternally preparing for itself its funeral pile, and consuming itself upon it; but so that from its ashes is produced the new, renovated, fresh life. But this image is only Asiatic" (89).

²¹⁷ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), 149.

²¹⁸ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), 149; In *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel narrates the transition from the Egyptian to the Greek world as follows: "Wonderfully, then, must the Greek legend surprise us, which relates, that the Sphinx — the great Egyptian symbol — appeared in Thebes, uttering the words: "What is that which in the morning goes on four legs, at midday on two, and in the evening on three?" Oedipus, giving the solution, Man, precipitated the Sphinx from the rock. The solution and liberation of that Oriental Spirit, which in Egypt had advanced so far as to propose the problem, is certainly this: that the Inner Being [the Essence] of Nature is Thought, which has its existence only in the human consciousness" (241).

Sphinx's riddle, Neil Mann observes that the Hegelian cycle resembles his own launch of the "two-thousand-year, lunar month of civilization (1000 BCE)," and perceives this as "becoming nature—which in this case is primary—at Phase 1, when a primary West impregnates East" (118).²¹⁹ Hegel's impact on this facet of trajectory and outward manifestation of Yeats's system remains clear and begins even before *AVB*, when Yeats clearly connects Hegel's history with the Absolute Spirit. In his "Introduction to The Holy Mountain" (1934) Yeats observes that from the moment Oedipus solved the "wily" Sphinx's riddle, "that Sphinx was compelled to leap into the abyss" and "from that moment on, intellect or Spirit, that which has value in itself, began to prevail, and now in Hegel's own day, the climax had come, not crippled age but wisdom."²²⁰ Yeats's connection of the Hegelian "Spirit" with a thing that possesses "value in itself" exhibits his association of the Absolute with an essential cause of reality, an immortal entity that past and future cannot exist without.²²¹ This aspect of Hegelian nihilism combined with Spinoza's and Kant's contributions to the subject make up the pieces of Yeats's reimagined divine entity: The Thirteenth Cone.

The "Thirteenth Cone" is conceivably one of the most confusing, yet significant symbols in Yeats's *Vision* system. However, I want to show that Yeats's Thirteenth Cone is another iteration of nothing: a shape without a form, and a simultaneously real and

²¹⁹ Neil Mann, "The Thirteenth Cone" in *W. B. Yeats's 'A Vision': Explications and Contexts*, eds. Neil Mann, Matthew Gibson, and Claire Nally (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Digital Press), 2012. 118.

²²⁰ Yeats, *Later Essays*, 151.

²²¹ Hegel, *History*, 79.

illusionary entity. While Yeats can only truly say what the Cone is not, we can use these clues to infer what it is: Because everything participates in and relates back to the Cone, it is infinite, but generative negativity. In *AVB*, Yeats struggles to find adequate words to describe its visage, and he settles by calling it a “geometrical” being that also possesses an “illusionary form.” This entity, a limitless shape without a definitive body and a receptacle for enlightenment, connects Yeats’s idea of God with the old nihilist philosophy that shaped his interaction with the divine. Perhaps because of its elusiveness, much criticism exists on this topic, and the argument that the Thirteenth Cone resembles a deity for Yeats is not new.²²² Not only does Yeats say this himself, but others such as Neil Mann have explored this topic in depth. However, its overt connection to old nihilism has gone completely unnoticed. Indeed, the Thirteenth Cone retains components of Spinoza’s One Substance and Hegel’s Absolute Spirit, and serves as Yeats’s Kantian transcendental idealism answer to the philosopher’s antinomies that puzzled Yeats since *AVA*. As Mann suggests, Yeats’s positioning of the Thirteenth Cone echoes not only Spinoza’s and Hegel’s old nihilisms, but Gottlieb Fichte’s as well, whose system of ideas first garnered the term “nihilism” in the history of ideas.²²³ This similarity places the Thirteenth Cone’s foundation in the tradition of old nihilism, as this facet of Yeats’s system shares little in common with new nihilism. It is here that the substance monism, the One Substance of Spinoza’s old nihilism, and Hegel’s Absolute Spirit shapes the

²²² For a survey of criticism, see Ron Heisler, “Yeats and the Thirteenth Æon,” *Yeats Annual* 13 241-52. For a comprehensive analysis of the concept, see Neil Mann, “The Thirteenth Cone” in *W. B. Yeats’s ‘A Vision’: Explications and Contexts*, 159-93. This includes the Cone’s connection to Plotinus’s “One.”

²²³ Neil Mann, “The Thirteenth Cone,” 161.

poet's rendering of the divine, thus carving a path to a new conception of divinity rather than new nihilism's deicide.

While appearing most complete in *AVB*, the Thirteenth Cone emerges in various stages of augmentation in several of Yeats's texts. For instance, though not a wholly actualized figure yet, the concept comes to life in his August 26, 1918 automatic script session and grows riper in *AVA*.²²⁴ In *AVA*, Yeats calls the Cone the "Thirteenth Cycle," which represents a new series beyond the extent of current history. Yeats clarifies the Cone's characteristics and more closely connects it with a deific being as he expands his ideas between *AVA* and *AVB*. He explains in *A Diary* 1930, "Berkeley thought in the *Commonplace Book* that 'we perceive' and are passive whereas God creates in perceiving. He creates what we perceive. I substitute God for the Thirteenth Cone, the Thirteenth Cone therefore creates our perceptions—all the visible world—as held in common by our wheel."²²⁵ Interestingly, this was the same year that Yeats meditated on

²²⁴ W. B. Yeats, *Yeats's Vision Papers*, vol. 2, eds. George Mills Harper, and Mary Jane Harper (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave), 2001. 24; Yeats first mentions the Thirteenth Cycle as a sphere rather than a cone in *AVA*. He states, "...we say that the first cycle sent its first soul into the world at the birth of Christ, and that the twelfth will send its last soul immediately before the first of the New Fountain. Then there will come the first in a new series, the Thirteenth Cycle, which is a Sphere and not a cone. He later revises this point of view in *AVB*. Furthermore, in *AVA*, Yeats closely connects the Thirteenth Cycle to the *Daimon*, another murky entity in his system, who in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* shapes the mask, thus evoking the anti-self. In *A Vision*, all things are present in an eternal instant for the Daimon: "She is not phasal...she is that being united to man which knows neither good nor evil...She is revealed to man in moments of prevision and illumination and in much that we call good and evil fortune, and yet, seeing that she remains always in the Thirteenth Cycle, cannot accompany man in his wanderings.

²²⁵ Yeats, *Later Essays*, 320.

the Absolute in *Fighting the Waves*, where the entity stands waiting at the end, an idea that in his old age he will “sing them to the Garrets and Cellars.”²²⁶ For Yeats, this Cone represents the operational configuration of the divine, the “ultimate reality...neither one nor many, concord nor discord,” which is “symbolized as the phaseless Sphere.”²²⁷

In early drafts of *AVB*, Yeats describes this entity in Hegelian language. He elaborates, “The particulars are the work of the *thirteenth sphere* or cycle which is in every man and called by every man his freedom.”²²⁸ In Yeats’s system, the Sphere represents the ultimate reality that exists beyond the gyres; for *AVB*’s 1937 publication, however, Yeats changes “Sphere” to “Cone” to render the idea tangible enough for human understanding, as the mind cannot comprehend the full infinity of the Sphere.²²⁹ This alteration aside, Yeats’s explanation that all “particulars,” or substances, participate in the Cone resembles Hegel’s description of the Absolute Spirit, that negative body from which the world, life, and existence all stem.²³⁰ Hegel’s Absolute Spirit further gives shape to the Thirteenth Cone and Yeats’s different kind of God born of negativity through the act of giving a tangible “shape” to an otherwise shapeless, intangible concept. In *What Is Living and What is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel*, a book that Yeats read in earnest,²³¹ Benedetto Croce lucidly explains the Hegelian Absolute as follows:

²²⁶ Yeats, *Variorum*, 570.

²²⁷ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), 193.

²²⁸ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), 302.

²²⁹ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), xlvii.

²³⁰ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 106.

²³¹ According to O’Shea’s catalogue of Yeats’s library, this book contains several instances of underlining and annotations (70).

It is the absolute, which is no longer a parallelism of attributes or an indifference to both; but which accentuates and confers new significance on one of the terms, which, in virtue of that new significance, absorbs and brings the other within itself. Thus substance becomes subject, the absolute determines itself as spirit and idea; and materialism is overcome. Thus too reality is no longer an internal confronting an external: nature...has neither nut nor shell, but is all of a piece. The one is not beyond the many, but is the many; spirit is not beyond body, but is body. And supernaturalism is overcome.²³²

Yeats's characterization of the Thirteenth cone as "neither one nor many" closely follows Croce's description of the Hegelian Absolute Spirit. Yeats can only use language of negation to characterize the Cone, a technique that he borrows from Croce, and by extension Hegel. Since the Absolute also shows the "one" as inseparable from the "many," Yeats and Hegel both leave us with a divine force that exists in terms of infinity. To show the negativity of the Thirteenth Cone and the Absolute, Yeats and Hegel also use similar rhetoric. That is, they both describe their divinity in terms of what it is *not*. Yeats expresses this through the words "neither" and "nor," with the Hegelian Absolute requiring the same negating phrases. Therefore, Yeats's Thirteenth Cone is a divine force of absolute but procreative negation that gestates all of existence's "particulars," and Yeats revises Hegel's Absolute Spirit to give it shape.

Yeats's expression of the ethereal Thirteenth Cone is likewise uncannily similar to Spinoza's characterization of his One Substance in the *Ethics* (1677). Spinoza defines the One Substance—which he also calls "God"—as "being absolutely infinite—that is, a substance consisting in infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite...

²³² Benedetto Croce, *What Is Living and What is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (New York: Russel and Russel), 1969. 110-111.

essentiality God, or substance, consisting of infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality, necessarily exists.”²³³ By equating God to substance, Spinoza edges dangerously to committing the “sin” of pantheism that courted both reproach from his contemporaries and Yeats’s admiration. The philosopher elaborates further in “Proposition XI,” and declares, “either nothing exists, or else a being absolutely infinite necessarily exists also. Now we exist either in ourselves, or in something else which necessarily exists. Therefore a being absolutely infinite—in other words, God—necessarily exists.”²³⁴ Yeats’s collapsing of the Cone into an entity that exists as place and thing, while superficially contradictory, also mirrors the negating abilities of the One Substance. That is, both entities pull a “something” out of a “nothing.” Each is a boundless “place” and a thinking “thing” simultaneously: Spinoza plainly uses “infinite” to describe the One Substance’s unlimitedness, and Yeats calls the Thirteenth Cone “phaseless.” Just as for an infinite substance, for a thing to be “phaseless,” it needs to lack a defined visible form, a trait that implies negativity. Also comparable to Spinoza’s substance, Yeats’s “phaseless sphere” with endless attributes represents a completeness that transcends human experience, idea, and form.²³⁵ Everything and nothing inhabit this cone, like Spinoza’s substance, and thus an endless capacity for understanding exists in this amorphous “nothing.” As Randall states, this place of Spinoza’s is an “impersonal realm, the knowability of the world, the rationality of experience, intelligibility, logical

²³³ Benedictus De Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. G. H. R Parkinson, Oxford Philosophical Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2000. 4.

²³⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 8.

²³⁵ Neil Mann, “Thirteenth Cone,” 162.

structure; thought, not thinking, reason, not reasoning.”²³⁶ Spinoza’s desire to define God as “existing in only a philosophical sense” further underscores the One Substance’s connection to Yeats’s Thirteenth Cone. Spinoza wanted to prevent any “anthropomorphizing of God,” and while Yeats aimed to make the Cone more tangible for human understanding, the ethereal language he uses also resists anthropomorphization.²³⁷ When considered together, it seems clear that Yeats incorporates facets of Spinoza’s One Substance into his system to deliberately reimagine God in a way that removes the entity’s paternalism and still fills the emptiness that new nihilism leaves in its shadow.

Yeats also casts the Cone as the savior of humanity, and by doing so, he reimagines what it means to be a savior. He explains that it “is that cycle which may deliver us from the twelve cycles of time and space,” in which “live all souls that have been set free and every Daimon and Ghostly Self.”²³⁸ On one hand, the language that Yeats employs to describe the Thirteenth Cone implies an extension of the Judeo-Christian God that new nihilism declares dead. Indeed, his emphasis on the Cone’s “delivering” humanity from the confinement of the twelve cycles and the “setting free” of souls imply an active, liberative deity not unlike Christ. However, as Gibson indicates, the Cone seems to possess power to release humanity from movement rather than any

²³⁶ John Herman Randall, “The Intelligible Universe of Plotinos,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 30, no. 1 (1969): 9. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708241>.

²³⁷ Steven M. Nadler, *Spinoza’s Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon), 2004. 229.

²³⁸ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), 210-211.

type of moral trespass.²³⁹ Such a removal from motion itself harkens to the mystical nothingness of Spinoza and Hegel: they each propose a *philosophical* rather than theological god-like figure that is intricately connected to nothingness. In this way, Yeats's interest in what he considered the old nihilism's—Spinoza's and Hegel's—mystical and pantheistic qualities guided his deity away from a recycled Judeo-Christian form to a renewed vision of the divine.

Through Spinoza and Hegel, Yeats's fashioned the Thirteenth Cone as the divine entity of old nihilism, but its utility extends even further: the substance demystifies the antinomies and becomes a Kantian, transcendental idealistic solution to their confounds. In this way, Yeats offers a generative, ordered alternative to new nihilism's emptiness. For Yeats, the antinomies wove themselves so tightly into the fabric of existence that he claimed, "The whole System is founded upon the belief that ultimate reality...falls in human consciousness...into a series of antinomies."²⁴⁰ They are so powerful that they block the Sphere, the Thirteenth Cone's true form, from human imagination. Like Kant, Yeats wrestles with the antinomies and attempts to resolve them. To accomplish this, he fuses aspects of transcendental idealism with the Thirteenth Cone. Indeed, Kant believed that ideas, knowledge's visceral material, exist because certain realities occur independently of human minds. While he supposed that these "things-in-themselves" must remain forever unknown, individual interaction with the "things" can foster

²³⁹ Matthew Gibson, "Timeless and Spaceless"? in *W. B. Yeats's 'A Vision': Explications and Contexts*, eds. Neil Mann, Matthew Gibson, and Claire Nally (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Digital Press), 2012. 112.

²⁴⁰ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), 187.

experience and settle the antinomies.²⁴¹ This is evident in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, where Kant argues,

There could be inhabitants of the moon, even though no human being has ever perceived them, must of course be admitted; but this means only that in the possible progress of experience we could encounter them; for everything is actual that stands in one context with a perception in accordance with the laws of the empirical progression. Thus they are real when they stand in an empirical connection with my real consciousness, although they are not therefore real in themselves, i.e., outside this progress of experience.²⁴²

This statement gives an important indication of the way Kant considered experience. As Paul Janz argues, a Kantian “appearance” is not necessarily an actual experience, but a possible one.²⁴³ Yeats, however, extends Kant’s “possibility” into a nothing, and dissolves everything that the subject knows. As Gayatri Spivak notes, Kant loiters in Yeats’s “basic premise that Reality is systematically refracted by the perceiving mind and in his suggestion that at least the principle of computation of these refractions can be exposed if the unifying form of consciousness is discovered and grasped.”²⁴⁴ In this way, Yeats renames Kantian transcendental idealism as “revelation,” and as Spivak observes, the Thirteenth Cone represents the space where the human mind absorbs this “unifying consciousness.”²⁴⁵ Yeats takes Kant’s vanishing subject and extends that into a removal

²⁴¹ Lucy Allais, *Manifest Reality: Kant’s Idealism and His Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2015. 203.

²⁴² Kant, *Pure Reason*, 493.

²⁴³ Paul D. Janz, *God, the Mind’s Desire: Reference, Reason and Christian Thinking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2004. 151.

²⁴⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Some Theoretical Aspects of Yeats’s Prose,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 4, no. 3 (1975): 679.

²⁴⁵ Spivak, “Some Theoretical Aspects of Yeats’s Prose,” 679.

or transcendence, thereby turning the Cone into a mystical, philosophical “savior” that, rather than delivering the individual from sin, moves the mind beyond the antinomies themselves.

This transcendence via Kantian vanishing results in a mind that accepts its reality.

In “All Soul’s Night,” the Epilogue to *A Vision*, Yeats writes,

How it is whirled about,
Wherever the orbit of the moon can reach,
Until it plunge into the sun;
And there, free and yet fast,
Being both Chance and Choice,
Forget its broken toys
And sink into its own delight at last.²⁴⁶

The soul suffers a tumultuous existence, “whirling about” as the moon’s “orbit” carries it “wherever.” However, once it falls into the sun, the soul achieves autonomy and joy. In this stanza, Yeats’s word choice again implies a generative outcome via negation: with an active “plunging” and a “sinking,” the soul becomes “free” and will ultimately discover its own “delight.” Through a representation of limitlessness in the sun, the subject undergoes its Kantian vanishing, and as Mann astutely reveals, “Chance and Choice” convey the “fundamental antinomy,” a dilemma that Yeats verbalizes as “one can think about the world and about man, or anything else until all has vanished but these two things, for they are the first cause of the animate and inanimate world.”²⁴⁷ For Mann,

²⁴⁶ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), 221.

²⁴⁷ See Yeats’s *Robartes-Aherne Writings: Featuring the Making of His ‘Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends’*. Edited by Wayne K Chapman, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 132.

Chance and Choice's blending signifies the "resolution of the antinomies that can only occur in the Sphere."²⁴⁸ The subject vanishes into procreative nothingness through "forgetting" everything that it previously experienced but finds a fundamental satisfaction in this dissolution.

Conclusion

Yeats's experience with political turmoil and colonization superficially cast him as the perfect harbinger of the new nihilism, especially given his love of Nietzsche's philosophy. For J.H. Miller, Yeats's journey begins in nihilism, and with this he enters a "new reality" through his discovery of the "richness of the finite moment."²⁴⁹ Miller's argument appears valid, but it needs an important clarification: Yeats's engagement with nihilism does not align with the new nihilism of Nietzsche. Instead, his nihilism follows in the old tradition that commences not in an abysmal nothing but an infinite experience within nothingness. The sheer breadth of Yeats's career further distances him from the grip of new nihilism. Before the publication of *The Will to Power*, the 36-year old Yeats had already published several texts and immersed himself in mystical and philosophical environments, which shaped his impression of nothingness and divinity. Because of this, he perhaps engaged in a culture of nihilism that, at least for a few years, remained inspired by the concept's definition in the history of ideas and untainted by *The Will to Power*. These old nihilistic sentiments only amplified after Yeats read Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel, and consequently seemed to leave Nietzsche's *The Will to Power* out of his

²⁴⁸ Neil Mann, "The Thirteenth Cone," 181.

²⁴⁹ J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 1965. 11.

system of ideas. While Nietzsche's ghost never strays far from Yeats, we cannot allow that shade to overshadow Yeats's old, generative interaction with the new nihilism.

Not only does Yeats resist the new nihilism's grasp, but he refuses to leave the idea of divinity lifeless for a modern landscape. While Nietzsche's new nihilism declares God "dead" without attempting to "resurrect" the figure, Yeats engages with old nihilism to fill that empty space. As Gillespie astutely observes, the problem of nihilism stems from a concept of God that casts the being as a "terrifying, transrational, transnatural figure of will" whose "absolute power reduce[s] nature to chaos of radically individual and unconnected beings."²⁵⁰ Spinoza and Hegel resist this picture in their philosophical systems and sculpt transformed conceptions of God that leave the entity neither dead nor terrifying, but instead more palatable for human consumption. This reveals a figure of generative negativity that contains and guides human existence. Yeats's own views of the divine exist beyond Judeo-Christian terms and incorporates mysticism and occultism, and the mystical and pantheistic considerations that he observed in old nihilism helped him shape his new god for a modern age. Through his Thirteenth Cone, Yeats proposes such a divinity that absorbs Spinoza's substance monism and Hegel's Absolute Spirit. This Thirteenth Cone thus solves Kant's antinomies and shows Yeats participating in a generative tradition of nihilism where the divine possesses infinitely negative but generative qualities. Though the abyss still lingers menacingly, Yeats thus endeavors to

²⁵⁰ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 255.

banish the chasm of complete nothingness that Nietzsche's new nihilism leaves a modernist audience to surmount.

CHAPTER IV

“SURELY SOME REVELATION IS AT HAND”: YEATS, DISASTER, AND THE GENERATIVE VOID

The Soul. Seek out reality, leave things that seem.
The Heart. What, be a singer born and lack a theme?
The Soul. Isaiah's coal, what more can man desire?
The Heart. Struck dumb in the simplicity of fire!
The Soul. Look on that fire, salvation walks within.
The Heart. What theme had Homer but original sin?
—W. B. Yeats, “Vacillation,” VII

Introduction

In the essay “Modern Poetry: A Broadcast” (1936), three years before his death, Yeats recalls his merriment with the Rhymers' Club at the Cheshire Cheese in London. His talks with the club members at the tavern stirred up weighty issues, including the pessimistic considerations that “nothing of importance could be discovered” and “only philosophy and religion could solve the great secret.”²⁵¹ Paradoxically, though, neither philosophy nor religion could illuminate the darkness of secrecy because they “said all their say years ago.”²⁵² However, Yeats seems to offer an alternative that could reinvigorate philosophy for a modern audience: a nihilistic mix of terror and the abyss. He declares,

²⁵¹ W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan), 1961. 491.

²⁵² Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, 491.

I think profound philosophy must come from terror. An abyss opens under our feet; inherited convictions, the pre-suppositions of our thoughts, those Fathers of the Church Lionel Johnson expounded, drop into the abyss. Whether we will or no we must ask the ancient questions: Is there reality anywhere? Is there a God? Is there a Soul? We cry with the Indian Sacred Book: 'They have put a golden stopper into the neck of the bottle; pull it! Let out reality!'²⁵³

The abyss that Yeats poses appears to consume all that is dated and unworthy, and in their place, it establishes a renewed "reality" more fitting a modern audience. This fruitful capacity exemplifies the qualitative essence of the generative that the old nihilists create. For Yeats, this void embodies the space left behind by disaster, the thing that encapsulates revelation and fosters a new era of being. Indeed, in a 1903 letter to John Quinn, Yeats declares that "I think I have to some extent got weary of that wild God Dionysus, and I am hoping that the Far Darter will come in his place"²⁵⁴ This is an early clue that Yeats does not accept the Dionysian mode of disaster, even though much of his poetry focuses on disaster not unlike the chaos which the wine god heralds. As Harold Bloom declares,

Shelley and Schopenhauer were questers, in their very different ways, who could journey through the Void without yielding to the temptation of worshiping the Void as itself being sacred. Yeats... implicitly decided that he too would rather have the Void as purpose, than be void of purpose.²⁵⁵

²⁵³ Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, 502-503.

²⁵⁴ Yeats, *Letters*, 403.

²⁵⁵ Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1976. 234.

As Elizabeth Kuhn argues, one of the most “significant modernist questions” is how one should “respond to a world of dislocation and fractured temporality in which identity has become fragmented beyond recognition.”²⁵⁶ For Kuhn, Yeats’s answer is “intensity.”²⁵⁷ Indeed, intensity for Yeats sees the stable center breaking loose and things falling apart but left in the wake of that destruction is not complete and unredeemable nothingness. While it seems counterintuitive that disaster necessarily creates, one must keep in mind this question: what comes after Yeats’s implied apocalypse, or “disaster”? As Cunningham asks, why can’t a “nothing” do the job of a “something”?

In this chapter, I investigate Yeats’s interpretation of “the disaster” and “catastrophe.” To do this, I first examine the consequences of the disaster’s failure in the transitional volume *Responsibilities* (1914), which Yeats wrote before reading old nihilism. This failure, I argue, leads to cyclical dissatisfaction. I then interrogate how Yeats borrows representations of “disaster” from Benedict de Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, and Georg W. F. Hegel and executes these images in his later poetry, including *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), *The Tower* (1928), and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933). Considering his interest in creation that these volumes exhibit, I argue that Yeats uses the gnostic catastrophe of Spinoza, Kant’s reduction of the subject into a nonsubstantial void, and the Kantian and Hegelian sublime to diminish chaos to stillness and draw light from the void. This allows him to extract the Apollonian, creative capacity

²⁵⁶ Elizabeth Kuhn, “Toward an Anti-Humanism of Life: The Modernism of Nietzsche, Hulme and Yeats,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 34 no. 4 (2011): 13.

<https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.34.4.1>.

²⁵⁷ Kuhn, “Toward an Anti-Humanism,” 13.

from nothingness and imbue the void with creative possibility, an aim that he ultimately reaches at the conclusion of *The Winding Stair*.

The Poetry of a Failed Disaster

Disaster, apocalypse, and catastrophe. Critics have employed each of these words to characterize Yeats's mystical, philosophical approach to writing. For instance, Stan Smith notes a "pervasive" vision of all three in Yeats, particularly after *A Vision* (1925).²⁵⁸ Similarly, as Graham Hough states, Yeats writes *A Vision* in an established literary mode: that of "apocalypse" and "revelation."²⁵⁹ Holdridge then connects Yeats's rhetorical use of disaster to an approach that instigates transformation; he argues that Yeats sees "violence and mockery" as "prophetic of change that 'Heaven suffereth violence and the violent bear it away'."²⁶⁰ The epochs that form the poet's system in *A Vision* therefore begin and end in violence and catastrophe, which shows Yeats's use of a negating, destructive, but generative force. For Yeats, the choice to explore disaster through poetry finds its roots in his philosophical influences. In "Anima Hominis" (*Per Amica Silentiae Lunae*, 1918) he declares, "He only can create the greatest imaginable beauty who has endured all imaginable pangs, for only when we have seen and foreseen what we dread shall we be rewarded by that dazzling unforeseen wing-footed wanderer. We could not find him if he were not in some sense of our being and yet of our being but

²⁵⁸ Stan Smith, *W. B. Yeats: A Critical Introduction* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield), 1990. 12.

²⁵⁹ Hough, *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats*, 63.

²⁶⁰ Holdridge, *Those Mingled Seas*, 150.

as water with fire, a noise with silence.”²⁶¹ Only through disaster and suffering can one find a meaningful sense of magnificence. Contrary to Nietzsche’s dark, violent, Dionysian, which holds the power to beckon the abyss of complete nothingness, Yeats sees a redemption in disaster that summons an old nihilistic, Apollonian will. His “wing-footed wanderer” arrives at the point of utter “dread” and reclaims catastrophe as prolific.

As I have shown previously, the formal and contextual characteristics of Yeats’s poetry changed utterly by the time he read the texts of old nihilism. *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), *The Tower* (1928), and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933) demonstrate the language of catastrophe that destroys its subject while longing for a redemptive outcome. “Catastrophe” finds its lineage in the Greek “κατα” and “στρέφω,” which together mean “I overturn.” This is precisely how Yeats views human history, and it aligns rather seamlessly with an old nihilistic determination of nothingness. Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel all illustrate the subject, whether the individual person or the idea of God and Nature, as using the void of nothingness for redemption after experiencing a dissolution of “everything.” It is important to note that all three of these old nihilists view the disaster as ultimately Apollonian—a levelling occurrence that leaves a void in its wake. By applying this generative view of disaster to his later volumes of poetry, Yeats eliminates the threat of utter nothingness that characterizes Nietzschean nihilism.

²⁶¹ Yeats, *Mythologies*, 334.

Interestingly, though, it is the disaster's failure for Yeats that incites more fear and discontent than its success, and he explores this restlessness in *Responsibilities* (1914). Yeats externalizes "genuine creation" as a "presence made from absence," as he meditates on his own confrontation with the disaster. For Yeats, the *Responsibilities* poems indicate a stylistic and thematic departure from the idealistic "Celtic Twilight" to the unforgiving realities of modernity. As he repeats in "September 1913" (*Responsibilities* 1914), "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, / It's with O'Leary in the grave." Archaic words like "ye," as George Bornstein perceptively highlights, are absent from this volume, and in their place is a "language of poetry [that] coincide[s] with ... passionate, normal speech."²⁶² However, Yeats wrote these poems before reading old nihilism, and while he begins to consider disaster in this volume, he fails to engage with the creative potential that such an event leaves behind. "The Cold Heaven" exemplifies the futility of a failed disaster.

"The Cold Heaven" represents a disaster-like event that fails to yield a transformation. It begins *in medias res* and with an aura of frenzy; the speaker "suddenly" sees "the cold and rook-delighting heaven / That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice." The sublimity of the setting stirs the speaker until "imagination and heart were driven / So wild that every casual thought of that and this / Vanished."²⁶³ Though the scene's fervor appears strong, it does not facilitate a disaster

²⁶² George Bornstein, "Reading Yeats's 'September 1913' in its Contexts," *Sewanee Review* 122, no. 2 (2014): 227.

²⁶³ W. B. Yeats, "The Cold Heaven," in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997), 125.

that yields a generative nothingness. The “vanishing” fails to entirely level the scene; not only does it leave “memories” intact, but those memories “should be out of season,” which implies that they are obsolete or unnecessary. As the light seems to pierce the speaker, only a purgatorial question remains: will the soul be “stricken / By the injustice of the skies for punishment?”²⁶⁴ It is neither impending damnation nor even the hope for salvation that preoccupies the speaker’s thoughts; that is, he wonders *is*, not *when*.

While Yeats stops short of producing a transformative disaster in “The Cold Heaven,” he depicts the consequence of missing the disaster’s redemptive qualities in “The Magi.” This outcome is eternal dissatisfaction. The poem shows a speaker who envisions the Nativity scene from the perspective of an outside, bewildered individual. He paints a scene for the lifeless statues, superimposing his own observations onto the figures:

Now as at all times I can see in the mind’s eye,
In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones
Appear and disappear in the blue depths of the sky
With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,
And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,
And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,
Being by Calvary’s turbulence unsatisfied,
The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.²⁶⁵

²⁶⁴ Yeats, “The Cold Heaven,” 125.

²⁶⁵ W. B. Yeats, “The Magi,” in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997), 126.

Far from occupying a scene of chaos, the poem's subjects are static. The Three Kings, as the speaker perceives, sport "stiff, painted clothes" and their "pale, rain-beaten," stone-like faces reveal an antiquated longing. The poem's unvarying abab rhyme scheme confines these figures; they cannot escape through a break in form, as the poem leads the "mind's eye" to the concluding "floor," the lowest point in the space of the poem. Even the progressive tense of "hovering" and "hoping" traps the figures; while "hoping" might suggest desire or potential for movement, the lingering impression of "hover" immediately quells any expectation of liberation. Their unsatisfied "fixed eyes" reveal a vexation that plagues Yeats himself. As A.N. Jeffares argues, the Magi are unsatisfied "because they represent Yeats's belief that the Christian revelation was not final... Christ is uncontrollable because he is not final."²⁶⁶ It seems clear that Christ's resurrection and the upheaval it triggered could deliver neither the Magi nor Yeats from dissatisfaction. Disaster, in this case, fails to completely negate the metaphysical space of the poem, and thus a generative void cannot form. The lack of finality that Jeffares highlights vexes both the Magi and the speaker, who "now" and "at all times" see a vision of the "unsatisfied," motionless figures. Both are confined in an apocalyptic circle of inaction that disaster's failure directly causes.

Despite the failure of Christ's disaster, the Magi nevertheless long for a deliverance from their immobility. For Michael Wood, they eagerly seek unrest and the

²⁶⁶ A. Norman Jeffares, *A New Commentary on the Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1984. 126.

promise of “Calvary’s turbulence,”²⁶⁷ the event that summoned them to the child in the manger.²⁶⁸ The Magi, rather than pursuing a transformation, seek the turbulence itself; they ignore what might hide in the core of turmoil as their eyes “still fix” on the next disaster.²⁶⁹ For Yeats, these figures represent “the habitual image suggested by the blue sky,” as if they are doomed to remain chronically unsatisfied. Rather than acting as a generative void, the sky in this poem seems to swallow the figures as they episodically “appear and disappear” into the abyss of blue. And this is their failure as well as the failure of new nihilism: the inability to reap “the disaster” for its creative properties.

The Disaster of Old Nihilism: Yeats, Gnostic Catastrophe, and the Levelling of Everything

When it comes to comprehending and depicting the disaster in his poetry, Yeats garners information from Gnosticism, a perhaps unlikely adjacent philosophy to old nihilism.²⁷⁰ However, the poet gains his knowledge of Gnosticism from a perhaps equally unobvious source: his reading of Spinoza. While critics have attributed Yeats’s writing of the disaster and apocalyptic mode to Gnosticism, they overlook Spinoza as a

²⁶⁷ “When Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, He yielded up His spirit. At that moment the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth quaked and the rocks were split. The tombs broke open, and the bodies of many saints who had fallen asleep were raised” (Matthew 27:50-52).

²⁶⁸ Michael Wood, *Yeats and Violence*, The Clarendon Lectures in English, 2008 (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2010. 11.

²⁶⁹ Michael Wood, *Yeats and Violence*, 12.

²⁷⁰ Gnosticism a prominent heretical movement of the 2nd-century Christian Church, partly of pre-Christian origin. Gnostic doctrine taught that the world was created and ruled by a lesser divinity, the demiurge, and that Christ was an emissary of the remote supreme divine being, esoteric knowledge (gnosis) of whom enabled the redemption of the human spirit. I do not mean to suggest that this movement and nihilism are the same; rather, they share general characteristics.

likely source for these ideas.²⁷¹ As Bloom suggests, Yeats did read Gnostic texts, but “generally in dubious versions or misleading contexts.”²⁷² Since, if Bloom is correct, Yeats studied Gnostic texts under ambiguous and even questionable circumstances, it is possible that he instead absorbed these concepts through Spinoza’s nihilism. For instance, we know that he owned and most likely read Spinoza’s *Ethics and de Intellectus Emendatione*, which scholars have linked to Gnosticism.²⁷³ Two statements in particular link Yeats’s consideration of the Gnostic vision to Spinoza’s nihilism. He uses one to end one of his final letters: “The last kiss is given to the void. The second appears in *Where There Is Nothing*; Yeats writes “We sink in on God, we find him in becoming nothing— We perish into reality.”²⁷⁴ Heather Martin highlights both of these statements as exemplifying the same message. If so, Yeats’s Gnostic vision moves compellingly close to Spinoza’s nihilism, whose One Substance leads us to the abyss of emptiness but turns that nothingness into divine plenitude, therefore imbuing it with infinite possibility.

²⁷¹ For instance, Steven Hoeller calls Yeats a “friend and follower” of Gnosticism. Furthermore, in “The Modern Relevance of Gnosticism,” the afterward to *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Richard Smith casts Yeats as being tangibly influenced by Gnosticism (536-37). Neither of these critics investigate how and where Yeats learned about the religion, however.

²⁷² Bloom, *Repression*, 212.

²⁷³ Scholars have linked the *Ethics* to Gnosticism. For instance, Proposition X says that “As long as we are not assailed by emotions contrary to our nature, we have the power to arrange and associate affections of the body according to the order of the intellect.’ This is an almost Platonic or gnostic proposition insofar as it says that we can arrange our affections according to the ‘order of the intellect’. By order of the intellect, Spinoza means to say that we may use logical deduction to re-arrange our emotions based on the logical form related to the essence of said emotions.

²⁷⁴ Yeats, *Where There Is Nothing*, V. 471-472.

Through they may seem at odds, Gnosticism and old nihilism share perceptible similarities. For Hans Jonas, the Gnostic movement's connection to disaster is clear. He argues that the Gnostics grasped the particularly unnerving idea that the human condition has been fulfilled and performed "with all the vehemence of a cataclysmic event."²⁷⁵ Consequently, he maintains that we may illuminate nihilism's disaster by juxtaposing it against Gnostic catastrophe.²⁷⁶ Additionally, in *Agon: Towards A Theory of Revisionism* (1983), Bloom argues that any "adequate theory of poetic creation also must be a catastrophe theory. What is called creation, in art, is both a creation of catastrophe and a creation by catastrophe."²⁷⁷ He elaborates further, stating that catastrophe is "already in the condition of language, the condition of the ruins of time."²⁷⁸ For Bloom, the act of writing a poem entails a crisis: the external calamity that the poet reacts to reflects an internal struggle that he/she must also confront. Bloom contends further that poems themselves are "gnostic catastrophe creations." Indeed, creation is itself a catastrophe, a succession of tragedies created by an imperfect designer.²⁷⁹

Yeats takes the "nothing" that his system needs from Spinoza, and this enables him to efface both God and Nature. The disaster seeps into Spinoza's philosophy rather unexpectedly: That is, through the erasure of Nature and a lingering Gnostic spectre. On

²⁷⁵ Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press), 1958. 433.

²⁷⁶ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 433.

²⁷⁷ Harold Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1982. 73.

²⁷⁸ Bloom, *Agon*, 74.

²⁷⁹ Bloom, *Agon*, 81.

one hand, Spinoza's iteration of old nihilism appears antithetical to Gnosticism; however, like the Gnostic God, Spinoza's "deity," so to speak, does exist beyond attribute and negation because it is *only* attribute and negation. Spinoza's philosophy contains a "dualism within-monism" that collapses God, or the "One Substance," and Nature into one article. For Cunningham, this duality embodies the "logic" of nihilism because each entity cannot exist apart from the other: "God is made manifest in Nature, Nature manifests in God."²⁸⁰ Consequently, Spinoza can allot efficacy to "both" in the absence of "each," a formulation that enables him to interpret the "nothing" as "something."²⁸¹ Such a provisional nothingness animates the void while banishing the negativity from nothingness. For Spinoza, the One Substance consequently "provides" Nature with existence and vice versa.²⁸² Through its negating power, the One Substance thus supplies a nothingness that fosters existence. As Alain Badiou suggests, "Let us say of [Spinoza] ... he offers a salvation that promises nothing."²⁸³ This "nothing" ultimately directs Yeats's rendering of disaster to the void.

In addition to the *Ethics* and Gnosticism, Yeats obtains his understanding of generative disaster through his reading of Kant. For instance, in the *Opus Postumum* (1804), Kant aligns the phenomenal "World" with the noumenal "God" and vice versa.²⁸⁴

²⁸⁰ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, vix.

²⁸¹ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, vix.

²⁸² Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 170.

²⁸³ Badiou, Alain. *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*. University of Minnesota Press, 2000. 101.

²⁸⁴ For Kant, the "phenomena" refers to the way a thing appears to an observer and the "noumena" is the thing-in-itself.

However, as Cunningham points out, this dualism also yields monism, one which Kant eventually calls the “Totality.”²⁸⁵ While we cannot be certain how much of the *Opus Postumum* that Yeats read, he did own and annotate a copy of *Kant’s Critical Philosophy for English Readers* (1915), which outlines many of the concepts that the *Opus* tackles.²⁸⁶ Kant’s “disaster” materializes when he reduces the subject, the “absolute I,” to a functional nothingness. Like Spinoza, it appears that Kant found usefulness in diminishing a “something” to a “nothing,” and even further utility in using that negated space to function as something. His reduction of the subject to a nothing is an obvious example of this, but like Spinoza before him, Kant proposes a dualism that provides nothing. Humans, as Kant states, are the sight of a disappearance that triggers an object to be purely phenomenal and causes the noumenal to exist simply as the phenomenal; this act functionally negates and dissolves the object. Ultimately, Yeats’s endeavor aligns with Kant’s own: to unite “God” and the World through humans in the wake of a negating force.

Finally, Yeats’s thorough reading of Hegelian old nihilism gives the poet a picture of a destruction that annihilates destruction itself. The annihilation and the emptiness that the disaster leaves behind is thus a conditional, transitional space—the consequential void that fosters creation. Of the three old nihilists, Yeats read Hegelian philosophy most extensively; he housed eight different books on Hegel in his personal library, including *The Logic of Hegel* (1892); *What Is Living and What Is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel*

²⁸⁵ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 94.

²⁸⁶ See O’Shea’s *A Descriptive Catalog of W. B. Yeats’s Library*: 144.

(1915); and *Studies in the Hegelian Dialectic* (1918).²⁸⁷ For Hegel, the absolute is the nothing that negates itself, or, the annihilation of annihilation. This iteration of disaster, like the disasters that Spinoza and Kant postulate, is not the harbinger of absolute destruction. However, it requires that the individual recognizes the disaster's creative potential; if the individual can do this, the provisional nothingness that disaster leaves behind is truly provisional. As Hegel declares, "out of this abyss of nothing...the highest totality... at once all-encompassing and in the most joyful freedom of its form can and must arise."²⁸⁸ Yeats revises this language when he commands reality to be released in "Modern Poetry," and he gestures toward this idea in "The Cold Heaven" when the speaker "[takes] the blame out of sense and reason."²⁸⁹ Here, the hollowing out concludes in "crying" "trembling," and "rocking," and if the speaker can transcend these tumultuous emotions, the "highest totality" becomes an accessible consequence.

Yeats's representation of "the disaster" in his poetry noticeably borrows from the old nihilism of Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel. As I have shown, Yeats stands on the precipice of depicting a generative disaster in *Responsibilities*, but he stops just short of lucidly presenting this outcome in these poems. Beginning with *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, the first volume after he read old nihilism, the poet's disaster suggests a transformation, and in his later volumes, a transcendence. By combining disaster with a

²⁸⁷ O'Shea, *Descriptive Catalog*, 70; 164; 123.

²⁸⁸ Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, 358.

²⁸⁹ Yeats, "The Cold Heaven," 125.

generative, Apollonian will, Yeats reaches the void of old nihilism that yields plentitude and creation.

Yeats and Blake: The Dionysian Daemonic and the Apollonian Sublime

To gain a holistic understanding of Yeats's old nihilistic use of the disaster, we must first consider his engagement with both the constructive and destructive wills: The Apollonian and Dionysian. Yeats's place in literary history is unique: he stands as one of the last "Romantics" and travels across the threshold of modernism. He began his career in the 19th century and ended it in the mid-twentieth century. This is perhaps a critical reason why Nietzsche's new nihilism held little power over Yeats: he already rooted himself in a tradition of old nihilism that Romanticism grappled with, which interrogates the nature of God and the sublime. So, the negative, destructive nihilism that more accurately threatens Yeats is what critics label "the daemonic," an energy born of similar origins as the Dionysian. Yeats makes the connection between the daemonic and poetry through his reading of William Blake, who used the daemonic mode to interrogate the nature of divinity. However, Yeats answers the questions that Blake poses through the absolute negativity that characterizes old nihilism. By doing this, he drives away the malevolent force that the daemonic heralds and replaces it with an Apollonian, creative energy.

It is through Blake's example that Yeats connects the daemonic to poetic aptitude. Blake, whom Yeats casts as one of the "great artificers of God who uttered great truths to

a little clan,”²⁹⁰ felt a deep admiration for the English poet.²⁹¹ Blake extended Romanticism’s fascination with sublimity and divinity in “The Tyger” (1794) by tapping into the tradition of the daemonic. Through a series of questions, the speaker meditates on the nature of the divine:

When the stars threw down their spears
And water’d heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?²⁹²

The poem’s trochaic, chant-like rhythm quickly pulls the reader through the poem, as if the speaker is hurried and needs his questions answered swiftly; the symmetrical stanza lengths emphasize the speaker’s question of symmetry in the poem. Here, Blake uses both structural and the literal word “symmetry,” often considered a property of divinity and artistic beauty, combined with “fearful” to conjure images of sublimity, a thing that captivates and frightens.²⁹³ Throughout the whole poem, the speaker questions the tiger’s

²⁹⁰ W. B. Yeats, “Introduction,” in *Collected Poems of William Blake*. 1893. xxxii.

²⁹¹ Blake’s influence on Yeats has received significant critical attention. For instance, see Hazard Adams, *Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision*. 1968. Yeats first read Blake at the age of 15 or 16 when his father gave him Blake to read. Yeats writes in his essay “William Blake and the Imagination” that “...when one reads Blake, it is as though the spray of an inexhaustible fountain of beauty was blown into our faces (Yeats, *Essays* xxx).

²⁹² William Blake, “The Tyger” *The Complete Writings of William Blake: With Variant Readings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press), 1966. 172.

²⁹³ The discipline of sacred geometry emphasizes this point. A component of this states that God created the universe according to a consistent geometric plan. Furthermore,

existence: who or what could have made such an awe-inspiring creature? And, did this same creator fashion both Christ the “Lamb” as well as the fire-forged tiger? These stanzas position the tiger, as Gillespie argues, as not merely a destroyer, but a “sublime destroyer” that simultaneously “attracts” and “terrifies” the reader.²⁹⁴ The “fire” that surrounds the tiger underscores the two repetitions of “dread,” a term that indicates an existential anxiety concerning an anticipated event. This event, if Gillespie’s reading is accurate, is destruction, with the tiger leading the charge.²⁹⁵ At the poem’s conclusion, the unknowable tiger stays “alien, inhuman, incapable of speech, a nightmare vision of an incomprehensible engine of destruction.”²⁹⁶

Even though Yeats showed a life-long interest in the occult and fancies that edge dangerously close to a malevolent, supernatural connotation of “daemonic,” the definition that I propose takes its namesake from the Greek term *daimon* or *daimonion*. Such daimons are transitional spirits between humans and the divine.²⁹⁷ As transitional beings, they inhabit the sphere between gods and human beings in some tales, while in others they are “indwelling” spirits.²⁹⁸ As Gillespie comprehensively explains, the “daemonic” is a “dark and powerful but essentially negative will underlying

“divine ratio” was used to achieve balance and beauty in many Renaissance paintings and sculptures. Da Vinci himself used the Golden ratio to define all of the proportions in his Last Supper, including the dimensions of the table and the proportions of the walls and backgrounds.

²⁹⁴ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 102.

²⁹⁵ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 102.

²⁹⁶ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 103.

²⁹⁷ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 104.

²⁹⁸ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 104.

phenomena”.²⁹⁹ This will can arise from the divine but ultimately opposes it. Thus, it “empowers and liberates certain individuals but also catapults them beyond the bounds of conventional morality into what is simultaneously an exalted state of superhumanity and a degraded state of bestiality.”³⁰⁰ Goethe, for instance, provides a contemporary Romantic explanation of the daemonic’s “power,” stating “I cannot rid myself of the notion that the daemons, who enjoy teasing us and joy at our pain, set up individuals so alluring that everyone aspires toward them, yet so great that no one can reach them. So they set up Raphael...Mozart...Shakespeare.”³⁰¹ The daemonic, Goethe continued, was absent in his Mephistopheles because the daemonic “had nothing in it of the spirit that denies, being positive and efficacious.”³⁰² Yeats himself first writes extensively of his “Daimon” in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*:³⁰³

Daemon and man are opposites; man passes from heterogeneous objects to the simplicity of fire, and the Daemon is drawn to objects because through them he obtains power, the extremity of choice. For only in men’s minds can he meet even those in the Condition of Fire who are not of his own kin... His descending power is neither the winding nor the straight line but zigzag, illuminating the passive and active properties, the tree’s two sorts of fruit: it is the sudden lightning, for all his acts of power are instantaneous. We perceive in a pulsation of the artery, and after slowly decline.³⁰⁴

²⁹⁹ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 102.

³⁰⁰ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 102.

³⁰¹ Bloom, *Poetry and Repression*, 211.

³⁰² Bloom, *Poetry and Repression*, 211.

³⁰³ Yeats first uses the term “Daimon” explicitly in *The Savoy*’s April 1896 issue. In his essay “Verlaine in 1894,” he states: “One felt always that he had a great temperament, the servant of a great daimon, and fancied that, as one listened to his vehement sentences that his temperament, his daimon, had been made uncontrollable that he might live the life needful for its perfect expression in art, and yet escape the bonfire.”

³⁰⁴ Yeats, *Mythologies*, 335.

The Daimon becomes more prevailing and animate in *A Vision*, where all things are present in an eternal instant for the this entity: “She is not phasal...she is that being united to man which knows neither good nor evil...She is revealed to man in moments of prevision and illumination and in much that we call good and evil fortune, and yet, seeing that she remains always in the Thirteenth Cycle, cannot accompany man in his wanderings.”³⁰⁵ If we interrogate Yeats’s language, however, we see that his daemonic already deviates from the established Romantic definition in a noteworthy way: he recognizes the entity’s creative, Apollonian potential.

The true horror of the daemonic is the force behind the Blake’s tiger: a terrible, alarming, shadowy creator, and for new invention to transpire, this creator must be overcome. Blake confronts the daemonic in his poetry through ambiguity; he gives no answers, but instead only asks continuous questions. Hegel, however, turns the daemonic destroyer of Romantic nihilism into an agent of reason. Hegel reacts against “capricious divine omnipotence in favor of true omnipotence and dialectical rationality of absolute spirit.”³⁰⁶ Like the new nihilism, Hegel shows a rejection of the will of a God ruling over humanity, but he fills that gap rather quickly with rationalism and the Absolute. Any uncertainty left by the sublimation of God dissipates with a switch to the “becoming” of absolute negativity. For Hegel,

Becoming in essence, its reflected motion, is thus the motion from nothing to nothing and thereby back to itself. The transit or becoming overcomes itself in its transit; the other, that becomes in this transit, is not the non-being of a being, but

³⁰⁵ Yeats, *A Vision* (1925), 182.

³⁰⁶ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 116.

the nothing of a nothing, and this being the negation of nothing, constitutes being. –Being is only as the motion of nothing to nothing, so it is essence; and this does not have its motion in itself, but rather it is absolute appearance itself, pure negativity, with nothing outside of itself that negates it, but that negates itself through its negative itself, that only is in this negating.³⁰⁷

This “buried reality” is embodied in the much studied “The Second Coming” (*Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, 1921). Unquestionably inspired by *A Vision* (1925), “The Second Coming” narrates the end of an epoch in history and gestures toward the beginning of another. The space exists in state of limbo because the current era has not yet absolutely ended, and the new era still awaits its beginning. In this poem, Yeats confronts the mysterious maker of the daemonic through negation.

Similarly to “The Cold Heaven,” “The Second Coming” ends in mystery, but this time, Yeats gestures toward regeneration. Like Blake, Yeats meditates on these ideas through questions, as if inviting the reader to question these concepts simultaneously with him. Yeats writes the poem in roughly iambic pentameter, but this meter “falls apart” as early as the first line, “**turning** and “**turning in the widening gyre,**” in a mix of dactyls and ends in a trochee.³⁰⁸ As the iamb’s mirror image, the ending trochee’s falling rhythm magnifies a descent and pulls the reader through to the end of an era as the gyre enlarges. The dactyls, often used in Greek and Latin elegiac poetry, further underscore the idea of

³⁰⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. Walter Henry Johnston and L. G. Struthers (New York: Macmillan), 1929. 807.

³⁰⁸ W. B. Yeats, “The Second Coming,” in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997), 187.

termination, but elegy contrasts with this poem's content: Yeats excitedly anticipates the era's end rather than mourns it.

Continuing the visage of brokenness, the second stanza is 14 lines—the length of a sonnet—and the first is eight lines, approximately half the length of a sonnet, as though the first stanza was interrupted or abruptly halted by a traumatic event. Here, the speaker narrates an imminent catastrophe:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.³⁰⁹

The daemonic, Dionysian language consumes these lines. As if prophesizing modern society's fate at an era's end, Yeats casts ominous darkness on the "blood-dimmed tide," an image that conjures thoughts of *The Book of Revelation's* apocalyptic blood moon.³¹⁰ The apocalyptic torrent then relentlessly inundates "innocence," a term often associated with purity and goodness. However, innocence also indicates an artlessness, a thing that lacks culture and craft, and a naiveté that suggests a naturalness resulting from

³⁰⁹ Yeats, "The Second Coming," 187.

³¹⁰ Revelation 6:12-14: "And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood;
And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind.
And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places."

unawareness of the effect one is producing on others. For this “innocence” to be drowned means to eliminate a wide-eyed crudeness that has worn out its welcome. Yeats nearly inverts the desired effect of the *Book of Revelation*: he privileges the “worst,” who exhibit a raw strength at this era’s end while the “best” fall languidly to the side, unwilling or unable to do.

Adding to the poem’s desire for knowledge, Yeats follows this stanza with “Surely some revelation is at hand,” a statement that demands a profound change. While the speaker could be desperately begging for this revelation, indicated by his repetition of “surely,” he appears to immediately conjure it by shouting “the Second Coming!” and summoning a sphinx out of *Spiritus Mundi*.³¹¹ Like Hegel, Yeats believes that a dialectical process motivates historical events. Further, his belief that humans can glimpse this progression reveals a “common consciousness” not unlike the “world soul.” It is because of this process “and in the comprehension of the unity of opposites, or of the positive in the negative, that speculative knowledge consists.”³¹² Yeats changes Blake’s “tyger” and the poet’s questioning of the creative force behind it into a “shape with a lion body and the head of a man,” the harbinger of a renewed era. A reference to the sphinx, the master puzzler of antiquity, shows that Yeats’s creature is an amalgamation of two distinct forms, setting it apart from both human and animal.

³¹¹ Harold Bloom suggests this reading in *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (1976).

³¹² Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 111.

The terror that surrounds the “rough beast” is not purely Dionysian for two reasons: The sphinx’s association with the provisional nothingness of the void and its heralding of eventual creation. The terror behind the sphinx, just like the terror behind Blake’s tiger, is the creative force that drives it. Like Blake’s tiger, the sphinx is strange and nightmarish: the vision “troubles” the speaker’s “sight” and its presence startles the surrounding birds. Even the creature’s movements are threatening, as it presses forward painfully deliberately, “moving its slow thighs” while trapesing across the land. Despite these similarities to Blake’s tiger, Yeats’s sphinx deviates because it is an entity comprised of prolific nothingness. As Bloom observes, he “welcomes the second birth of the Egyptian Sphinx both emotionally and intellectually.”³¹³ Firstly, the creature possesses “a gaze blank and pitiless as the sun.” It is impossible to meet the sun’s stare with the naked eye for an extended amount of time, but if one can manage a quick glimpse, he/she would only see a sphere of bright light with no discernable features. The light’s intensity masks the sun’s true form from the beholder. The “blankness” of the sphinx’s face thusly exhibits not nothingness, but an unknown potential.

Furthermore, the desert, a place of complete nothingness, bears this sphinx: it is a creature born of nothing and created not by a menacing divine entity but summoned out of the collective unconscious. “Pitiless” too draws upon a language of negation and implies a lack of feeling rather than an active desire to view suffering. Such images, for Daniel Albright, are striking, but the critic is more enthralled with the negative, vacant

³¹³ Bloom, *Repression*, 217.

background that Yeats uses to display them. Albright indicates that through the Sea, sky, desert, Yeats aspires to “find an image large enough and blank enough to mirror the ultimate things.”³¹⁴ This aspiration quite expressively animates the poet’s goal for his writing that he outlines in *Mythologies* (1917): “I shall find the dark grow luminous, the void fruitful when I understand I have nothing, that the ringers in the tower have appointed for the hymen for the soul a passing bell.”³¹⁵ In a rhetorical move that mimics the rising and falling of all things into Spinoza’s One Substance, Albright sees all of Yeats’s images as rising out of a void, and subsequently descending back into that void.³¹⁶

Additionally, a creature born of the desert’s void, Yeats’s sphinx’s existence displays similarities to Hegel’s idea of absolute negativity. As Hegel explains in *The Science of Logic*, “the negative appears as the mediating element, since it includes within it itself and the immediate whose negation it is.”³¹⁷ The desert, then, acts as this “mediating element” that breeds this blank sphinx and portent of the new era. No sooner does the sphinx appear that the darkness overtakes the image again and it disappears from the speaker’s sight. This creature heralds the current epoch’s end and the new one’s beginning, unlike the tiger’s connection to destruction. As the sphinx slowly moves

³¹⁴ Daniel Albright, *Quantum Poetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and the Science of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1997. 34.

³¹⁵ Yeats, *Mythologies*, 332.

³¹⁶ Albright, *Quantum Poetics*, 34.

³¹⁷ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 1781.

forward, disturbing the environment around it, it approaches closer to bringing upon the disaster and ushering in newness.

Yeats's sphinx in "The Second Coming," possesses an ancestry that belongs to the void; it brings the disaster of the old era's destruction. However, this symbol also overlaps with the representation of the sublime in old nihilism.³¹⁸ The daemonic does indeed share similarities with the sublime, including an ability to elicit both fear and fascination from a human subject. However, Kant's old nihilism in particular withdraws the sublime's transformative capacity more viscerally. For Gillespie, the daemonic is "a force that evokes fascination and fear but does not yet exercise power over actuality."³¹⁹ This is where old nihilism's sublime holds such a power, and Yeats deploys it to pull the buried Apollonian energy out of the daemonic's dense Dionysian haze. Kant's sublime shows an object existing as objectively terrifying, but the individual viewer does not truly fear it. He clarifies this point in *The Critique of Judgment* (1790) when he declares, "The sublime is that, the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense."³²⁰ The sublime is therefore a part of the "supersensible" world, unbound by temporal and physical constraints, and formless and free.³²¹ Its nebulous properties and detachment from the realm of particulars make the

³¹⁸ Bloom also recognizes the language of negation inherent in the sublime. He states, "First, that creative sublime moment is a negative moment; second, that this moment tends to rise out of an encounter with someone else's prior moment of negation, which in turn goes back to an anterior moment, and so on."

³¹⁹ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 103.

³²⁰ Kant, *Judgment*, 98.

³²¹ Holdridge, *Those Mingled Seas*, 33.

sublime a vehicle that helps thrust the subject away from “visible objects” and toward a nonsubstantial void. The subject thus reaches beyond the idea of terror and toward a generative levelling.

Through the mind’s rationalization, sublimity acts as a vehicle for a revelation or even a transformation, which is what Kantian nihilism aims to do. In the modern age, aesthetic experience has become increasingly individualized, found in solitude, and this highly individualized aspect of aesthetics is itself a result of “a breaking of the soul and world into fragments,” as Yeats writes of history beginning in the eighteenth century.³²² As Yeats articulates, “The world begins to long for the arbitrary and the accidental, for the grotesque, the repulsive, and the terrible, that it may be cured of desire, and the moment has come for the ninth gyre.”³²³ This “curing” for Yeats necessitates a vanishing of the subject, in this case the collective consciousness of modernity. After a reduction to the absolute nihil, Yeats’s void becomes fruitful.

A Sublime Transformation: The “Terrible Beauty” and the Void

Yeats’s sphinx and Blake’s tiger both embody the sublime’s perfect blending of beauty and terror, allure and repulsion. Like the tiger, the sphinx brings with it an impending destruction that will change the face of reality, and Oedipus undergoes a change that allows him to know only his mind. Extending Kant’s implementation of the concept, Yeats latches onto the sublime’s transformative quality and distills that into

³²² Holdridge, *Those Mingled Seas*, 3.

³²³ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), 89.

transcendence through his tragic joy. While Nietzsche's influence on tragic joy displays through a "love of fate," Yeats calls upon Kant's sublime to transform terror of annihilation into a state of near divine perfection. Such an action, as Holdridge notes, will transport the individual to another plane.³²⁴

In "Easter, 1916" (*Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, 1921), Yeats combines the ideas of tragedy and ecstasy together in his haunting refrain "a terrible beauty is born." Repeated three times, as if to actively evoke a movement beyond the physical world, his phrase suggests that the Easter Rebellion of 1916 possessed a nearly God-like power to not only "change" but "change" and "transform utterly" the trajectory of Ireland. The terrible beauty, devoid of definite form, positions the subject for a movement beyond physical understanding. In this way, the Kantian limitlessness that Yeats adopts does not lie in the possibilities for Ireland's future; rather, the subject vanishes because of this transformation, which can lead to a transcendence. At the poem's beginning, the speaker recalls the insignificant interactions he experiences with the people of his town in a foreboding tone that matches the disconcerting change about to take place:

I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words...
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly³²⁵

³²⁴ Holdridge, *Those Mingled Seas*, 36.

³²⁵ W. B. Yeats, "Easter, 1916," in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997), 179.

Again, the speaker emphasizes the inconsequential exchanges between he and the townspeople through repetition. “Meaningless” here conjures not only images of the desolate new nihilism, but perhaps more specifically, action without intent. That is, the speaker partakes in these routine pleasantries because they are expected, or “polite,” rather than substantial. However, tapping into the Kantian sublime changes the “meaningless words” that the speaker twice admits to uttering and replaces them with the “terrible beauty.” Likewise, the sublime event that introduces the “terrible beauty” removes and replaces the “motley” fabric, a symbol that evokes images of foolish jesters. This act consequently eliminates the subject in the process: the “they” and the “I” are transformed, but the speaker does not reveal into what. In the poem’s final stanza, the sublime event’s transformative reach expands past the speaker’s town to “wherever green is worn.” Through this transformation, Yeats leads us to the Kantian nonsubstantial void: the entire erasure of what used to exist. The birth of the “terrible beauty” concludes the poem, an indication that the subject’s vanishing is complete. It seems, then, that transcendence is a Yeatsian rendering of the Kantian nonsubstantial void. For Yeats, tragic joy marries two contradictory perceptions of a single feeling that is “the nobleness of the arts is in the mingling of contraries, the extremity of sorrow, the extremity of joy.”³²⁶ Yeats expresses Kant’s formless limitlessness in the space between those extremes within that mingling.

³²⁶ Yeats, *Essays*, 255.

One way that Yeats accomplishes this feat is through the figure of Oedipus. For Yeats, Oedipus represents a human embodiment of the sublime. In *A Vision*, Yeats asserts that the tome will “proclaim a new divinity” in Oedipus:

Oedipus lay upon the earth at the middle point between four sacred objects, was there washed as the dead are washed, and thereupon passed with Theseus to the wood’s heart until Amidst the sound of thunder earth opened, “riven by love,” and he sank down soul and body into the earth. I would have him balance Christ who, crucified standing up, went into the abstract sky soul and body...He raged against his sons, and this rage was noble...He knew nothing but his mind, and yet because he spoke that mind fate possessed it and kingdoms changed according to his blessing and his cursing. Delphi, that rock at earth’s navel, spoke through him, and though men shuddered and drove him away they spoke of ancient poetry, praising the boughs overhead, the grass under foot, Colonus and its horses.³²⁷

Yeats’s language is striking and ferocious in this passage. Words like “thunder,” “rage,” and “shuddered” give life to the daemonic as it entirely trembles the landscape. But amidst all of this frenzy lies a transformation and a “balance.” Delphi possesses and transforms Oedipus into a medium that leaves him enraged but also triggers the men to “bless joyfully” the language of poetry.³²⁸ As Jahan Ramazani argues, the transformation of terror into joy is “the sublime’s affective structure, and the spontaneous movement of language from one mind to another is the intersubjective course of the sublime. The powerful speech of Yeats’s Oedipus makes overt the violence of the sublime.”³²⁹

Another significant aspect of Yeats’s Oedipus is his association with metaphysical

³²⁷ Yeats, *A Vision* (1937), 27-28.

³²⁸ Jahan Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death: Elegy, Self-Elegy, and the Sublime* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1990. 108.

³²⁹ Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death*, 108.

disappearance. He sinks “body and soul” into the void of the earth and seems to surface knowing “nothing but his mind.” The character seems to emerge as a transformed subject, a result that closely resembles Kant’s vanishing and the philosopher’s view of the sublime. By making Oedipus “disappear” and leading us to the void of the “terribly beauty,” Yeats injects Apollonian transformation into an atmosphere filled with Dionysian destruction and catastrophe. Thus, Yeats’s disaster edges even closer to uncovering the new beginning that he desires.

The “Unsatisfied Ones” Satisfied: Yeats’s Fruitful Void

Through his reading of old nihilism, Yeats applies an Apollonian version of the sublime to uncover a generative transformation that the daemonic, Dionysian façade masks. We stand now on the precipice of creation that must be birthed into existence. For Yeats, birth is intertwined with his reclamation of “the disaster” and destruction. The speaker of “The Second Coming” asks what newness will be “born” out of the old world’s demolition and “Easter, 1916” declares the nativity of a transformed reality. Both poems were born of real-world disasters: Ireland’s Easter Rising and the First World War. Furthermore, Yeats also sees the terror, the daemonic consequence of the rebirth. In “The Mother of God (*The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, 1933), a dramatic monologue spoken by the Virgin Mary, the speaker asks, “What is this flesh I purchased with my pains, / And bids my hair stand up?”³³⁰ Yeats, donning the mask of the new mother, embodies humans’ reaction to a sublime event: an all-consuming fascination with

³³⁰ W. B. Yeats, “The Mother of God,” in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997), 249.

its beauty and terror. As the mother contemplates, “This love that makes my heart’s blood stop / Or strikes a sudden chill into my bones.”³³¹ Her simultaneous attraction and repulsion, love and fear, solicits a forward-progress. Although the mother fears the “fallen star that [her] milk sustains,” the birth has already transpired. Only the uncertainty left in the wake of such new-ness remains. If Yeats sees a rebirth spring from the destruction’s aftermath, he continues to fashion this void and clarifies it in *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*.

In *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), Yeats descends ever closer to the unforgiving abyss, but before it can consume him entirely, he finds the redemptive void that he seeks. Perhaps befitting of such a descent, the temper of the poems in both these volumes is indeed, as Yeats calls *The Tower*, “bitter,” and “verges on nihilism.”³³² As Bradley perceptively notes, “the idealizing dream of Ireland that dominated the early romantic verse of Yeats has become “a modernist nightmare” in *The Tower*.³³³ The order of the poems in the volume *The Tower* is perhaps noteworthy as well, since Yeats deliberately chose their placement. It follows, then, that Yeats may have conceivably intended the relative calmness of “Sailing to Byzantium” to frame and put in heartening perspective the poems that come directly after; that is, “The Tower,” “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” and “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” because their systems, content, and sentiments are quite perplexing and alarming.³³⁴ For Bradley,

³³¹ Yeats, “The Mother of God,” 249.

³³² Anthony Bradley, “Angel of History,” 110.

³³³ Anthony Bradley, “Angel of History,” 110.

³³⁴ Anthony Bradley, “Angel of History,” 111.

however, he more likely intended to simulate the slope from order into near chaos and anarchy mapped by several of his later poems.³³⁵ But as we shall see, *near* is a vital additive to Yeats's chaos: Like Spinoza and his substance monism, he leads us to the edge of the absolute emptiness, but he does not leave us to be consumed by the Dionysian abyss. Rather, old nihilism's Apollonian qualities redeem annihilation and cultivate the void.

Yeats's poetic masks often long for nothing. In "Meditations in a Time of Civil War" (*The Tower*, 1928) the "daemonic rage" which "imagined everything" haunts the poem's landscape, and the "rage-hungry troop" magnifies the discontent chaos. However, the troop appears to so desperately long for emptiness that he "plunges toward nothing" with his "arms and fingers spreading wide / For the embrace of nothing."³³⁶ The figure seems frenzied in his quest for nothingness: the speaker calls him "belabouring" and "tormented," "biting at an arm or face" as he moves head-on into the abysmal scene. While the speaker fails to understand the trooper's desire and Yeats does little to describe this nothingness, it is clear that the trooper is drawn to it. His outstretched extremities long and reach for it, as if this nothingness will offer him something more than he currently possesses. It is this alluring quality to nothing that tempts and terrifies, but also leads the speaker to "abstract joy" and "half-read wisdom of daemonic images" at the

³³⁵ Anthony Bradley, "Angel of History," 111.

³³⁶ W. B. Yeats, "Meditations in a Time of Civil War," in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997), 206.

poem's close. While still incomplete, nothing's glimmering of a gratification from within the void begins to form.

Nothingness appears as transformative in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (*The Tower*, 1928). Here, Yeats extends the image of the "rage-d riven...troop" who longs for the void to include a sublime vanishing of the subject that edges closer. Although rooted in the Irish Home Rule struggle, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is a poem full of vanishing; indeed, it begins at Kant's third stage of vanishing with the disappearance of material objects. The speaker recalls, "Many ingenious lovely things are gone..." and even the things that otherwise seemed impervious to the vanishing, like "Phidias's famous ivories / And all the golden grasshoppers and bees" also are "gone."³³⁷ Human accomplishments in art, law, and philosophy are reduced to "pretty toys," but the "toys" now belong to the past. Time, for Mutter, changes everything, and human perception is quite susceptible to such an alteration.³³⁸ A vanishing of all material objects in a subject's world lays the foundation for a nonsubstantial void. Yeats primes the human subject for transformation by negating all achievement and physical items, but it is the "swan" that undergoes this change first.

The swan appears in several of Yeats's poems as a symbol of imagination, timeless existence, and conquest. In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," though, this mysterious bird connects visibly to the void. First, Yeats bonds the swan directly to the

³³⁷ W. B. Yeats, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997), 207.

³³⁸ Mutter, *Restless Secularism*, 152.

human soul; the speaker expresses, “Some moralist or mythological poet / Compares the solitary soul to a swan; / I am satisfied with that.”³³⁹ As Rachel Billigheimer shows, we can credit Plato for first connecting the swan with the soul. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates pronounces: Will you not allow that I have as much of the spirit of prophecy in me as the swans?... because they are sacred to Apollo, they have a gift of prophecy, and anticipate the good things of another world; wherefore they sing and rejoice on that day [of their death] more than ever they did before.”³⁴⁰ Given that Yeats read the *Phaedo*, we can assume that he understood the swan’s connection with an Apollonian spirit as well as the bird’s celebration of its own destruction.³⁴¹ More fascinating still, however, is that the sublimity that Yeats’s swan embodies shares similarities to Kant’s sublime disaster and transformation.³⁴² Through the swan, Yeats stages the soul’s advancement into sublime change, a move that leads it to the void’s edge. The posture that the swan takes before “that brief gleam of its life be gone” is dignified and undaunted: its wings are “half spread for flight” and its “breast is thrust out in pride / Whether to play, or to ride / Those winds that clamour of approaching night.”³⁴³ The swan, and by extension the human soul, then shifts to an active seeker of the disaster and destruction, as it “has leaped into the

³³⁹ Yeats, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” 208.

³⁴⁰ Rachel V. Billigheimer, “Passion and Conquest: Yeats’s Swans,” *College Literature* 13, no. 1 (1986): 55-70; “Phaedo.” *The Dialogues of Plato, Volume I*. 462

³⁴¹ In the “Great Year of the Ancients” section of *A Vision*, Yeats writes extensively on the “Platonic Year.” In this section, he includes parables from the *Phaedo*, including Plato’s tale of dividing an egg with a hair.

³⁴² In a note to “The Tower,” Yeats connects the swan to transformation. He recalls, “When I wrote the lines about Plato and Plotinus I forgot that it is something in our own eyes that makes us see them as all transcendence. Has not Plotinus written: ‘Let every soul recall then at the outset the truth that soul is the author of all living things...’”

³⁴³ Yeats, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” 208.

desolate heaven.”³⁴⁴ In a move that alludes to Kant’s view of the sublime, this bird fails to fear the “desolate heaven’s” immensity or vastness, despite the object’s quantitatively terrifying sensation. The terror that this void elicits exists as incredibly real and hostile.

It can:

bring wildness, bring a rage
To end all things, to end
What my laborious life imagined, even
The half-imagined, the half-written page³⁴⁵

The vision of the soul leaping into the desolate heaven can bring wildness and even existence-ending rage; for Billigheimer, the life and the half-imagined and the half-written page that the poet has imagined may terminate.³⁴⁶ Additionally, as Mutter elaborates, the poet is “half persuaded to join in the prevailing mood of cynicism and destruction; it is tempting to acquiesce in nihilism, even to jettison his own poetry.”³⁴⁷ The speaker’s use of “can” in this passage rather than “will” or “does,” however, is noteworthy: while the soul’s deliberate bounding has the power to potentially summon such disaster and wildness, this outcome is not guaranteed; it is merely a possibility. Attaining order and renewed creation are the unspoken alternative consequences to leaping into “desolate heaven” of this poem’s void.

³⁴⁴ Yeats, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” 208.

³⁴⁵ Yeats, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” 209.

³⁴⁶ Rachel Billigheimer, “Passion and Conquest: Yeats’s Swans,” 60.

³⁴⁷ Matthew Mutter, *Restless Secularism*, 149.

Whereas the vision of the swan-soul leaping into the void elicits a potentially fearsome outcome, it is an act of “good violence” spawned from a genuine yearning. Mutter connects the soul’s actions directly to “good violence,” which he calls “aristocratic, heroic, creative, and passionate.”³⁴⁸ This “good violence” bears similarities to the redemptive disaster of old nihilism, an Apollonian force that enters in one of Yeats’s most diminutive poems: “Fragments” (*The Tower*, 1928). This poem meditates on language and truth as springing from the void of darkness and is one of the clearest instances of Yeats’s void at last fostering creation. His title, which indicates a whole entity that experienced a destructive dismantling, implies a necessary reconstruction from the remains of the disaster. The speaker attacks John Locke for leaving us with the waste of the physical world and for underestimating the source of their own inspiration.³⁴⁹ As an empiricist, Locke denied the existence of an innate truth; for Yeats, he failed to see that the “Garden died.” By contrasting the empirical with the unperceivable, Yeats positions nothing-as-something; in this case, a “something” that prophesizes:

Where got I that truth?
Out of a medium’s mouth,
Out of nothing it came,
Out of the forest loam,
Out of dark night where lay
The crowns of Nineveh.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁸ Matthew Mutter, *Restless Secularism*, 150.

³⁴⁹ Holdridge, *Those Mingled Seas*, 150.

³⁵⁰ W. B. Yeats, “Fragments,” in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997), 214.

Revelation in this poem comes after disaster. Nineveh, once a powerful city and capital of Assyria, fell at the hands of Babylon. But that nothing finally reveals something definite: the truth, born from the bare soil and darkness. The truth springs from the void of darkness, an entity that negates the ability of the sense to perceive. Finally, Yeats imbues his void with creative properties, an achievement that only amplifies in *The Winding Stair*'s "Byzantium" and "Vacillation."³⁵¹

The sublime and nihilism's disaster again continue expanding in "Byzantium" (*The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, 1933). Each of the poem's stanzas moves from pentameter to tetrameter to trimeter lines, only to end with a pentameter line that now seems expansive; this reflects the narrowing and intensity of the experience the poem strives for. While we are accustomed to reading this poem as an allegory of the aesthetic process, it is yet another exercise in Yeats's rendering of the Kantian sublime. In the commentary to his *Collected Poems*, Yeats reveals that he "warmed [him]self back into life with Byzantium" after falling ill. A "poem that befit [his] years," "Byzantium's" structure oscillates between varying line lengths that perpetuates the "images that yet / fresh images beget."³⁵² The aroma of flame that "no faggot feeds" and no storm

³⁵¹ The tone and concerns of *The Winding Stair* to some extent overlap with those of *The Tower*; indeed, Yeats originally intended "Blood and the Moon" and other poems to be included in *The Tower*. Also, "Byzantium" and "Sailing to Byzantium" are quite obviously linked, but not so obviously, for Bradley, are "Byzantium" and "All Souls' Night." The former anticipates the imagery of "Byzantium" as much as "Sailing to Byzantium" does: the midnight hour, the cathedral bell, mummies, and ghosts are common to both.

³⁵² W. B. Yeats, "Byzantium," in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997), 248.

“disturbs” hovers menacingly over the landscape, threatening to consume metaphysical reality and drag it into utter terror. In a move that Holdridge casts as the “negative” sublime latching onto the “positive” sublime, the fire threatens to eviscerate all *a priori* truths and leave us “with nothing but the abyss.”³⁵³ Yeats crafts the soundscape of “Byzantium” with harsh, abrupt dins; a cathedral gong reverberates and night-walkers warble their song, but these sounds “recede” as the distained “complexities” of “all that man is” enters the scene. “Unpurged images” are unrefined, as if the flame has not yet lapped their edges. For these entities, transformation to sublimity has not yet occurred. Once the flames envelope the day’s images, as Ramazani articulates, they will “simplify through intensity” and “burn away the accidents of the chaotic life.”³⁵⁴

Just as the “rough beast” appeared out of *Spiritus Mundi*’s desert, the speaker experiences another vision that sees the potential in disaster. He reveals:

Before me floats an image, man or shade,

Shade more than man, more image than a shade;
For Hades’ bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
May unwind the winding path;
A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
Breathless mouths may summon;
I hail the superhuman;
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.³⁵⁵

³⁵³ Holdridge, *Those Mingled Seas*, 180.

³⁵⁴ Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death*, 160.

³⁵⁵ Yeats, “Byzantium,” 248.

Does the “superman” refer to the image, man, or shade that the speaker sees? It doesn’t seem likely. This image is the embodiment of contradiction: the speaker first describes it as an image, refines his description to form a human, only to negate the first statement and cast it once again as mere image. This figure seems wrapped up in circularity: it has a mouth but cannot use it because the figure lacks moisture and breath; however, the potential for utility nevertheless exists, even if not yet actualized. Furthermore, Yeats’s superman sees the proclivity for creation beyond the disaster. Death and life collapse into one image to form a nothing that functions as something, a nothing devoid of negativity. In Kant’s dynamical sublime, there is the sense of annihilation of the sensible self as the imagination tries to comprehend a vast might. As Bloom highlights, the negative formula in this poem mirrors Phases 15 and 1 of *A Vision*, where “human incarnation is negated.”³⁵⁶ However, Yeats’s annihilation is neither absolute nor finite; instead, it is provisional. This is what the speaker achieves by collapsing death into life and life into death: the fusing of each negates the other, thus preparing a space for transformation. In this case, the transition between lives.

This is where the disaster of old nihilism enters the poem most prominently. Amid the fury, fire, and “mire” of the landscape, a regeneration of sorts begins to transpire. The “smithies,” who the speaker surrounds with hellish descriptions of metal and flame, surge the landscape’s bedlam forward and bring the destruction, but the scene is not one of utter annihilation. “Begotten” and “beget” appear a total of three times in the

³⁵⁶ Bloom, *Repression*, 225.

poem's second half. As if they spring from the void itself, the flames are their own cause and "begotten of flame," and the "spirits" "blood-begotten," made of flesh, are "dying into a dance / An agony of trance."³⁵⁷ Their death, however, exists as celebrated, as "dance" and "trance" amalgamate into a sublimity that fuses merriment and pain. These images, sprung from the destruction and disaster of the action appear to process in a never-ending litany that fills the space of the poem. Through this sublime, Yeats seems to gesture toward Kant's postulation that "no phenomenon can disappear" as the "images ... yet / fresh images beget."³⁵⁸

After the sublime, the idea of negation enters the poem to add supplementary explanation of Yeats's procreative disaster. As Miller argues, Yeats aims to yield to God in this poem as a phase of "total objectivity."³⁵⁹ For Miller, "Byzantium" comes close to removing all distinctive qualities from the soul so that it might reach God without qualities.³⁶⁰ Unlike Miller, I do not suggest that Yeats means to reach "God" in this poem, but the purging of an excess firmly anchors this idea in old nihilism. Spinoza's Gnostic erasure of God and Nature, an act of pure negation, promises the purged "nothing" that to which Miller and Yeats allude. Additionally, this is a process of "losing idiosyncrasy" to reach total objectivity again relates to Kant's vanishing of the subject and Hegel's absolute. For Hegel, absolute negativity is supposed to be a first principle, a ground from which everything else flows. While Miller uses the phrase "total objectivity"

³⁵⁷ Yeats, "Byzantium," 248.

³⁵⁸ Yeats, "Byzantium," 249.

³⁵⁹ Miller, *Poets of Reality*, 113.

³⁶⁰ Miller, *Poets of Reality*, 113.

to characterize Yeats's "yielding" to the divine, the poet depicts this surrender as anything but quiet and passive. Instead, he leaves us with a "dolphin-torn, gong-tormented sea." For all of the poem's eradicating language, a Dionysian, ferocious rage still overwhelms the final line. In this ultimate line, Yeats reveals that exorcism is violent: Kant's vanishing, Hegel's annihilation of annihilation, and Spinoza's gnostic disaster all require fury.

After transforming the subject and warding off the abyss, Yeats fully actualizes the generative disaster in "Vacillation" (*The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, 1933). This is where he animates the void and finds the "dark grow luminous," as he set out to do in "Anima Hominis" (*Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, 1918). Like Eliot, Yeats uses the idea of "betweenness" in "Vacillation" to indicate a transitional space, and he situates the reader in this interval from the poem's inception. The poem begins immediately with betweenness, where the speaker fixes humans' existence "between extremities." However, like the feeling that plagued the Magi, this betweenness appears unsatisfying. Indeed, the extremities here seem to be problematic and unresolved rather than the favored space. Humans merely "run their course" between the limits of what we can assume are existence and nonexistence, shape and form, color and shade. The blankness of the "rough beast's" stare returns to yield a space devoid of potent characteristic.

However, the "betweenness" does not remain for long. In the third line, a concurrently destructive and procreative force manifests to release humans from that undesirable state. The speaker describes,

A band, or flaming breath,
Comes to destroy
All those antinomies
Of day and night;
The body calls it death,
The heart remorse.³⁶¹

Like he does in *A Vision*, Yeats draws his attention to “antinomies,” those rational quandaries that expose an insurmountable chasm between humans and the divine. These antinomies puzzled both he and Kant, and each thinker drew upon nihilism to answer these metaphysical conundrums.³⁶² The “flaming breath” enters the scene to “destroy” everything that the subject knows, including the basic dichotomy of “day and night.” As in “Byzantium,” all idiosyncrasies are eliminated until presumably nothing remains. While the “body” and the “heart” appear discontented by this elimination—they deem it “death” and remorse,” respectively—the speaker holds a contrasting viewpoint. He asks, “But if these be right, / What is joy?”³⁶³ This rhetorical question implies that joy bounds from the antinomies’ annihilation, as if it is the only appropriate response to this outcome. Furthermore, as Gillis argues, the poem’s third section confirms that joy stems from an acceptance of death.³⁶⁴ However, the fundamental query for Yeats whether this acceptance is “bound by a vision of broader cohesion, of reincarnation and continuity, or

³⁶¹ W. B. Yeats, “Vacillation,” in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997), 249-250.

³⁶² Kant’s antinomies, outlined in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, are contradictions which he believed follow necessarily from our attempts to conceive the nature of transcendent reality.

³⁶³ Yeats, “Vacillation,” 250.

³⁶⁴ Alan Gillis, “W. B. Yeats: Among the Deepening Shades,” 146.

whether it is a matter of nihilistically laughing in annihilation's face."³⁶⁵ For Gillis, Yeats fails to reveal an adequate answer to the questions, but the sixth and seventh sections utilize old nihilism's disappearance and disaster to fully comprehend and utilize the prolific void.

Yeats ends each of Section VI's stanzas with the haunting refrain, "Let all things pass away." While such an utterance could appear abundantly pessimistic, this line embodies each of Spinoza's, Kant's, and Hegel's fruitful negativity. For Gillis, nihilism's "credibility" is postponed because of the "sheer bewilderment occasioned by the verse's breakneck rapidity, authoritative specificity, and weird historicity."³⁶⁶ Indeed, it is a "highly ambivalent atmosphere" that affords the possibility the speaker to conclude this section with "What's the meaning of all song? / 'Let all things pass away'."³⁶⁷ However, Gillis seems to miss the tradition of old nihilism present in these stanzas. Spinoza's removal of God and Nature and promise of nothing presents itself in the "meaning of the song." As Altizer highlights, Spinoza's "ultimate joy," and one here uniquely released in pure thinking itself, is one in which the individual subject of thinking is wholly absent as such, even as an individual subject is inevitably dissolved in the deepest expressions of mystical vision."³⁶⁸ The Spinozan metaphorical command of "Let all things pass away," vocalized by the speaker, promotes an "emptying out" so that the void can be filled. This passing away also elicits a Hegelian absolute negativity that ultimately commands

³⁶⁵ Alan Gillis, "W. B. Yeats: Among the Deepening Shades," 146.

³⁶⁶ Alan Gillis, "W. B. Yeats: Among the Deepening Shades," 148.

³⁶⁷ Alan Gillis, "W. B. Yeats: Among the Deepening Shades," 148.

³⁶⁸ Altizer, *Godhead and Nothing*, 40.

creation. Hegel declares, “Out of this abyss of nothing...the feeling: God is dead...the highest totality in its complete seriousness and out of its deepest ground, at once all-encompassing and in the most joyful freedom of its form can and must arise.”³⁶⁹

Finally, “Vacillation’s” seventh section charges the individual to find truth now that value-creating old nihilism has replaced the disaster and abyss with the void. In another iteration of betweenness, this section sees a dialogue between soul and heart, where the Soul instructs the Heart to “seek out reality” and “leave things that seem”: to abandon the phenomenal realm for the world of the noumena. Here, fire returns again, but this time it strikes fear into the Heart, who is “Struck dumb in the simplicity of fire.” “Simplicity” connects this fire to the void, which in “Byzantium” seemed to both birth and contain the flames. However, rather than recommending a shrinking from the fire’s annihilating, purging power, the Soul instructs the Heart to “Look on to that fire,” for “salvation walks within.” This statement casts the Soul as possessing direct knowledge of annihilation and vanishing’s creative potential; it knows that deliverance rather than calamity awaits the Heart. Now the redeemed entity that started out as a triumphant swan leaping into the “desolate heaven” of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” the Soul exists as the quintessence of the void’s rejuvenating capacity. The disaster, catastrophe, and apocalypse all lead to a fruitful void of old nihilism that Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel all help Yeats to actualize.

³⁶⁹ Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, 358.

Conclusion

In “Modern Poetry” (1936), Yeats comments on Eliot’s “still point,” of the *Four Quartets* (1941), saying that “Eliot’s historical and scholarly mind seems to have added...this thought: reality is expressed in a series of contradictions, or is that unknowable something that supports the center of the see-saw.”³⁷⁰ The center of Yeats’s “see-saw” is the void left behind after catastrophe. This is the space of an “unknowable something” that, although beyond the realm of human comprehension, exists to stabilize the universe and its inhabitants. However, reaching the nonsubstantial void of old nihilism is an arduous task; it requires both trauma and catastrophe: an utter change and a loosening of anarchy. However, Yeats harnesses this Dionysian chaos and mixes it with an Apollonian order that enables the “dark” to finally “grow luminous” in his poetic system. His reading of the old nihilism of Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel, rather than Nietzsche’s new nihilism, aids the poet in his endeavor. In his last letter, written to Elizabeth Pelham on January 4, 1939, three weeks before his death, Yeats concluded:

I am happy, and I think full of an energy, an energy I had despaired of. It seems to me that I have found what I wanted. When I try to put all into a phrase I say, “Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.” I must embody it in the completion of my life. The abstract is not life and everywhere draws out its contradictions. You can refute Hegel but not the Saint or the Song of Sixpence.³⁷¹

³⁷⁰ Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, 503.

³⁷¹ Yeats, *Letters*, 922.

Yeats finally reaches the still point and achieves a satisfaction with his life and poetic vision, and this satisfaction imbues much of his late poetry. As he concludes in his “Supernatural Songs” (*Parnell’s Funeral and Other Poems*, 1935),

There all the barrel-hoops are knit,
There all the serpent-tails are bit,
There all the gyres converge in one,
There all the planets drop in the Sun.³⁷²

The circularity that characterizes this stanza is not unresolved like the circularity of “Meru” or the “widening gyre” of “The Second Coming.” Instead, the Sun acts as a stable center, and the wild gyres all find unity in the amorphous “there.” Through his mode of disaster and catastrophe, his Apollonian stabilization of the Dionysian’s chaos, Yeats finds the new center that he seeks. He finds this center in the void that the disaster of old nihilism leaves behind.

³⁷² W. B. Yeats, “Supernatural Songs,” in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997), 285.

CHAPTER V

“THEY ALL GO INTO THE DARK”: T. S. ELIOT READING NIHILISM

And if anyone assert that immediate experience, either at the beginning or end of our journey, is annihilation and utter night, I cordially agree.

—T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley*

Introduction

By the time he reached success as a poet and literary critic, T. S. Eliot had abandoned any notion of considering himself as a profound philosophical mind. In his “Scylla and Charybdis” (1952), a lecture that he delivered in Nice, France, Eliot claims that if he had turned to philosophy rather than switching to poetry, he would have attained only a modest position as a philosopher.³⁷³ Furthermore, in “To Criticize the Critic” (1965), he claims that all that was left of his years of studying philosophy was the linguistic style of three philosophers: Bradley’s English, Spinoza’s Latin, and Plato’s Greek, with no mention of philosophical influence.³⁷⁴ Despite his statements to the contrary, the poet picked up more than linguistic skills from his extensive reading of philosophy. That same year, Eliot reflects on his motive for abandoning philosophy as a discipline. Looking back on his earlier philosophical career, Eliot cited the “divorce of

³⁷³ T. S. Eliot, *Agenda: T. S. Eliot Special Issue, Including Scylla and Charybdis, a Hitherto Unpublished Lecture*, eds William Cookson and Peter Dale, *Agenda* 23, no. 1-2 (London: Agenda), 1985. 23.

³⁷⁴ T. S. Eliot, “To Criticize the Critic” in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1975. 21.

philosophy from theology” as the reason for his decision, approximately 37 years earlier, to leave philosophy behind as a viable profession.³⁷⁵ While Eliot’s view of philosophy may be bleak near the end of his career, the poet’s view of nothingness as generative and his path to conversion owe a debt to the old nihilism that he read as a Harvard graduate student.

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate Eliot’s reading of nihilism by predominantly using his early letters, prose, and doctoral dissertation to demonstrate a strong philosophical foundation. I first acknowledge Eliot’s baptism into the Church of England in 1927 and demonstrate that his faith and philosophy are not antagonistic; rather, his reading of old nihilism facilitates an eventual return to belief. I then investigate Eliot’s understanding of Friedrich Nietzsche, and while elements of the philosopher’s dramatic theory seep into Eliot’s own dramas, I show that the poet ultimately rejects Nietzschean philosophy and the bleak nihilism of *The Will to Power* (1901). I then chart Eliot’s extensive graduate school reading of Benedict de Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, each of whom posits a generative view of nothingness and a god-like figure of negation that, for Eliot, connects philosophy to faith. To more clearly reconstruct Eliot’s reading of old nihilism, I draw upon my research at Cambridge University’s Archive Centre and argue that Eliot’s view of empty space, substance, and God are indebted to the old nihilistic ideas in Spinoza’s *Ethica* (1677). Finally, I show that Eliot’s dissertation, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley*,

³⁷⁵ Manju Jain, *T. S. Eliot and American Philosophy: The Harvard Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1992. 93.

lays the epistemological foundation for the poet's formal return to belief in 1927. By incorporating Spinozan, Kantian, and Hegelian concepts of the Absolute, utter vacuity, and emotion in his project, Eliot builds a system that imagines nothingness as a space for creation. In this way, God is never "dead" for Eliot, but hidden, and his understanding of old nihilism helps Eliot find the veiled deity.

Eliot in Context: The Modern Nihil

T. S. Eliot is no stranger to existential angst, a term that philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre will develop later in the 20th-century. His tumultuous marriage with wife Vivienne is well documented and his personal insecurities surface in his poetry as existential concerns. William Irwin, for instance, cites Prufrock's "overwhelming question," never actually uttered in the poem, as receiving concrete verbalization in Sartre's *Nausea* (1938). Roquentin's own question to himself, "Can you justify your existence then? Just a little...", captures the concern driving many of Prufrock's own mantra-like questions of "Do I dare?"³⁷⁶ Although the new nihilism can be a consequence of existentialism, the two concepts are not synonymous. Prufrock, for instances, shares more qualities in common with an existentialist than a nihilist. While he muses that "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea... Till human voices wake us, and we drown," Prufrock does not actively condemn his existence; rather, he laments it. Indeed, it seems that many of his existential hang-ups would diminish or evaporate

³⁷⁶ William Irwin, "Prufrock's Question and Roquentin's Answer," *Philosophy and Literature* 33 no. 1, 2009: 185. <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.0.0041>.

entirely if he would simply “dare.”³⁷⁷ In a 1958 interview with writer Leslie Paul, however, Eliot talks explicitly about nihilism and deliberates its trajectory and longevity. It seems clear that Paul and Eliot consider nihilism in Nietzschean terms, given descriptions like “spiritual desert” that the men use to describe their topic. In response to Paul’s question of nihilism as an effective response to cultural deterioration, Eliot states, “I don’t think nihilism can be kept up indefinitely. What is the source of refreshment in nihilism? One generation can find satisfaction in expressing nihilism, but where does the next generation go on from there?”³⁷⁸ Given Eliot’s answer that nihilism is doomed to fail, his question of new nihilism’s next step does not appear rhetorical; rather, he directly criticizes the concept.

Furthermore, Eliot’s use of “refreshment” in reference to the nihilism that grips modernity is significant. By choosing this word to underscore the new nihilism’s fatal flaw, he demonstrates that nihilism itself is not necessarily ineffective or problematic. Such a mindset might function effectively for a certain amount of time, but a Nietzschean interpretation of nihilism is finite and thus a fruitless response to the modern condition. His question of “refreshment” resurfaces a few questions later, when Eliot comments on the sustainability of the new nihilism. He observes, “... Nihilism would have been impossible without the things that nihilism condemned. If the objects of nihilist attack disappear, there is nothing left. Nihilism itself disappears with them.”³⁷⁹ Eliot’s statement

³⁷⁷ T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1980. 7.

³⁷⁸ Elliot Paul, “A Conversation with T. S. Eliot,” 14.

³⁷⁹ Elliot Paul, “A Conversation with T. S. Eliot,” 14.

shows his own value construction and implies that nihilism itself depends on generative valuation for its own continued existence. Without creation, even nihilism cannot subsist.

Even though the new nihilism is difficult to detect and overcome, Eliot's interview answers hint that the poet did just that. When Paul indicates that Eliot actively sensed the new nihilism all along, the poet replies,

I never venture to interpret my own poetry, and I would hesitate to make myself a prophet. In any case, you see, the prophetic element in poetry very often is unconscious in the poet himself. He may be prophesying without knowing it. What he absorbs from the atmosphere is not altogether conscious in him.³⁸⁰

Although Eliot resists the label of “prophet,” he admits that a poet can perceive elements of the zeitgeist, even if passively and unconsciously, and then offer a written vision of his/her discernment. Through this statement, Eliot acknowledges his awareness—whether conscious or unconscious—of the new nihilistic atmosphere that hovered over modernism. This claim is further supported when Eliot mentions an essay by Gottfried Benn, a German poet who interestingly discussed the new nihilism recurrently in his essays.³⁸¹ For the poet, a poem functions as the “release” of “something inside of him that needs to come out and be shaped.”³⁸² This “something,” for Eliot, can manifest as

³⁸⁰ Elliot Paul, “A Conversation with T. S. Eliot,” 14-15.

³⁸¹ Misspelled in interview as “Godfrey Benn”; Eliot does not mention the essay by name, but it is probably a lecture entitled *Probleme der Lyrik* (1951). In this lecture, Benn argues that modern poetry is monological.

³⁸² Elliot Paul, “A Conversation with T. S. Eliot,” 15.

“the hopes or the fears, the anxiety or the faith, which he shares unconsciously with the rest of humanity or with the rest of his people.”³⁸³

Eliot’s statement implies his observance and awareness of a nihilistic atmosphere, and given that awareness, it follows that Eliot would offer a response and even resistance to Nietzschean nihilism. Eliot even notes that he wrote on a similar subject in his 1922 “Marie Lloyd” essay. Here, the poet discusses the degradation of society as it marches toward ultimate boredom. He upholds Marie Lloyd as a pinnacle of genuine artistry for the masses, and with her passing, the “working man,” will no longer attend the music hall and participate in the chorus. He will thus not become part of the performing act in a “collaboration” between artist and audience.³⁸⁴ Instead, he will venture to the cinema where his mind will be “lulled by continuous senseless music and...will receive listless apathy,” thus causing him to lose “interest in his life.”³⁸⁵ This early essay, written around the time that Eliot wrote *The Waste Land*, indicates that his view concerning nihilism remains consistent. While he does not mention nihilism by name in “Marie Lloyd,” what he describes clearly refers to Nietzschean nihilism, and this statement connects Eliot’s early acknowledgement of the problem of nihilism.

³⁸³ Elliot Paul, “A Conversation with T. S. Eliot,” 15.

³⁸⁴ T. S. Eliot, “Marie Lloyd” in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1975. 174.

³⁸⁵ T. S. Eliot, “Marie Lloyd,” 174.

Philosophy and Faith: Eliot and Anglo-Catholicism

There is no question that Eliot's faith strongly guided both his professional and personal lives.³⁸⁶ The poet's first grand public expression of his Christian faith is a familiar story. In the summer of 1926, while exploring Rome with his wife, brother, and sister-in-law, Eliot visited the Basilica of St. Peter, where he viewed the *Pietà* for the first time. What the poet did next shocked his entire family: As soon as he laid eyes on the statue, he immediately fell to his knees.³⁸⁷ When Eliot was baptized into the Church of England less than one year later in June 1927, his friends and the contemporary literary scene shared that same astonishment.³⁸⁸ As Ben Lockerd highlights, his contemporaries felt disappointed and even betrayed by Eliot's conversion because his "avant-garde poetry" represented the "herald of their modern secular worldview."³⁸⁹ Virginia Woolf sums up this sentiment in a letter to her sister where she laments, "Poor dear Tom Eliot ... may be called dead to us from this day forward."³⁹⁰

Though Eliot's conversion shocked his friends and colleagues, the poet's faith weighs heavily on his writing, and even more interestingly, his conversion was not as

³⁸⁶ My discussion of Eliot's faith is far from comprehensive. For further reading on this topic, see *T. S. Eliot and Christian Tradition* by Benjamin Lockerd (2014); *Anglo-Catholic in Religion: T. S. Eliot and Christianity* by Spurr (2010); and *Eliot's Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art* by Ron Schuchard (1999).

³⁸⁷ Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: Norton), 1999. 192.

³⁸⁸ Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, 192.

³⁸⁹ Benjamin Lockerd, "Introduction," in *T. S. Eliot and Christian Tradition*, ed. Benjamin Lockerd (Lanham: Fairleigh Dickinson), 2014. 1.

³⁹⁰ Quoted from Kevin Dettmar in "An Occupation of the Saint: Eliot as Religious Thinker. *A Companion to T. S. Eliot*. Ed. David Chintiz. Blackwell 2009. 363. As Ben Lockerd notes, however, Woolf and Eliot remained friends after his conversion.

sudden as his friends and family presumed.³⁹¹ Barry Spurr, for instance, calls Eliot's conversion in 1927 the "culmination of his intellectual, cultural, artistic, spiritual and personal development to that point."³⁹² The seeds of this "culmination" were planted in his early childhood, as Spurr highlights, when the young Eliot would accompany Annie Dunn to church services. Eliot recalled these memories with fondness years later, where he reminisces, "she sometimes took me into the local Catholic Church when she went to say her prayers, and I liked it very much: the lights, the coloured statues and paper flowers, the lived-in atmosphere, and the fact that the pews had little gates that I could swing on."³⁹³ For Spurr, these whimsical childhood experiences helped lay the foundation for Eliot's conversion, which Eliot himself supports through his statement that a writer's art "must be based on the accumulated sensations of the first twenty-one years."³⁹⁴

While Eliot's early experiences with Christianity were instrumental to his conversion, his study of philosophy proved to be just as important. His graduate learning of philosophical systems at Harvard from 1909-1914, as Spurr argues, perhaps even more strongly led Eliot toward a path of faith and Anglo-Catholicism.³⁹⁵ Irving Babbitt's defense of classicism and Josiah Royce's "organic nature of the Christian community,"

³⁹¹ Benjamin Lockerd, "Introduction," 1.

³⁹² Barry Spurr, *Anglo-Catholic in Religion: T. S. Eliot and Christianity* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press), 2010. 10.

³⁹³ Barry Spurr, *Anglo-Catholic in Religion: T. S. Eliot and Christianity*, 10.

³⁹⁴ Barry Spurr, *Anglo-Catholic in Religion: T. S. Eliot and Christianity*, 10-11.

³⁹⁵ Barry Spurr, *Anglo-Catholic in Religion: T. S. Eliot and Christianity*, 16.

for instance, shaped Eliot's worldview for years to come.³⁹⁶ For Manju Jain, Eliot's "serious concern [was] with the whole question of the foundation of religious belief and its place in a scientific, secular society," and in Royce's seminars, the poet found an instigator of questions that would trouble his mind for years to come.³⁹⁷ Eliot's connection of philosophy to faith becomes even more clear in his 1917 unsigned review of Peter Coffey's *Epistemology* in *The New Statesman*. Here, the poet contends that the Catholic Church is "the only Church which can even pretend to maintain a philosophy of its own."³⁹⁸

Given his early study of philosophy, the argument that Eliot's conversion began as an intellectual and philosophical pursuit is neither surprising nor new. As Lockerd notes, many critics have refused to acknowledge Eliot's belief as genuine, and these same critics are equally as reluctant to see the poet's faith as an influence on his writing.³⁹⁹ Such criticism, however, evidently neglects to consider an entire facet of Eliot's worldview, which is a grave oversight. My intent is thus to show that philosophy and faith need not be mutually exclusive, and that Eliot is an example of this. Although his work is perhaps the definitive exercise on Eliot's faith, Spurr does not mention Spinoza, Kant, or Hegel as potential philosophical influences that lead to Eliot's conversion and

³⁹⁶ Barry Spurr, *Anglo-Catholic in Religion: T. S. Eliot and Christianity*, 17.

³⁹⁷ Manju Jain, *T. S. Eliot and American Philosophy*, 114.

³⁹⁸ T. S. Eliot, "Unsigned Review," in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Apprentice Years, 1905–1918*, eds. Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press and Faber & Faber Ltd), 2014. 623.

³⁹⁹ For examples of such an argument, see William Skaff's *The Philosophy of T. S. Eliot* (1986) and C.K. Stead's *Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement* (1986).

shape his consideration of generative nothingness. However, my intent is to show how his specific reading of old nihilism both facilitated this return to belief and shaped his conception of God. Both of these outcomes allowed the poet to resist the new nihilism in favor of a generative view of nothingness and divinity.

The Philosopher-turned-Poet and Poet-Philosopher: Eliot Reading Nietzsche

Perhaps it is Eliot's reading of old nihilism, his generative view of nothingness, and latent faith that allows him to apparently so easily dismiss Nietzsche and resist the new nihilism. Although the philosopher's dramatic theory hovers in the background of Eliot's plays, Eliot ultimately views Nietzsche and by extension his nihilism as unremarkable. In the introduction to Charlotte Eliot's drama *Savonarola* (1926), Eliot passively calls Nietzschean philosophy "a chaotic and immature intellectualism of the later nineteenth century," but his disapproval of Nietzschean philosophy begins at a much earlier age.⁴⁰⁰ By 1909, a young Eliot had discovered the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche for the first time through his reading of James Huneker's *Egoists: A Book of Supermen*. Between that year and 1916, he had several opportunities to read and learn about Nietzschean existentialism through different media and environments. Eliot took courses while a student at Harvard that examined Nietzsche's philosophy, with Royce's lectures being the most instrumental; he also studied abroad in Germany on a traveling

⁴⁰⁰ T. S. Eliot, Introduction to *Savonarola: A Dramatic Poem* by Charlotte Eliot (London: R. Cobden-Sanderson), 1926. 4.

scholarship in 1914 where he no doubt encountered Nietzschean philosophy.⁴⁰¹

Furthermore, as he wrote to his mother in 1915, Eliot had already read some Nietzsche and planned to read more: “As for the book on Nietzsche [most likely Abraham Wolf’s *Philosophy of Nietzsche*], I have finished it, and now am reading some of Nietzsche’s works which I had not read before, and which I ought to read anyhow before my examinations.”⁴⁰²

Early in his studies, Eliot reviewed Huneker’s *Egoists: A Book of Supermen* (1909) for *The Harvard Advocate* in 1909, which marks Eliot’s first encounter with a text that directly examines Nietzsche’s philosophy.⁴⁰³ The review is short, equaling about one page of prose because, as Eliot states, “except in a detailed review, analysis of any of the articles which make up this book would be impossible.”⁴⁰⁴ Huneker, an American literary, art, and music critic, published his book in 1909. It includes a series of essays

⁴⁰¹ Royce was one of the first American philosophers to recognize the important challenge of Nietzsche’s moral vision, which celebrates those individuals who seek to exercise their autonomous will to a “socially idealized” power. Such heroic individualism, also associated with Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William James, proves unsatisfactory in Royce’s view.

⁴⁰² T. S. Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, vol. I, eds. Valerie Eliot, Hugh Haughton, John Haffenden (New Haven: Yale University Press), 2011. 132.

⁴⁰³ Also included in Huneker’s *Egoists* are Stendhal, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Anatole France, Huysmans, Barres, Blake, Ibsen, Stirner, and Ernest Hello. Considering that Huneker doesn’t investigate only philosophers in this book, it is important to consider Nietzsche in the context of these other thinkers. The connection, rather than being strictly philosophical, appears to be their advocacy for individualism rather than collectivism. In his review, Eliot states that these men are “highly individual, some of perverse and lunary, genius.”

⁴⁰⁴ T. S. Eliot, “A Review of *Egoists, A Book of Supermen*, by James Huneker,” in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Apprentice Years, 1905–1918*, eds. Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press and Faber & Faber Ltd), 2014. 24.

that he previously published in an assortment of literary magazines.⁴⁰⁵ Since Eliot initially encountered Nietzschean philosophy through this book, it is possible that Huneker's portrayal of Nietzsche informed the way Eliot would consider Nietzsche as a philosopher in general, and thus shape his attitude toward the new nihilism. The language that Huneker uses to characterize Nietzsche's temperament is rather unfavorable. He portrays Nietzsche as a "delicate" man who was "more of a poet than an original thinker" and a man possessing a "morbidly introspective Hamlet temper."⁴⁰⁶ Furthermore, Huneker reduces Nietzsche's philosophy to something "negligible," and casts *The Will to Power* as having "resolved itself to the Will to Suffer." He declares:

Compared to [Nietzsche], Schopenhauer's pessimism is the good-natured grumbling of a healthy, witty man with a tremendous vital temperament...Headache, eye trouble, and weak stomach, coupled with his abuse of intellectual work...colored his philosophy. The personal bias was inescapable, and this bias favoured sickness, not health...His famous injunction 'Be hard!' was meant for his own unhappy soul, ever nearing...the abyss of black melancholy.⁴⁰⁷

Huneker's argument essentially reduces the *Will to Power* to the despondent grievances of a wounded man, an attitude that drains the philosophical significance from the text that introduced a new nihilism to literary modernism. Furthermore, since this book was likely Eliot's first encounter with Nietzsche, Huneker's rendering of *The Will to Power* aligns with a thread in Eliot's poetry that opposes this "will to" and even exhibits a preference

⁴⁰⁵ *Scribner's Magazine*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *North American Review*, the *New York Times*, and the *New York Sun*.

⁴⁰⁶ James Huneker, *Egoists: A Book of Supermen: Stendhal, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Anatole France, Huysmans, Barrès, Nietzsche, Blake, Ibsen, Stirner, and Ernest Hello* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 1909. 238; 240-241.

⁴⁰⁷ James Huneker, *Egoists*, 239-240.

for suffering for the sake of atonement. Even in poems like “The Burnt Dancer” and *Ash Wednesday* where suffering plays a key role, Eliot casts such actions in a penitent light in which purgation will eventually generate something, even if that something has not yet occurred.

Despite his negative tone concerning Nietzsche’s philosophy, Huneker acknowledges that his ideas are frequently distorted. He recognizes that authors, critics, and even other philosophers misappropriate and misunderstand Nietzsche’s philosophy. Concerning this distortion, Huneker claims:

Nietzsche has become the bugaboo of timid folk...Thanks to the conception of some writers, Nietzsche and the Nietzscheans are gigantic brutes, a combination of Genghis Khan and Bismark, terrifying apparitions wearing mustachios like yataghans, eyes rolling in frenzy, with a philosophy that ranged from pitch-and-toss to manslaughter and with a consuming atheism as a side attraction.⁴⁰⁸

This wild description of the way Nietzschean philosophy is understood and represented by contemporaries lends itself heavily to a nihilistic atmosphere characterized by frenzy and godlessness, whether or not that was Nietzsche’s intent. Despite this acknowledgement, Huneker’s overall characterization of Nietzschean philosophy casts the thinker in a negative light, and Eliot did not indicate that Nietzsche acted as a positive influence on his poetry or outlook. The point that Eliot awarded Huneker’s book an affirmative review suggests that Eliot perhaps at least passively agreed with Huneker’s

⁴⁰⁸ James Huneker, *Egoists*, 256.

appraisal of Nietzsche's philosophy, a mindset that continues in a later review of a Nietzschean-based text.⁴⁰⁹

Eliot's 1916 review of Abraham Wolf's *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (1915) supports the argument that Huneker's book noticeably influenced the poet's view of Nietzschean philosophy. In his review, Eliot claims that "Nietzsche is one of those writers whose philosophy evaporates when detached from its literary qualities," which indicates that he regarded Nietzsche as more of a "literary than philosophical mind."⁴¹⁰ Through this statement, Eliot's demonstrates an even more disapproving valuation of Nietzsche than in his *Egoists* review. In Wolf's words, the book serves as an introduction to Nietzsche's thought and is derived from the substance of a course of three lectures delivered by Wolf at the University of London, University College in February 1915.⁴¹¹ It is a study that provides a wide and succinct summary of the key elements in Nietzsche's writings, though Wolf himself admits that he provides "broad outlines" of Nietzsche's philosophy rather than extensive analysis or criticism. Because of its introductory ethos, Eliot calls the book "slight and unsatisfactory," neither a guide for beginners nor an extensive study for advanced Nietzsche scholars, in a letter to his mother.⁴¹² Given the

⁴⁰⁹ In his review of Huneker's book, Eliot states that "Few critics are possessed of so much erudition, yet there are few so determined to consider subjects only of the most modern interest," and he called Huneker "far too alert to be an American."

⁴¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, "A Review of The Philosophy of Nietzsche, by A. Wolf" in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Apprentice Years, 1905–1918*, eds. Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press and Faber & Faber Ltd), 2014. 401.

⁴¹¹ Abraham Wolf, *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 7.

⁴¹² Abraham Wolf, *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* (London: Constable), 1915. 32; T. S. Eliot, *Letters Vol. I*, 132.

way Wolf situates Nietzsche as a philosophical mind, however, it is perhaps not surprising that Eliot criticizes Nietzsche's talent as a philosopher in his review.

Like Huneker, Wolf questions Nietzsche's importance vis a vi the "history of philosophy" and questions his uniqueness and adeptness at postulating astute arguments and concepts. According to Wolf, as a philosopher, Nietzsche "felt profound discontent with the current conceptions of human life and history."⁴¹³ While he does not argue that Nietzsche's philosophy ought to be treated as "mad extravagances" and "ominous forebodings of the tragic mind that eventually overtook him" as some critics might be inclined to say, Wolf's critical tone regarding followers of Nietzschean philosophy is especially biting. He declares that a Nietzschean views his namesake's writings with "extraordinary originality" only because he is "unfamiliar with the history of philosophy," a statement that undermines both Nietzsche as well as supporters of his philosophy.⁴¹⁴ Despite the triteness of Nietzsche's own philosophy, Wolf does grant that he demonstrates originality in positioning the material of past philosophers and providing nuanced views of their work. Considering this, Eliot's criticism that Nietzsche appears more like a literary mind than a philosophical one could be influenced by Wolf's statement.

Despite the poet's written disapproval of the philosopher, Eliot's relationship with Nietzsche's philosophy is on one hand almost nonexistent, but on the other hand, rather palpable. As Rafey Habib asserts, connecting Eliot's study of philosophy to its influence

⁴¹³ Abraham Wolf, *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 32.

⁴¹⁴ Abraham Wolf, *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 28.

on his texts requires that one first understand the philosophical concepts on their own terms.⁴¹⁵ While Eliot seems to reject Nietzsche as a philosophical mind, the philosopher's dramatic theory outlined in *The Birth of Tragedy* appears to inspire Eliot's own poetic drama in his later plays. As Linda Leavell argues, if not for Eliot's use of Apollonian and Dionysian refrains in his plays, his connection with Nietzsche would be "more tenuous."⁴¹⁶ An investigation of their dramatic theories, however, shows that social harmony is missing from modern society, a concord that needs underlying "myth" in order to exist.⁴¹⁷ For Leavell, this is an idea that Eliot chases before his conversion through *The Waste Land* (1922) and afterwards via *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) and *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* (1948).⁴¹⁸

The idea of tragedy is integral to both Eliot and Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, Socrates signifies Greek self-indulgence and departure from myth, a current that ought to be resisted in contemporary society. To resolve this loss and navigate back to the right stream, Nietzsche suggests a backwards move to tragedy.⁴¹⁹ By putting his poetry on the wide-reaching stage, Eliot indirectly accepts the social mission of Nietzsche's

⁴¹⁵ Rafey Habib, *The Early T. S. Eliot and Western Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 1999.

⁴¹⁶ Linda Leavell, "Nietzsche's Theory of Tragedy in the Plays of T. S. Eliot," *Twentieth Century Literature* 31, no. 1 (1985): 119. <https://doi.org/10.2307/441224>.

⁴¹⁷ Linda Leavell, "Nietzsche's Theory of Tragedy," 113.

⁴¹⁸ Linda Leavell, "Nietzsche's Theory of Tragedy," 113.

⁴¹⁹ In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche declares, "Yes, my friends, join me in my faith in this Dionysiac life and the rebirth of tragedy. The age of Socratic man is past: crown yourselves with ivy, grasp the thyrsus and do not be amazed if tigers and panthers lie down fawning at your feet. Now dare to be tragic men, for you will be redeemed. You shall join the Dionysiac procession from India to Greece! Gird yourselves for a hard battle, but have faith in the miracles of your god!"

challenge.⁴²⁰ This potential Nietzschean influence on Eliot's outlook highlights the necessity of myth in each of their approaches if a cultural amalgamation is to be reached. As Leavell remarks, Nietzsche's myth, while not a call for unity through Christian values, nevertheless functions as an integral piece to achieving cultural unity. She quotes Nietzsche from *The Birth of Tragedy*:

Every culture that has lost myth has lost, by the same token, its natural healthy creativity. Only a horizon ringed about with myths can unify a culture. The forces of imagination and the Apollonian dream are saved only by myth from indiscriminate rambling. The images of myth must be the daemonic guardians, ubiquitous but unnoticed, presiding over the growth of the child's mind and interpreting to the mature man his life and struggles.⁴²¹

Leavell's question of whether Eliot had Nietzsche's statement in mind when characterizing the Guardians from *The Cocktail Party* is perceptive and can be answered in the affirmative. Even if Eliot did not have Nietzsche's statement directly in mind, its spirit is represented through the Guardians, without whom, as Vinod Sena observes, the play would "be reduced to nothing."⁴²² As the ubiquitous forces who further the myth and goal of a unified culture, the Guardians "stage-manage" and "pronounce" the play's actions by condensing life's trajectory to two possible directions. These directions demonstrate that one path remains superior to the other insufficient avenue.⁴²³ Despite these similarities in dramatic method, however, Nietzsche's philosophical effect on Eliot

⁴²⁰ Linda Leavell, "Nietzsche's Theory of Tragedy in the Plays of T. S. Eliot," 113.

⁴²¹ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 136-137.

⁴²² Vinod Sena, "The Ambivalence of The Cocktail Party," *Modern Drama* 14, no. 4 (1971): 397. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.1971.0061>.

⁴²³ Vinod Sena, "The Ambivalence of The Cocktail Party," 397.

still appears rather limited and as his interview with Leslie Paul implies Eliot's interaction with Nietzschean nihilism is an understatedly objecting.

Eliot also appears to glean a theoretical rather than philosophical influence from Nietzsche. Gesturing toward the theoretical influence, F.N. Lees notes a possible antecedent to Eliot's objective correlative in *The Birth of Tragedy*. He cites the following passage as evidence:

...we must admit that the import of tragic myth... never became transparent with sufficient lucidity to the Greek poets, let alone the Greek philosophers; their heroes speak...more superficially than they act; the myth does not at all find its adequate objectification [translated from the German *adäquate Objectivation*]. The structure of the scenes and the conspicuous images reveal a deeper wisdom than the poet himself can put into words and concepts.⁴²⁴

The language that Eliot uses to define the objective correlative in "Hamlet and His Problems" (1919) shares similarities with Nietzsche's statement. Specifically, Eliot's "set of objects" and "chain of events" that act as a "formula for a particular emotion" similarly reflect Nietzsche's "scene structure" and "conspicuous images" that expose an intense insight. The connection becomes more palpable, as Lees indicates, through Nietzsche's discussion of Hamlet's pitfalls immediately following the above quote and if Francis Golffing's translation of *adäquate Objectivation* as "objective correlative" is considered.⁴²⁵

⁴²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2000. 91.

⁴²⁵ F. N. Lees, "T. S. Eliot and Nietzsche," *Notes & Queries* 209 (1964): 387.

Eliot's understanding of metaphysical perceptions also aligns with Nietzsche's on certain occasions. For instance, when considering order and reality, Nietzsche contends that "appearance is an arranged and simplified world, at which our practical instincts have been at work."⁴²⁶ Eliot seems to take a similar stance; that is, his criterion for reality lies ultimately in social practice.⁴²⁷ More striking still is Eliot's statement that practical reality as a "system of relations," a consideration that closely mirrors Nietzsche's idea that "the world of appearance is essentially a world of relationships" whose "being is essentially different from every point."⁴²⁸ Finally, perhaps the most potent of these similarities concerns the "viewing of reality as comprising the identical references of various points of view."⁴²⁹ Nietzsche states that "the world of 'phenomena' is the adapted world which we feel to be real. The 'reality' lies in the continual recurrence of identical, familiar, related things in their logicized order."⁴³⁰

Eliot takes more linguistic cues from Nietzsche in his dissertation. As Habib highlights, Eliot echoes Nietzsche's language in several sections of the project, an observation that widens the overlap between these two thinkers.⁴³¹ Furthermore, Jewel

⁴²⁶ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 477.

⁴²⁷ Rafey Habib, *The Early T. S. Eliot and Western Philosophy*, 146.

⁴²⁸ Rafey Habib, *The Early T. S. Eliot and Western Philosophy*, 146; Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 568.

⁴²⁹ Rafey Habib, *The Early T. S. Eliot and Western Philosophy*, 146.

⁴³⁰ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 306-307.

⁴³¹ For instance, in his dissertation's third chapter, Eliot argues that "psychic phenomena have no laws. For intentionally, their relations among themselves are determined only by the real world from the point of view of the subject, and externally by the real world from the somebody else's point of view. This language is similar to Nietzsche's statement in *The Will to Power* that "the world of phenomena is the adapted world which we feel to be

Spears Brooker notes that Eliot's view of history, the notion that history involves a perception not only of the "pastness of the past, but of its presence" and it is "a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional" derives from Nietzsche's meditation on the subject.⁴³² Despite areas of intersection and concession, however, Eliot never admits to fully accepting Nietzsche as more than a middling thinker whose literary talents outweigh his arguments on common weighty philosophical issues. This lack of influence, though, is significant because it serves to further exhibit Eliot's adoption of an old interaction with nihilism rather than one informed by Nietzsche's *Will to Power*, a rejection that manifests even in his early poetry given the way that Eliot positions the subject of madness.

Eliot challenges Nietzschean nihilistic madness in "Prufrock's Pervigilium" (1912), an omitted section of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) that Eliot most likely copied into his *March Hare* notebook around 1912.⁴³³ In these excluded lines, the speaker first closely connects madness to "A blind old drunken man who sings and mutters, / With broken boot heels stained in many gutters" whose singing coincides with

real. The reality lies in the continual occurrence of identical, familiar, related things in their logicized manner."

⁴³² T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent.," While this is a worthy observation, it is prudent to acknowledge that Nietzsche's view of history was closely inspired by that of Hegel, who perhaps developed the subject of a philosophical theory of history more thoroughly than any other philosopher. Indeed, Eliot read Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* while at Harvard, and his philosophy is one that shaped Eliot's adoption of an old response to nihilism.

⁴³³ Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, 66.

the “world fall[ing] apart.”⁴³⁴ Here, madness is dissonant: he is inebriated and dirty, his singing is subverted by senseless muttering, his boots are useless because they are damaged, and he is blind, a stark contrast to Tiresias of *The Waste Land* who may be blind, but possesses a prophetic sight and understanding that can reveal a type of resolution. Overall, though, madness here is forlornly ineffectual, which coincides with the decay of modern society. This fragmented image of madness incarnate leads to Prufrock’s first-person account of despair. He declares:

I have seen the darkness creep along the wall
I have heard my Madness chatter before day
I have seen the world roll up into a ball
Then suddenly dissolve and fall away.⁴³⁵

The repetition of “I have” followed by “seen or heard” imbues Prufrock with an air of clairvoyance, even if he does not actually possess prophetic insight. Although Prufrock’s description of his vision appears rather bleak, it does not entirely vanish into a nihilistic abyss; instead, Eliot’s language evokes a reduction of the subject to nothingness, a metaphysical exercise that aims to produce order rather than chaos.

The madness that Prufrock perceives in these lines is used to reveal something, even if he cannot yet perceive that “something.” It is worth noting that, even though he perhaps did so under the direction of Conrad Aiken, Eliot chose to omit the only lines in “Prufrock” that explicitly address “madness” by name from the poem’s final draft. He

⁴³⁴ T. S. Eliot, “Prufrock’s Pervigilium,” in *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems, 1909-1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (San Diego: Harcourt Brace), 1998. 44.

⁴³⁵ T. S. Eliot, “Prufrock’s Pervigilium,” 45.

does, however, retain the spirit of the line concerning the world “rolled up into a ball” and renders it as “Would it have been worth while... / To have squeezed the universe into a ball / To roll it towards some overwhelming question.”⁴³⁶ As David Spurr suggests, “squeezing the universe into a ball would counteract the world’s tendency to fall apart and to spread itself out like yellow fog.”⁴³⁷ While the explicit madness departs from the poem, the “squeezing” that offsets it remains intact, which adds to Eliot’s early and overall disinclination to accept Nietzschean nihilism as an acceptable philosophical reality.

Something from Nothing: Eliot Reading Spinoza

While the veil of Nietzsche may linger over Eliot’s dramatic theory and their views of reality nearly intersect at certain points, Eliot dismisses Nietzsche as an unexceptional philosophical mind. This dismissal coupled with Eliot’s faith in value systems, even as a young poet, suggests that he adopts a stance on nihilism that aligns closely with philosophers that he admired and read meticulously as a student of philosophy rather than a Nietzschean conception. Interestingly, Eliot likely read Spinoza and Nietzsche contemporaneously since he studied both of their texts while a graduate student at Harvard. Spinoza’s philosophy, however, captures Eliot’s engagement with modern nihilism, a reaction that deviates from the Nietzschean casting of the abyss and nothingness. It is clear that Eliot was especially familiar with Spinoza’s work; he

⁴³⁶ T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” 6.

⁴³⁷ David Spurr, *Conflicts in Consciousness: T. S. Eliot’s Poetry and Criticism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 1984. 9.

references Spinoza in his early prose writings such as in “The Development of Leibniz’s Monadism” published in *The Monist* in 1916 as well as a review of Wolf’s biography of Spinoza in 1927.⁴³⁸ This extensive time span shows that Eliot’s interest in Spinoza continues at least through the middle of his career. Unlike the disapproving words that Eliot wrote in his Nietzsche reviews, he showered Spinoza with overwhelming praise. In his review of Spinoza’s biography, Eliot labels Spinoza “a man of the greatest reticence, but with nothing to conceal; a man of intensely “private life,” but wholly transparent” as well as “unquestionably a hero” and “a symbolic hero of modern Europe.”⁴³⁹

While Eliot’s view of new nihilism seems clear, I wanted to gain a more intimate understanding of Eliot’s grasp on *old* nihilism. So, while at the King’s College Archive Center, I dusted off Eliot’s 1895 copy of Spinoza’s *Opera*, a book that he likely purchased as a graduate student and perhaps even earlier. His edition the *Opera* contains three different treatises, but my interest rested in the philosopher’s magnum opus: the *Ethica* (1677).⁴⁴⁰ In this five-part treatise, Spinoza intends to demonstrate the truth about God, nature, and human existence as well as the chief ideologies of humanity, religion

⁴³⁸ In “The Development of Leibniz’s Monadism,” Eliot uses Spinoza’s philosophy as a point of comparison with that of Leibniz. While Spinoza’s philosophy argues that there is only one substance in the universe, Leibniz argued that there are an infinite number of monads (“units”), created and maintained in existence by God. This is outlined in his treatise *The Monadology*.

⁴³⁹ T. S. Eliot, “Spinoza. An unsigned review of The Oldest Biography of Spinoza, ed. A. Wolf” in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Literature, Politics, Belief, 1927–1929*, eds. Frances Dickey, Jennifer Formichelli and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 2015. 56.

⁴⁴⁰ Eliot’s copy of the *Opera* is written in Latin. All translations come from the following edition: Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. W.H. White (Wordsworth Editions Limited: Ware), 2001.

and the “good life.” Given the frequency of Eliot’s annotations, however, he showed most interest in Parts I and II: “Of God” and “Of the Mind,” respectively. These sections contain frequent underlining, blocking, and marginalia, a pattern that demonstrates what struck Eliot as the essential components of Spinoza’s system: God, substance, negation, and existence.⁴⁴¹ These components also correspond with Kant’s, Hegel’s and Spinoza’s formulations of nihilism, which see the void of creative potential in negativity where new nihilism perceives an abyss of fruitlessness. Eliot understands the complexity of Spinoza’s philosophy, and he declares in his review of the philosopher’s biography that “few people have mastered the *Ethics*.”⁴⁴² In a marginal comment on the book’s title page, Eliot scribbles in near-illegible French, “Spinoza is difficult...[his] concept of God is difficult [to understand]”⁴⁴³ Difficulty aside, my investigation of Eliot’s notes and scrawls reveal his solid grasp of Spinoza’s nihilism.

For Spinoza, the One Substance is an infinite, god-like entity of pure negation, and Eliot’s notes show that he recognizes its properties. The first indication of his understanding occurs in Proposition VIII of Part I. In this proposition, Spinoza argues that “every substance is necessarily infinite,” but since “we cannot infer the existence of several substances ... it follows that there is only one substance of the same nature.”⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴¹ Benedictus de Spinoza, *Opera*, 1895, MS-HB, Box B, Folder 27, The Hayward Bequest, King’s College Archive Centre, Cambridge, England.

⁴⁴² T. S. Eliot, “Spinoza,” 56.

⁴⁴³ Benedictus de Spinoza, *Opera*, 1895, MS-HB, Box B, Folder 27, The Hayward Bequest, King’s College Archive Centre, Cambridge, England.

⁴⁴⁴ Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. W.H. White (Wordsworth Editions Limited: Ware), 2001. 6.

Eliot's annotation directly below this proposition shows him actively deciphering this riddle; he concludes, "If limited by another substance of the same nature, it would coincide with that substance & therefore not be limited; and it cannot be limited by a subs. of a different nature."⁴⁴⁵ Thus, substance cannot be limited. Next, Eliot blocks off the following phrase in Proposition X: "Each particular attribute of the *one substance* [my emphasis] must be conceived through itself."⁴⁴⁶ This is Eliot's only mark on this page and it is one of only a few places that Spinoza mentions the One Substance by name. For Spinoza, all things flow back into the One Substance, and Eliot's underlining indicates that he understands this idea's magnitude and it interests him.

Eliot's notes also establish his interest in Spinoza's generative negation, a core facet of the philosopher's nihilism. Under the first note to Proposition VIII, "every substance is necessarily infinite," Eliot scribbled the phrase "all determination is negation," quotes included.⁴⁴⁷ This phrase comes directly from Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1837), a text that Eliot also read in detail, where Hegel paraphrases one of Spinoza's key ideas: his meditation on substance. To claim a thing *is* something is to simultaneously say it is *not* many other things. This negative approach to "determination" permeates Eliot's poetry as well as his dissertation, and it enables him to see nothingness as plentiful.

⁴⁴⁵ Benedictus de Spinoza, *Opera*, 1895, MS-HB, Box B, Folder 27, The Hayward Bequest, King's College Archive Centre, Cambridge, England.

⁴⁴⁶ Benedictus de Spinoza, *Opera*, 1895, MS-HB, Box B, Folder 27, The Hayward Bequest, King's College Archive Centre, Cambridge, England.

⁴⁴⁷ Benedictus de Spinoza, *Opera*, 1895, MS-HB, Box B, Folder 27, The Hayward Bequest, King's College Archive Centre, Cambridge, England.

While Eliot pays close attention to Spinoza's negation, he also shows an interest in the philosopher's view of divinity. In Proposition XV, Spinoza meditates on his idea of God. Eliot blocks off the phrase "without God, nothing can be or be conceived"⁴⁴⁸ If we consider that God and substance are interchangeable for Spinoza, we see Eliot making a connection between the One Substance, an entity of infinite generative negativity, and existence itself. That is, without the infinitely negative One Substance, nothing can exist. In Spinoza's note to that same proposition, Eliot rather emphatically underlined the phrase "qui negant dari vacuum," roughly translated as "Those who deny the existence of a vacuum."⁴⁴⁹ In this note, Spinoza denies that an unredeemable abyss of absolute nothingness, or a "vacuum," can possibly exist. He declares, "...there does not exist a vacuum in nature...but all parts are bound to come together to prevent it, it follows from this that the parts cannot really be distinguished, and that extended substance in so far as it is substance cannot be divided."⁴⁵⁰ For Spinoza, complete nothingness cannot possibly exist; indeed, such a thing is unnatural. It is this divine presence that guides Eliot late into his career, including in the *Four Quartets*.

Eliot's interpretation of Spinoza's "all determination is negation" maxim reflects a trend in his writing that identifies nothingness as holding the capacity for creation, a disposition that starkly contrasts with Nietzschean nothingness. Indeed, as Altizer claims,

⁴⁴⁸ Benedictus de Spinoza, *Opera*, 1895, MS-HB, Box B, Folder 27, The Hayward Bequest, King's College Archive Centre, Cambridge, England.

⁴⁴⁹ Benedictus de Spinoza, *Opera*, 1895, MS-HB, Box B, Folder 27, The Hayward Bequest, King's College Archive Centre, Cambridge, England.

⁴⁵⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 17.

rather than the One Substance existing as complete nothingness, Spinoza is instead one of the only modern philosophers who does not succumb to the “nihil,” the complete abyss, and instead aims to “deconstruct a uniquely modern nothingness.”⁴⁵¹ He argues that Spinoza, rather than maintaining an abyss filled with nothing, removes the “negativity of nothingness” and that he “renders it as divine plenitude.” If so, this seems to concur with the “very logic of nihilism,” which is to condense the “something into metaphysically nothing and to attempt to have the nothing perform as something.”⁴⁵² To extrapolate further, it appears that Spinoza’s brand of nihilism discussed in the *Ethics* interprets the void and nothingness as having the potential for promoting an Apollonian order that contrasts with Nietzsche’s Dionysian chaos instigated by nihilistic tendencies. Given Eliot’s reading of Spinoza, it seems fitting that Eliot incorporates images of the abyss that align with his philosophical concepts in an effort to keep the Nietzschean, Dionysian abyss at bay and at a distance.

Reason and the Absolute: Eliot Reading Kant

The connection that Eliot sees between philosophy and faith is even more clear in his thoughts on Kant. Like Nietzsche’s and Spinoza’s philosophies, Eliot also encountered Kant’s philosophy as a student at Harvard. However, unlike Nietzsche and Spinoza, Eliot studied and wrote extensive commentary on Kant’s philosophy, metaphysics, ethics, and conception of God. Eliot took a graduate seminar with Charles Montague Bakewell on Kant while at Harvard, and the assigned text was *The Philosophy*

⁴⁵¹ Altizer, *Godhead and Nothing*, 119-120.

⁴⁵² Altizer, *Godhead and Nothing*, 139.

of Kant as Contained in Extracts from his Own Writings (1908).⁴⁵³ This book contains selections from each of Kant's three *Critiques*—*Pure Reason*, *Practical Reason*, and *Judgment*—and Eliot wrote frequent annotations throughout the text. In his 1913 papers written for his seminar with Charles Montague, he wrote three papers that interrogate Kant's philosophy and show the poet beginning to consider Kant's nihilism. This consideration is evident in "Report on the Relation of Kant's Criticism to Agnosticism," where Eliot asserts that "experience is by definition essentially relative; for it is a complex relation so organic that, taken as a whole, no element can be separated or wholly distinguished from the rest." Here, Eliot's idea of an all-encompassing experience indicates the notion of an equalizing nihil.⁴⁵⁴

Through his reading of Kant's nihilism, we see a clear connection between philosophy and faith. This same essay shows, as Brooker observes, Eliot's emphasis on faith as an "element in epistemology."⁴⁵⁵ Eliot declares, "in order to know, we must begin with faith, that is to say, the conception of an external relation, a real which is outside of ourselves."⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵³ "Philosophy 15: The Kantian Philosophy," Harvard University, Spring 1913.

⁴⁵⁴ T. S. Eliot, "Report on the Relation of Kant's Criticism to Agnosticism," in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Apprentice Years, 1905–1918*, eds. Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press and Faber & Faber Ltd), 2014. 42.

⁴⁵⁵ Jewel Spears Brooker, *T. S. Eliot's Dialectical Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 2018. 55.

⁴⁵⁶ T. S. Eliot, "Report on the Relation of Kant's Criticism to Agnosticism," 45; Eliot elaborates on this connection in his 1914 essay "The Validity of Artificial Distinctions" where he declares, "You not only cannot prove your result; you cannot within the rights of your own conscience impose it upon your neighbour. It can only be maintained by

Similarly to his reading of Spinoza's nihilism, Eliot also considers Kant's depiction of God as an ultimately negating, ultimate reality:

...we have assurance of God's existence, only by mercilessly plucking him of all the qualities which constitute a God, and reducing him to a mere term; whether God or not, it is all one. And I cannot see that our "pure practical" knowledge of such a God differs at all from our speculative assumption of noumena "behind" physical existence, except in so far as we assign priority to the material order.⁴⁵⁷

Here, Eliot equates Kant's God to a noumenon—a thing that exists independently from human perception. Kant uses "Absolute" and "God" rather synonymously; the Absolute is by definition unknowable, but it nevertheless drives existence. As Jain articulates, Eliot's conclusion concerning Kant's God and Absolute is that the entity exists as a "state of nothingness."⁴⁵⁸ This inference is clear in his "Report on the Ethics of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*" where Eliot casts Kant's God as "quite as real as anything else! Not this God or that God—but at any moment some God."⁴⁵⁹ He continues "All ethical questions, and the existence of God, and freedom, depend ultimately on a vague entity (felt rather than seen) known variously as common sense, or faith, or response to environment; but surely not determinable."⁴⁶⁰ In Eliot's eyes, Kant's God resembles a guiding presence rather than a paternalistic, omnipresent, omnipotent entity. That this

faith, a faith which, like all faith, should be seasoned with a skilful [sic] sauce of scepticism [sic]. And scepticism [sic] too is a faith, a high and difficult one."

⁴⁵⁷ T. S. Eliot, "Report on the Relation of Kant's Criticism to Agnosticism," 52.

⁴⁵⁸ Manju Jain, *T. S. Eliot and American Philosophy*, 209.

⁴⁵⁹ T. S. Eliot, "Report on the Ethics of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*," in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Apprentice Years, 1905–1918*, eds. Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press and Faber & Faber Ltd), 2014. 53.

⁴⁶⁰ T. S. Eliot, "Report on the Ethics of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*," 55.

God is “quite as real as anything else” for Eliot shows an early philosophical influence on his idea of God, and from this guiding presence, the ordering of existence through Kantian categories is possible. Eliot again sees the categories of Kant as regulators of the of the natural world’s overall organization.⁴⁶¹ This thought is demonstrated in his essay “Report on Kantian Categories,” in which Eliot declares that Kant’s categories are “a list of ways of thinking about reality.”⁴⁶² Kant’s categories, which include space, time, relation, and quantity, ascribe an order to reality that combined with the nothingness allowed by the phenomena/noumena dichotomy shows an old nihilism that is impossible according to Nietzsche. Given Eliot’s statement, his alignment with this Kantian nihilism shows him brushing the haze of Nietzschean nihilism away from his work.

The Annihilation of Annihilation: Eliot Reading Hegel

Perhaps most potently, Eliot garners his understanding of annihilation as procreative from Hegel’s nihilism. During Eliot’s undergraduate years, the Harvard philosophy department was dominated by the idealism of Hegel.⁴⁶³ Eliot therefore had purchased Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* as a student and heavily annotated the book with underlining and marginalia.⁴⁶⁴ As Lyndall Gordon notes, he underlined the phrase “Thought ought to govern spiritual reality” on the book’s flyleaf,

⁴⁶¹ Rafey Habib, *The Early T. S. Eliot and Western Philosophy*, 103.

⁴⁶² T. S. Eliot, “Report on Kantian Categories,” in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Apprentice Years, 1905–1918*, eds. Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press and Faber & Faber Ltd), 2014. 31.

⁴⁶³ Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, 71.

⁴⁶⁴ Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, 384.

and in the same place, he questions whether there is any connection between our present selves and the past, whether one can argue about anything but the present, and whether anything but the present exists. Eliot eventually concludes that the past holds just as much reality as the present.⁴⁶⁵ These are ideas that Eliot interrogates recurrently in his poetry, perhaps most explicitly in the *Four Quartets* (1943). Conceivably more closely than Kant's and Spinoza's positions, Eliot's worldview aligns with Hegelian philosophy on multiple levels, including the idea that there is only a provisional relationship between the "real and the "ideal," a conclusion that Eliot ultimately derives from Hegel.⁴⁶⁶ As Habib states, Eliot hints at this conclusion in his Kant papers through his reading of Plato's Forms and his rejection of Kant's distinction between the form and the content of experience.⁴⁶⁷

Eliot expresses the madness and chaos of Nietzschean nihilism that he absorbed from his environment beginning with his *March Hare* poems, and similarly, Hegel also perceives the potential pitfalls of a nihilism that only affords nothingness. The philosopher recognized the danger of romantic nihilism and attempted to overcome it by showing that the principle of negation did not lead to meaningless and despair.⁴⁶⁸ Rather,

⁴⁶⁵ Manju Jain, *T. S. Eliot and American Philosophy*, 146.

⁴⁶⁶ Manju Jain, *T. S. Eliot and American Philosophy*, 83.

⁴⁶⁷ Rafey Habib, *The Early T. S. Eliot and Western Philosophy*, 121.

⁴⁶⁸ Romantic nihilism stems from the idea that humans, after becoming masters of knowledge and the transcending of nature of the "absolute I" have reached peak meaning with nothing else to discover. Thus, the appearance of Goethe's *Faust* and Blake's *tiger*.

it yielded absolute knowledge and a rational, methodical ethics.⁴⁶⁹ In his *Science of Logic* (1816), Hegel outlines his view of absolute negativity:

Becoming in essence, its reflective movement, is the movement of nothing to nothing, and so back to itself. The transition, or Becoming, sublates itself in its transition: that Other which arises in the course of this transition is not the Not-being of a Being, but the nothingness of a Nothing, and this, to be the negation of a nothing, constitutes Being — Being only is as the movement of Nothing to Nothing, and as such it is Essence; and Essence does not have this movement within it but is this movement, as a being that is itself absolutely illusory, pure negativity, which has nothing without it that could negate it, but negates only its own negativity, which is only in this negation, which latter is only in this negating.⁴⁷⁰

This Hegelian idea of a determination through negation appears in Eliot's poetry as early as the *March Hare* poems and reemerges through to his late career.

Eliot's use of Hegelian nihilism and iterations of negation are clear in the *Four Quartets*, despite the former's conversion to Christianity and later renunciation of philosophy. In "East Coker," for instance, the speaker meditates on deciphering a deeper connection between human existence, nature, and the present moment. He states,

In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.⁴⁷¹

⁴⁶⁹ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 115.

⁴⁷⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Science of Logic* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014). 346.

⁴⁷¹ T. S. Eliot, "East Coker" in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1980. 127.

Here, Eliot even mimics Hegel's language in *The Science of Logic* when he discusses the notion of negation and productive self-destruction.⁴⁷² The speaker's negative language takes over the lines: both the first and last lines end in "not," which reveals a beginning and an ending that both transpire in nothingness. Furthermore, whenever the speaker indicates positive motion, he immediately halts it with more negative language. He states that "you must go," but ends the motion with "not." The subject may "own," but the speaker instantly takes that ownership away with another "not." To reach a point where meaning and value can be reached, humans must pass through some sort of experience where our egos are totally broken down. Through this Hegelian absolute negativity, meaning beyond the new nihilism is possible.

While Eliot may be searching to revitalize his faith during his early years, his reading of old nihilism helps him establish a concrete system that values a generative nothingness. This view of emptiness aligns rather seamlessly with the thought process of a man who sought metaphysical answers in a broken world, a process that ultimately led him to passionately profess his faith in front of the *Pietà*. His early reading of old nihilism facilitates Eliot's "return to belief," an action that whispers to the reader in his dissertation.

⁴⁷² I do not mean to suggest that this is intentional—just that the positioning and phrasing of the ideas are rather similar.

A “Return to Belief”: Eliot’s Nihilism in “Knowledge and Experience”

Between 1913 and 1916, Eliot labored to write a doctoral dissertation that he would never return from London to defend.⁴⁷³ Originally titled “Experience and the Objects of Knowledge in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley,” Eliot’s dissertation focuses on F.H. Bradley’s *Appearance and Reality* (1893), where Bradley argues that most things are appearances and describes the reality that these appearances misrepresent. During the writing process, Eliot lived as a troubled young man who struggled with existence. These haunted feelings also permeate his poetry at the time, the “sanity” of Bradley’s explorations saved Eliot from a terrifying sense of intellectual isolation.⁴⁷⁴ Despite the respite that Eliot found in Bradleyan philosophy, however, Bradley’s ideas fail to satisfy the poet for a sustained amount of time. It is the specters of Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel that linger over his dissertation and guide Eliot toward a generative nothingness. The old nihilists help Eliot lay the groundwork for what Brazeal asserts is “a foundation [for] a return to belief in God” rather than an agenda of “self-torturing and utter nihilism” like some contemporaneous interpretations frame the final lines of *The Waste Land*: that is, a

⁴⁷³ To shed more doubt on the effectiveness and validity of his dissertation, Eliot reveals his criticisms concerning the culminating project of his philosophical studies at Harvard in the 1964 preface to the project. While he recognizes that it might be useful when considering the development of his prose style, which he admits has changed very little throughout the years and was “formed on that of Bradley,” Eliot rather clearly disavows his earlier work to the point that he maintains his inability “to think in the terminology of this essay” and, looking back, is no longer able comprehend his thought process (10). Despite this declaration, a pattern of thought that demonstrates interest in reality vs. appearance and authentic vs. inauthentic existence is present from *Knowledge and Experience* and the *March Hare* poems all the way to the *Four Quartets*.

⁴⁷⁴ Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, 72.

justification for a return to faith despite the lack of any metaphysical substance to prove God's existence.⁴⁷⁵ Eliot's desire for what Gordon calls a "higher truth contained in moments of lived experience" allows him to pull such ideas from the old nihilists that he read as a graduate student and use their systems to find redemption in a seemingly empty space.

In a June 1916 letter, James Woods informs Eliot that the Harvard Philosophy Department accepted his dissertation "without the least hesitation," and that Josiah Royce regarded it as "the work as an expert."⁴⁷⁶ These favorable comments aside, scholars have since debated the exact school of philosophy that Eliot ultimately defends in his dissertation. They also debate the many philosophical systems that Eliot uses in his dissertation. Childs, for instance, fills the introduction of his study on Eliot's philosophy with the various perceived stances taken in his dissertation, including hermeneutics, phenomenology, and existentialism.⁴⁷⁷ Scholars have contended that the philosophy contained in *Knowledge and Experience* is "so ambiguous" that it perhaps does not even effectively treat of its subject's system of ideas, and it can be "molded to fit any philosophical system."⁴⁷⁸ Jeffrey Perl adds to this argument and remarks, "by the

⁴⁷⁵ Gregory Brazeal, "The Alleged Pragmatism of T. S. Eliot," *Philosophy and Literature* 30 no. 1, (2006): 261. <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2006.0004>.

⁴⁷⁶ T. S. Eliot, *Letters Volume I*, 156.

⁴⁷⁷ Childs, Donald J. *From Philosophy to Poetry: T. S. Eliot's Study of Knowledge and Experience*. New York: Palgrave, 2001

⁴⁷⁸ Gregory Brazeal, "The Alleged Pragmatism of T. S. Eliot," 249.

centennial of his birth, Eliot had been associated with nearly every school or category of philosophy with which he could conceivably have been familiar.”⁴⁷⁹

This criticism, however, is a boldly relative view of the dissertation that allows Eliot the philosopher to overshadow Eliot the modernist poet and critic. As Eliot himself admits, he would have made a mediocre philosopher at best. Thus, using his dissertation to illuminate his poetry bears fruitful insight into the connection between his brand of modernism and his reading of old nihilism, the latter being informed by his extensive training in philosophy. As Brooker states, Eliot’s reading of Bradley as well as his dissertation are both directly relevant to the type of poetry he was writing at the time.⁴⁸⁰ While writing his dissertation, Eliot also worked on revising “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” so it is not surprising that similar metaphysical and epistemological questions appear in both texts. If anything is certain for Prufrock, it is that his insecurities are immobilizing. Statements like “There will be time... / to murder and create... / And time yet for a hundred indecisions / And for a hundred visions and revisions / Before the taking of a toast and tea” as well as “In a minute there is time / For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse” demonstrate the instability not only of Prufrock himself but speak to the epistemological uncertainty due in large part to the new nihilism’s assertion that “nothing is real.”⁴⁸¹ However, something real does exist for Prufrock, even if he fails to fully realize it: His desire to act. He spends 131 lines of

⁴⁷⁹ Jeffrey Perl, *Skepticism and Modern Enmity: Before and After Eliot* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 1989. 45.

⁴⁸⁰ Jewel Spears Brooker, *Mastery and Escape*, 192.

⁴⁸¹ T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” 4.

poetry thinking about “daring” and how he might “dare,” a consideration that continues even after seeing the “moment of [his] greatness flicker.”⁴⁸² Placing value on something, even an idea as nondescript as desire, shows Eliot’s unwillingness to accept complete nothingness as an accurate characteristic of existence.

Despite his own admission otherwise, Eliot does ruminate on the philosophical interests that preoccupy *Knowledge and Experience* in his poetry. Because of this connection between his dissertation and poetry, Eliot’s dissertation and the ideas it contains serves as a foundational structure for the old nihilism that he will continue to develop throughout his career. Broadly, *Knowledge and Experience* is a study of an inquest into the self, and more pointedly, a questioning of whether the possibility exists for knowledge to occur outside of one’s self; this question appears in some iteration in each volume of Eliot’s poetry up to and including *The Waste Land*. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” for instance, depicts an individual’s self that is unable to initiate forward motion due in part to an inability to differentiate reality—that is, true knowledge—from assumed but imaginary outcomes. This inquiry is directly related to Eliot’s reading of and ultimate siding with the old nihilists; while the new nihilism makes it difficult for any concrete knowledge base to exist, old nihilism sees the possibility and capitalizes on nothingness. Furthermore, even if Eliot draws from and includes multiple philosophical influences in his dissertation, this does not render it an entirely subjective and moldable document.

⁴⁸² T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” 6.

Critics have recognized the nihilistic undertones in Eliot's dissertation, but their acknowledgments align Eliot's claims with the new nihilism rather than a generative old nihilism. For instance, Brazeal contends that Eliot's investigation of Bradley's philosophy contains "frequent nihilistic claims" and that the most central element of Eliot's philosophical system as demonstrated in his dissertation is "annihilation and utter night."⁴⁸³ While the phrase "annihilation and utter night" does on one hand conjure images of complete nothingness that could place Eliot's philosophical system in a new nihilistic tradition, his reading of Spinozan nihilism—"all determination is negation"—suggests that the system presented in his dissertation removes the negativity of nothingness and replaces it with plenitude. This, coupled with Kantian "Absolute" and transformation and Hegelian annihilation of annihilation mounts a countercurrent against the nihilism that Nietzsche foresees in *The Will to Power*.

Given Eliot's language, which uses concepts like "instability" and "dependency" to characterize reality, it perhaps appears that he ascribes to a consideration of reality that is rooted in nothing but existential meaninglessness, but upon further examination, Eliot denies the existence of a total vacuity. The poet admits that his account of objectivity is "anything but lucid," but an investigation of his language points to the following concepts. As Spinoza's conception of the One Substance states, a seeming nothingness allows for "divine plenitude" in which the "world of practice" can ascribe its own order to reality. Equally as important to Eliot's dissertation, however, is Spinoza's view of

⁴⁸³ Gregory Brazeal, "The Alleged Pragmatism of T. S. Eliot," 144.

“total vacuum,” and idea that Eliot heavily marked in his copy of the *Ethics*. Eliot states, “there is an identity which persists, an identity due to which the objectivity is not annihilated, but rendered meaningless. The thing does not cease to exist, it exists in other ways.”⁴⁸⁴ The similarity of Eliot’s language to Spinoza’s is uncanny. Where for Spinoza “all parts are bound to come together to prevent it a vacuum,” Eliot sees not the disappearance of an object, but a transformation.⁴⁸⁵ Eliot also appears to borrow this transformation from Kant’s stripping down an object to a nonsubstantial void: The “thing” in this case is stripped of meaning, but not completely destroyed, so in the wake of this “vanishing” comes the opportunity for its utility and rebirth as something else fills the void.

To compound this point, Eliot also makes a similar contention in “Do I know how I feel? Do I know how I think?.” The poem’s inconsistent rhyme scheme shows a speaker on the cusp of an epistemological truth, but one that he cannot quite ascertain. Here, the speaker states that “A black bag with a pointed beard and tobacco on his breath / ... Will investigate the cause of death that was also the cause of life.”⁴⁸⁶ Eliot’s grotesque image of the “black bag” is threatening and grimy, and not an expected keeper or investigator of weighty concepts like life and death. Nevertheless, this dark figure holds the answer to the speaker’s question. This meditation aligns closely with Hegel’s assertion that utter

⁴⁸⁴ T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley* (New York: Farrar, Straus), 1964. 100.

⁴⁸⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 17.

⁴⁸⁶ T. S. Eliot, “Do I know how I feel? Do I know how I think?” in *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems, 1909-1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (San Diego: Harcourt Brace), 1998. 80.

destruction yields ultimate order: that through annihilation, or the “cause of death,” the “cause of life” that is regeneration begins. Eliot does not quite reach this conclusion yet, but these ideas indicate a foundational return to belief rather than a succumbing to meaninglessness.

Eliot’s interest in generative emptiness becomes clear through his objections to Bradleyan philosophy and acceptance of the old nihilist Absolute. He criticizes Bradley because the philosopher’s system does not account for true transcendence. Eliot then offers an alternative to Bradley that facilitates an object’s transformation: “The alteration from error to truth is not a change in the object, but in a change in the whole situation, and the object, so far as it is an object, must be admitted to persist as a real object in history.”⁴⁸⁷ This statement is reminiscent of Hegel’s view of history outlined in *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, where the philosopher casts history as a manifestation of the “Geist,” or “Absolute Spirit,” an “essentially and eternally present entity.”⁴⁸⁸ Hegel states, “Spirit is immortal; without it there is no past no future, but an essential now.”⁴⁸⁹ Furthermore, when connecting the Spirit to what Hegel calls the “Infinite,” nothingness becomes essential. He declares, “Nothingness is the principle of all things...all proceeded from and returns to Nothingness...To obtain happiness, therefore, man must seek to assimilate himself to this principle by continual victories over himself; and for the sake of this, do nothing, wish nothing, desire nothing.”⁴⁹⁰ Hegel’s Geist is a god-like entity of

⁴⁸⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience*, 119-120.

⁴⁸⁸ Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, 384.

⁴⁸⁹ Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 79.

⁴⁹⁰ Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 168-169.

infinite negativity that contains and propels all of reality, something that Bradley fails to facilitate. By drawing from his reading of Hegel's Geist, Eliot shows both the visages of a return to belief and a penchant for prolific nothingness.

The Absolute again appears as a god-like figure for Eliot that enables a generative nothingness. For Bradley, the aim of reality is to provide a positive account of the Absolute — the ultimate, unconditioned reality as it is in itself, not distorted by projection through the conceptual mechanisms of thought. In “The First Debate Between Body and Soul,” for instance, Eliot calls upon the Absolute in an almost prayer-like fashion to “assist [him] to the pure idea -- / Regarding nature without love or fear” and deliver him from “The withered leaves / Of [his] sensations.”⁴⁹¹ These lines contain a recurring but implicit theme that is central to Eliot's philosophical and poetic approaches: immediate experience, the Hegelian “annihilation of annihilation,” that can only be approached through the most refined transcendental inferences. This perhaps defies knowledge and practical difference, but nevertheless, has a validity that cannot be denied. In the final pages of his dissertation, Eliot professes his interpretation of the Absolute. Eliot's definition shows him applying Kant's iteration of the idea into his methodology rather than a Bradleyan explanation. For Eliot, the Absolute is neither real, unreal, imaginary, nor from a practical point of view true or false. He states:

If I have insisted on the practical (pragmatic?) in the constitution and meaning of objects, it is because the practical is a practical metaphysic. And this emphasis upon practice – upon the relativity and instrumentality of knowledge – is what

⁴⁹¹ T. S. Eliot, “First Debate between Body and Soul” in *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems, 1909-1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (San Diego: Harcourt Brace), 1998. 65.

impels us towards the Absolute... The Absolute, we find, does not fall within any of the classes of objects: it is neither real nor unreal nor imaginary.⁴⁹²

Eliot recognizes the Absolute as an ultimately negating, god-like entity. Despite his conclusion that the Absolute is “neither real nor imaginary,” Eliot refuses to deny the Absolute altogether. Rather, Eliot suggests that we are impelled toward the Absolute because it could make a difference to our lives. If knowledge is instrumental, then belief in the Absolute might be a very worthwhile practical instrument for us.⁴⁹³ This statement contains Kantian echoes but also indicates a sentiment that aligns with Hegelian and Spinozan nihilism, which broadly deals with making a type of “objective” reality out of subjectivity.

The backdrop of Eliot’s statement is nothingness, with the “unreal abstractions” containing no objective meaning in themselves. The philosophies of Spinoza and Hegel, assuming that Hegel extends Spinoza’s response to nihilism, require conditions of nothingness for a metaphysical system of significance to occur. For Paul Franks, with Spinozan nihilism acting as a “solvent” in which traditional metaphysical systems would be dissolved, Hegelian “self-negating negativity” could be actualized by annihilating itself and forming a positive response to that nothingness.⁴⁹⁴ Similarly, Eliot posits a reality, while not objective, that teeters on pragmatism and is fashioned from an

⁴⁹² T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience*, 169.

⁴⁹³ Gregory Brazeal, “The Alleged Pragmatism of T. S. Eliot,” 259.

⁴⁹⁴ Paul Franks, “Nothing Comes from Nothing: Judaism, the Orient, and Kabbalah in Hegel’s Reception of Spinoza,” *The Oxford Handbook to Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (New York: Oxford University Press), 2018. 529.

environment that does not contain intrinsic value but can nevertheless be “defended” as real due to its meaning to the individual. Even at this basic level, Eliot demonstrates a view of what should be done with nothingness that contrasts with new nihilism’s position that worth or value is metaphysically unreasonable.

Still, if epistemological and metaphysical “truths” cannot unconditionally buttress the modern reality, then the question becomes, what can? For Eliot, a significant component of the answer is “feeling.”⁴⁹⁵ This is particularly noteworthy considering the poet’s warning of the dangers of solipsism, which certain critics accuse him of committing.⁴⁹⁶ Although Eliot admittedly comes dangerously close to succumbing to this philosophy given its similarities to the new nihilism, he avoids it in favor of a type of relativism.⁴⁹⁷ Nevertheless, this then omits the “self” as Eliot’s point of metaphysical foundation. Turning back to his dissertation, on one hand, Eliot notes that feeling is “an abstraction from anything actual,” but on the other hand, feeling allows the objects from which feeling “is differentiated have a kind of union which they themselves did not

⁴⁹⁵ While the philosophy of feeling and emotion is far too complex to expound in a footnote, we may broadly think of “feeling” as a pure (though perhaps fleeting) reflection of a particular state of being. For a more thorough introduction, see Peter Goldie, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2010.

⁴⁹⁶ While Eliot did not aim to condone solipsism in his dissertation, critics have argued that he nevertheless succumbs to its pull. George Whiteside argues that, although Eliot aimed to refute solipsism, “his philosophy led to it...anyway” because it “does not establish a world of objects shared by all.” Furthermore, Lyndall Gordon contends that Eliot was “more willing than Bradley” to “indulge in solipsistic speculation.” See Whiteside, George. “T. S. Eliot’s Dissertation.” *ELH* 34.3, 1967: 421. *JSTOR* and Gordon, Lyndall. *Eliot’s Early Years*. New York: Oxford UP 1977. 51.

⁴⁹⁷ A similar skepticism concerning the concrete world can be found in solipsism. However, despite the fact that both deny the certainty of objects’ true existence, the nihilist would deny the existence of self whereas the solipsist would affirm it

account for” and exist as “real objects in the world of objects.”⁴⁹⁸ This description contains whispers of the more fully augmented “objective correlative” that Eliot presents in “Hamlet and Its Problems” (1919) that calls for a “set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion” that the poet feels and hopes to evoke in the reader. Emotion, in this case, is the foundation of a “reality” with the ability to connect with audiences across time and place.

The validity of emotion is a concept that Eliot meditates on in his *March Hare* poems as well. To return to “Do I know how I feel? Do I know what I think?,” the speaker is consumed with epistemological questions of what it means to “know” and “exist.” Turning to a porter for potential answers, the speaker asks, “If I questioned him with care, would he tell me what I think and feel / --Or only ‘You are the gentleman who has lived on the second floor / For a year or more’.”⁴⁹⁹ The first answer the porter might provide could reveal the knowledge that the speaker searches for, while the latter provides only a superficial response; it fails to provide enlightenment. However, the speaker notes a third potential response from the porter, an answer imbued with a “flash of madness” that the speaker “dreads”: “Sir we have seen so much beauty spilled on the open street...Or left untasted in villages or stifled in dark chambers / That if we are restless on winter nights, who can blame us?”⁵⁰⁰ When confronted with the most substantial piece of epistemological truth, that is, the squandering of an authentic

⁴⁹⁸ T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience*, 20-22.

⁴⁹⁹ T. S. Eliot, “Do I know how I feel? Do I know how I think?,” 80.

⁵⁰⁰ T. S. Eliot, “Do I know how I feel? Do I know how I think?,” 80.

existence in the form of untapped or wasted beauty, the speaker reels with fear. If the speaker could overcome his dread and confront the porter's potential third question, however, that "something...slip[ping] just at [his] fingertips" could be grasped and unravel his "twisted brain."⁵⁰¹

For Eliot, the old nihilism of Spinoza and Hegel also accentuates the metaphysical strength of emotion. Spinoza investigates emotions in "On Emotion," the third part of the *Ethics*, and contends that emotions are central to human existence, are intelligible and explicable, and that it is more effective to understand and harness emotions than ridicule them.⁵⁰² The "nature and strength" of emotions, for Spinoza, provides foundation for cognition, and in a way, reality. Although Eliot's annotations are less frequent in this part of the *Ethics*, short bursts of underlining and blocking show that he carefully read and considered Spinoza's arguments. Similarly, Hegel also contends that emotions are foundational for cognition and reality. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit* (1827-8), Hegel argues that "feeling is the being for self of the individual soul, so that it is at the same time dissolved in its universality...so far that my determinateness is a being, this determinacy is feeling."⁵⁰³ Here, it seems clear that Eliot's discussion of feeling mimics the language of that of Spinoza and Hegel: all three highlight the authenticity of emotion and even hint at emotion's ability to provide a basis for reality to grow.

⁵⁰¹ T. S. Eliot, "Do I know how I feel? Do I know how I think?," 80.

⁵⁰² Spinoza, *Ethics*, 115.

⁵⁰³ Georg W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit*, trans. Robert R. Williams (New York: Oxford University Press), 2007. 110.

Perhaps even clearer than his use of Spinoza and Hegel, Eliot's reading of Kant connects feeling to transcendence. This enables the poet to combine his latent faith with generative nothingness. He writes, "although we cannot know immediate experience directly as an object, we can yet arrive at it by inference, and even conclude that it is the starting point of our knowing."⁵⁰⁴ The Kantian, "transcendental nature" of this "inference" becomes apparent when he continues, "immediate experience seems to be in one aspect a condition of the conscious subject."⁵⁰⁵ For Eliot, in order that thought and will "may be possible, feeling must have been given."⁵⁰⁶ "Feeling," which is "self-transcendent," appears to be identical to "immediate experience" in Eliot's argument.⁵⁰⁷ Bringing these claims together, for Brazeal, shows that Eliot sees immediate experience "as a self-transcending" even in the early state of his dissertation.⁵⁰⁸ For Kant, when the subject transcends, it becomes unknowable and empty. However, this emptiness allows the subject to construct an epistemological foundation. Eliot does appear to double back and states that he does not know his own feeling better than an outsider.⁵⁰⁹ Nevertheless,

⁵⁰⁴ T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience*, 19.

⁵⁰⁵ T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience*, 20.

⁵⁰⁶ T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience*, 19.

⁵⁰⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience*, 21.

⁵⁰⁸ Gregory Brazeal, "The Alleged Pragmatism of T. S. Eliot," 256.

⁵⁰⁹ Eliot seems to abandon feeling as an adequate foundation for reality in *The Waste Land*. While he still views feelings as actual experiences, feelings can isolate an individual from the collective. This is most evident in the following lines from "What the Thunder Said":

Dayadhvam: I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours

by using “feeling” as even an unsteady or underdeveloped underpinning on which humans can build a reality, Eliot resists the proverbial nothingness of the new nihilism and the anguish it brings.⁵¹⁰

Finally, in his dissertation’s conclusion, Eliot ultimately criticizes the limitations of all metaphysical systems. Speaking specifically of Bradley, Eliot states:

To the builder of the future system, the identity binding together the appearance and the reality is evident; to anyone outside the system it is not evident. To the builder of the process is the process of reality, for thought and reality are one; to a critic, the process is perhaps only the process of the builder’s thought. From the critic’s standpoint the metaphysician’s world may be real only as a child’s bogey is real...Metaphysical systems are condemned to go up like a rocket and come down like a stick.⁵¹¹

Echoing the formulation that he proposed in his Kant papers, Eliot, as Habib states, insists that any criterion for an ultimate truth rests on an act of faith.⁵¹² Eliot pushes this criticism further and directly connects it to nihilism, stating that “The virtue of metaphysical analysis is in showing the destructibility of everything...In analyzing knowledge, we merely reduce the fact that knowledge is comprised of ingredients which are themselves neither known nor cognitive, but which melt into the whole which we call

Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus (412-417)

His footnote to these lines cites Bradley’s discussion of feeling in *Appearance and Reality* where the philosopher calls feelings “peculiar and private” to an individual “soul.”

⁵¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience*, 3.

⁵¹¹ T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience*, 167-168.

⁵¹² Rafey Habib, 144.

experience.”⁵¹³ Even though Eliot criticizes metaphysical systems, he can still resist a the new nihilism; to be critical of metaphysics as a branch of philosophy is not to condemn oneself to the abyss by default.

Conclusion

While Eliot does not accept Bradley’s vision of the Absolute because it aims to answer metaphysical troubles with metaphysics, his dissertation directs towards a return to belief that will continue to develop through his career. By ultimately rejecting Nietzsche’s philosophy in both his poetry and philosophical ideology and employing the responses to nihilism proposed by Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel contained in his dissertation, Eliot lays the foundation for a disposition that does not become consumed by unmitigated nothingness. The problem presented by Eliot in his dissertation was his own: should he live like a visionary in a dangerous space between two worlds and court madness, or fall back into the net of the material world, risk his gift for sublime knowledge, and live enmeshed in it artificial customs and beliefs?⁵¹⁴ Additionally, it is significant that Nietzsche read all three of the discussed philosophers; he wrote detailed responses to each of their ideas; and even expressed admiration for Spinoza and Hegel.⁵¹⁵ Given this

⁵¹³ T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience*, 157.

⁵¹⁴ Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, 75-76.

⁵¹⁵ In a postcard to Franz Overbeck dated July 30, 1881, Nietzsche says this about Spinoza: “I am utterly amazed, utterly enchanted! I have a precursor, and what a precursor! I hardly knew Spinoza: that I should have turned to him just now, was inspired by ‘instinct’... Even though the divergencies are admittedly tremendous, they are due more to the difference in time, culture, and science.” Furthermore, Hegel’s master/slave dialectic from his *Phenomenology of Spirit* is considered by many scholars to be a man influence of Nietzsche’s master/slave morality, and though Nietzsche’s reaction to Kant is rather harsh, some scholars argue that the two philosophers occupy the same

familiarity, it seems that Nietzsche's deviation from an "old" nihilism was deliberate; while he may not have intended to obscure the term's true meaning, he did perhaps consider his definition more fitting for the modern condition. Similarly, Eliot's deviation from the nihilism that surrounded the modernist landscape was also deliberate. Through his reading of Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel and an adoption of their "old nihilism," a foundation that is firmly established in *Knowledge and Experience*, Eliot finds the language to interrogate the Dionysian abyss from a traditionally Apollonian standpoint that he deploys in his poetry

conception of moral autonomy. See Sokoloff, William W. "Nietzsche's Radicalization of Kant." *Polity* 38.4, 2006. 501–518.

CHAPTER VI

“NEITHER PLENTITUDE NOR VACANCY:” T. S. ELIOT, ABSOLUTE NEGATION, AND THE GENERATIVE VOID

O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant,
The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,
The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,
Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees,
Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the dark,
—T. S. Eliot, “East Coker”

Introduction

“There is a difference,” T. S. Eliot declares, “between philosophical belief and poetic assent.”⁵¹⁶ To elucidate this contention, Eliot recommends that when reading *The Divine Comedy*, for instance,

You are not called upon to believe what Dante believed . . . but you are called upon more and more to understand it. If you can read poetry as poetry, you will ‘believe’ in Dante’s theology exactly as you believe in the physical reality of his journey; that is, you suspend both belief and disbelief.⁵¹⁷

The notion of “reading poetry as poetry” as Eliot suggests is a perceptive one. If applied to his own poetry, for instance, Eliot’s theology can be separated from the words he writes and this opens a space for discussing his philosophical influences, like the

⁵¹⁶ T. S. Eliot, “Dante” in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1975. 223.

⁵¹⁷ T. S. Eliot, “Dante, 221.

philosophies of old nihilism that he read while a graduate student at Harvard. It is undeniable, though, that Eliot demonstrates a penchant for order and value construction in his poetry that is guided by his Christianity, including a use of the *via negativa*. Furthermore, while he acknowledges that Eliot wrote during a time when the new nihilism was impossible to ignore, Miller gives Eliot's commitment to Christianity as the reason for the poet's ordered reality that manifests in *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and the *Four Quartets* (1943) as well as his later plays.⁵¹⁸ Indeed, Miller argues that Eliot's experience is "genuinely Christian" in his later career, and he fails to acknowledge Eliot's reading of old nihilism as a viable influence on his poetry.⁵¹⁹ Although Eliot's Christian faith unquestionably contributes to his vision of an ordered reality, I argue that it is only a piece of the puzzle and does not fully account for the deliberate, methodical discussions of generative nothingness that Eliot labors to articulate in the poems that Miller highlights.

In this chapter, I show that Eliot's reading of old nihilism enables him to reimagine images of prolific nothingness for a modern audience. I investigate images of stillness, silence, "betweenness," and emptiness in Eliot's poetry and argue that they are all manifestations of a generative void, iterations of which are all present in the old nihilism of Benedict de Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, and Georg W. F. Hegel. To do this, I

⁵¹⁸ In his introduction to *Poets of Reality*, Miller acknowledges the profound effect of Nietzsche's "Death of God" on literary modernism. Eliot's own response to and overcoming of nihilism, for Miller, is his realization that "the Incarnation is here and now."

⁵¹⁹ J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality*, 179.

first examine both the “abyss” and the “void” and show that Eliot indeed conceives of nothingness as a void. I then demonstrate the evolution of Eliot’s generative void beginning with his *March Hare* poems, continuing to *The Hollow Men* (1925) and *Ash Wednesday* (1930), and ending with the *Four Quartets* (1943). Considering Eliot’s consistent use of nothingness as a space for creation, I argue that he applies Spinoza’s Principle of Plenitude and One Substance, Kant’s reduction of the subject into a nonsubstantial void, and Hegel’s annihilation of annihilation to reach an ultimately empty, ultimately generative “still point.” Through this still point, Eliot then infuses the void with creative capacity, an objective that he meets in the *Four Quartets*.

More Than Faith: Eliot’s Generative Void

The idea that Eliot discusses images of the “void” in his writing is not a new observation. However, the connection between Eliot’s void and the generative nothingness of old nihilism has been noticeably overlooked. Eloise Hay pinpoints the “Buddhist peace of negation and emptiness” in “Silence,” for instance, as “more real” to the poet than a Christian serenity, even though that peace “terrified” him at the time.⁵²⁰ For Childs, on the other hand, Eliot’s appreciation of the void is best explained through Christian mysticism.⁵²¹ It seems that even the poet himself backs up this claim. In a February 1929 letter to Paul Elmer Moore, Eliot’s spiritual leader, he reveals, “I am one those whose sense of void tends to drive toward asceticism or sensuality, and only

⁵²⁰ Eloise Hay, *T. S. Eliot’s Negative Way* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1982. 72.

⁵²¹ Donald Childs, *From Philosophy to Poetry*, 112.

Christianity helps to reconcile me to life which is otherwise disgusting.”⁵²² To be ascetic, one must practice self-denial, a type of emptying or negation, and Eliot’s faith undoubtedly shaped his poetry and the images therein. While Eliot credits his faith with moderating his spiritual life and conception of the void, his statement fails to explain the presence of generative nothingness in his poetry. For this nothingness, we must look to his reading of Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel and consider the way that he renders their something-from-nothing- philosophies. As argued previously, Eliot’s early reading of philosophy helped facilitate his official return to belief in 1927, so the connection between faith and philosophy is not so stark for the poet. Iterations of the generative void appear continuously throughout Eliot’s poetry, beginning as early as his *March Hare* poems and continuing through to the *Four Quartets*.

To understand Eliot’s generative void, we must first investigate its opposing force: the Dionysian abyss of new nihilism. Eliot references the abyss in his 1933 lecture on Matthew Arnold, where he states, “At bottom: that is a great way down; the bottom is the bottom. At the bottom of the abyss is what few ever see, and what those cannot bear to look at for long; and it is not a ‘criticism of life’.”⁵²³ For Eliot, the abyss appears clearly Nietzschean: It is threatening and unbearable but for a short time. Just as scholars cast nihilism as an intricate, multi-layered concept, they also consider the abyss to be

⁵²² T. S. Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, vol. IV, eds. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (New Haven: Yale University Press), 2013. 433.

⁵²³ T. S. Eliot, “Matthew Arnold,” in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: English Lion, 1930–1933*, eds. Jason Harding and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 2015. 659.

equally nebulous. Iterations of the abyss, (or *abgrund*) are perhaps just as contentious even within Nietzsche's own writings.⁵²⁴ Nietzsche discusses the abyss in several of his texts, including *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), *The Gay Science* (1882), and *The Will to Power* (1901). In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche calls "the Will to Power" itself an *abgrund*, "the groundless chaos beneath all the grounds, all the foundations," an entity that leaves "the whole order of essences groundless."⁵²⁵ Furthermore, according to Nietzsche, the abyss shares properties with the Dionysian, which he continuously defines as "an abysmal loss of self," a completely imageless space, and what John Sallis calls a fundamentally contradictory level of existence, since it is both at the core of human existence while it simultaneously annihilates any sense of humanity's importance altogether.⁵²⁶

Nietzsche uses a labyrinth to symbolize the abyss of nihilism. This rhetorical choice adds shape to the amorphous properties of this enigmatic space, and as Adrian Del Caro observes, Nietzsche's elucidation is most evident in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886),

⁵²⁴ Leading nihilism scholar Shane Weller discusses the complexities of nihilism in *Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism: The Uncanniest of Guests* (2008) and nihilism's relationship to modernism in *Modernism and Nihilism* (2011).

⁵²⁵ The "will to power" describes what Nietzsche may have believed to be the main driving force in humans – achievement, ambition, and the striving to reach the highest possible position in life. These are all manifestations of the will to power; however, the concept was never systematically defined in Nietzsche's work, leaving its interpretation open to debate. See Clark, Maudemarie, 1990. *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP; Alfonso Lingus, "The Will to Power," in *The New Nietzsche*, ed. D.B. Allison (New York: Dell Publishing) 1977. 150.

⁵²⁶ John Sallis, *Crossings: Nietzsche and the Space of Tragedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1991. 6; Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 38.

aphorism 295.⁵²⁷ In this aphorism, Nietzsche imagines a conversation between himself and Dionysus, the “tempter-god” with a “halcyon smile” and Ariadne, a silent, external listener. Speaking as Dionysus, Nietzsche reveals the god’s relationship with the nihilistic labyrinth-abyss:

‘Under certain circumstances I love mankind’—and referred thereby to Ariadne, who was present; ‘in my opinion man is an agreeable, brave, inventive animal, that has not his equal upon earth, he makes his way even through all labyrinths. I like man, and often think how I can still further advance him, and make him stronger, more evil, and more profound’.⁵²⁸

If Dionysus acts as a “tempter” in this aphorism, then Ariadne symbolizes humanity groping their way through the deep, dark, disordered labyrinth. As Del Caro states, Dionysus, as a guide-like figure, entices the individual to the edge of the abyss, and at that edge, self-overcoming becomes possible.⁵²⁹ Despite the abyss perhaps indirectly yielding self-overcoming in Nietzsche’s anecdote, it is important to note that the journey to the *threshold* rather than the abyss itself is responsible for that affirmative outcome. The abyss, like the Minotaur’s labyrinth, remains just as empty, sinister, and chaotic as ever. Sallis takes this one step further and calls the abyss a direct result of the Dionysian, which he argues “reveals not ground but the dissolution of ground and determination.”⁵³⁰ Like Nietzsche, Eliot also demonstrates a desire for both a self and cultural overcoming

⁵²⁷ Adrian Del Caro, *Grounding the Nietzsche Rhetoric of Earth* (Berlin: De Gruyter), 2004. 176.

⁵²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (New York: Macmillan), 1907. 263.

⁵²⁹ Adrian Del Caro, *Grounding the Nietzsche Rhetoric*, 75.

⁵³⁰ John Sallis, *Crossings*, 58.

in his work, but his consideration of the abyss imbues it with Apollonian, generative qualities that more closely resemble an old nihilistic void than the entity that both allures and alarms Nietzsche.

The Apollonian, conversely, responds to the Dionysian through the emergence of images and forms, as a type of every-day state. The Apollonian is a way to cope with the despair felt in face of the Dionysian, what Nietzsche calls “the terrors and horrors of existence.”⁵³¹ An individual’s existence is asserted by means of the Apollonian and because of this mode, he/she is capable of contemplation, order, and the creation of images.⁵³² For Sallis, beautiful images serve as “transfiguring mirrors in which one appears to oneself more perfect, more complete” and “shining in a higher truth.”⁵³³ In other words, in the Apollonian image “one is given a measure by which to measure oneself, a measure by which to draw around oneself the limits of an individuality, even one never entirely measures up to it.”⁵³⁴ Such truth can cover over the abysmal Dionysian truth but can never cease to be threatened by it.⁵³⁵ This understanding of the Apollonian—a channel for reaching a “higher truth” and “self-knowledge” as well as forcing the Dionysian into remission—describes Eliot’s pursuit of order and value in his poetry. Scholars like Leavell identify the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy in Eliot’s

⁵³¹ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 29.

⁵³² In a perhaps contradictory fashion, Nietzsche indeed prefers the Dionysian over the Apollonian because it is “life-affirming.” The contradiction comes through his characterization of the “abyss” or nihilism as Dionysian, both of which he cautions against.

⁵³³ John Sallis, *Crossings*, 59.

⁵³⁴ John Sallis, *Crossings*, 3.

⁵³⁵ John Sallis, *Crossings*, 3.

drama, *Murder at the Cathedral* particularly, and Douglas Burnham calls attention to echoes of *The Birth of Tragedy* in *The Waste Land*—that is, the depiction of a culture in decline.⁵³⁶ Given these similarities, it is reasonable to see this dichotomy and ultimate preference for the Apollonian at work in Eliot's poetry.

While the Apollonian is not an abyss itself, this mode can interpret the abyss as something other than chaos and emptiness. As Gillespie argues, if, according to Nietzsche, the abyss is yet another manifestation of the Dionysian, the Apollonian interpretation of this revelation creates distance from the Dionysian abyss that allows individuals to view it without being consumed by it.⁵³⁷ In this way, the abyss is still real, but the Apollonian defends against it, places it at a distance, and makes it bearable and even beautiful, which provides a way back into everyday experience and understanding.⁵³⁸ Furthermore, the philosophical and theological definitions of an “abyss” cast it as a bottomless chasm, an endless pit, a primeval chaos that is all encompassing, and this characterization aligns closely with the Dionysian abyss of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*.

Alternatively, a void is an empty space, a place that has not yet been occupied or filled; this allows for the possibility of generation, a property that the abyss does not possess. Kant, Spinoza, and Hegel all envision a generative nihilism that stems from an act of something-from-nothing. For Kant it is a metaphysical evaporation of the world,

⁵³⁶ Douglas Burnham and Martin Jesinghausen, *Nietzsche's the Birth of Tragedy: A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum), 2010. 157.

⁵³⁷ Michael Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche*, 209.

⁵³⁸ Michael Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche*, 209.

and for Spinoza, a removal of the negativity of nothingness. By extension, Hegel's annihilation of annihilation and a subsequent recognition of negation is where growth occurs. By implementing an Apollonian mode, Eliot forces an order, design, and creation onto his poetry. Thus, he envisions the abyss in a fashion that more closely resembles the void of old nihilism rather than the disconcerting entity that Nietzsche illustrates in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Eliot's Apollonian response to the Dionysian abyss reconceives the abyss as a void, which, while empty, is capable of generation. This claim, however, is perhaps ostensibly complicated in *Murder at the Cathedral* (1935), where Eliot calls out "the void" by name. Regardless of his meditation on the subject and use of the particular terminology, this "void" has more in common with the Dionysian abyss of new nihilism rather than an old nihilistic void that holds the possibility of design. While considering death's shadow and martyrdom's replenishment, the women of Canterbury who make up the Chorus face a darkness more foreboding than death:

...behind the Judgement the Void, more horrid than active
shapes of hell; Emptiness, absence, separation from God;
The horror of the effortless journey, to the empty land
Which is no land, on the emptiness, absence, the Void,
Where those who were men can no longer turn the mind
To distraction, delusion, escape into dream...
For there are no objects, no tones...to divert the soul
From seeing itself, foully united forever, nothing with nothing.⁵³⁹

⁵³⁹ T. S. Eliot, *Murder at the Cathedral* in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1980. 210.

Eliot's intent here, argues John Brenkman, is to "project the modern, Pascalian terror of nothingness" onto the medieval peasants.⁵⁴⁰ While Pascal's theistic fear of nothingness is present in these lines, Linda Leavell perceptively highlights that Eliot's intended audience here is demonstrably Christian.⁵⁴¹ If, however, we read the Chorus's chant in a philosophical rather than a theological light, Eliot's language is rather similar to Nietzsche's characterization of a Dionysian abyss, demonstrated through words like "terror," "horrid," and "hell." Eliot, perhaps even unintentionally, calls attention to the hazards that new nihilism poses to modern society through these similarities in language. These hazards, as David Harvey remarks, explain the "troubled and fluctuating aesthetic response to conditions of modernity produced by a particular process of modernization" (98).⁵⁴² The "empty spaces" in Eliot's poetry therefore share properties of a void rather than an abyss. The poet meditates on this void as early in his career as 1910 when he was only writing in his *March Hare* notebook.

⁵⁴⁰ Approximately three years earlier in 1932, Eliot published his essay on Pascal's *Pensées*. He seemed to have the fragments in mind as he wrote *Murder at the Cathedral*. This appears to be the passage that inspired Eliot's Chorus: "He who regards himself in this light will be afraid of himself, and observing himself sustained in the body given him by nature between those two abysses of the Infinite and Nothing, will tremble at the sight of these marvels; and I think that, as his curiosity changes into admiration, he will be more disposed to contemplate them in silence than to examine them with presumption. For in fact what is man in nature? A Nothing in comparison with the Infinite, an All in comparison with the Nothing, a mean between nothing and everything. Since he is infinitely removed from comprehending the extremes, the end of things and their beginning are hopelessly hidden from him in an impenetrable secret; he is equally incapable of seeing the Nothing from which he was made, and the Infinite in which he is swallowed up" (sect. II, 72).

⁵⁴¹ John Brenkman, "Wrestling with (my God!) my God": Modernism, Nihilism, and Belief, *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 21, vol. 2 (2013): 112.

⁵⁴² David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell), 1990. 98.

Stillness and Silence: The Early Generative Void in the *March Hare*

Eliot begins experimenting with the generative void early in his career as a philosophy student at Harvard. We see glimmers of such a void in his *March Hare* poems, perhaps most clearly in “Silence” (1910), “Bacchus and Ariadne” (1911), and “In silent corridors of death” (undated).⁵⁴³ In these poems, Eliot recognizes the sublime terror of the Dionysian abyss and already shows an unwillingness to be overcome by it. It is important to remark that this early resistance predates his formal embrace of Christianity by over a decade and continues after it.

The year 1909 marks a shift in Eliot’s thinking, as he abandons “morning flowers and flowers of yesterday” of “Before Morning” in favor of stylistically experimental lines informed by French symbolism and meditations on suffering, temporality, and existence. The title’s allusion to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* implies a wasteful stillness: the March Hare feels compelled to behave as if it’s perpetually tea-time, stuck in an abyss of apocalyptic circularity because the Mad Hatter “murdered the time.”⁵⁴⁴ While the Cheshire Cat’s declaration that “we’re all mad here” evokes emotions more closely associated with the abyss, themes and images present in “Silence,” “Bacchus and Ariadne,” and “In silent corridors of death” establish a move away from such a philosophical system in favor of a particularly old conception of nihilism and the

⁵⁴³ I ordered these poems chronologically for the sake of continuity, not necessarily because their order beyond “Silence” is important to Eliot’s evolving conception of the generative void.

⁵⁴⁴ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 29.

void.⁵⁴⁵ Through an annihilation that removes the “negativity of nothingness” and instead “renders it as divine plentitude,” Eliot begins to pose an ordered reality that emerges from a reclaiming of the abyss of new nihilism.

Eliot’s initial representation of the generative void occurs in “Silence” as a sublime, still quietness that immobilizes the poet. As critics have observed, this poem narrates what is perhaps Eliot’s first encounter with what he later will call a mystical experience, the “kind of unexplainable experience which many of us have had, once or twice in our lives, and been unable to put into words.”⁵⁴⁶ The poem is set in the middle of a city, perhaps at rush hour or another busy time. For Lyndall Gordon, this poem represents Eliot’s “most lucid description of a timeless moment,” and narrates an instant when Eliot was walking along the streets of Boston and experienced, what he later described as “either a communion with the Divine or a temporary crystallization of the mind” that froze him in place and plunged him into a profound, peculiar quietness.⁵⁴⁷ The speaker reveals his experience:

Along the city streets,
It is still high tide,
Yet the garrulous waves of life
Shrink and divide
With a thousand incidents
Vexed and debated:—
This is the hour for which we waited—

⁵⁴⁵ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 26.

⁵⁴⁶ T. S. Eliot, “The Significance of Charles Williams,” in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: The War Years, 1940–1946*, eds. David E. Chinitz, and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 2017. 775.

⁵⁴⁷ Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, 23.

This is the ultimate hour
When life is justified.
The seas of experience
That were so broad and deep,
So immediate and steep,
Are suddenly still.
You may say what you will,
At such peace I am terrified.
There is nothing else beside.⁵⁴⁸

The first line of the poem appears to depict a rather typical day; the speaker views the “city streets,” which are not described in detail, and do not receive explicit physical attention for the remainder of the poem. The “shrinking and dividing” of the “garrulous waves of life” mimic the poem’s form, with its consistent rhythm and rhyme scheme acting like waves lulling the poem into a revelation of sublimity and alarm by the poem’s close. However, the “profound” but “peculiar” quietness that dominates the poem is strangely immobilizing, and fully grips the speaker in its embrace. Here, Eliot draws directly from Kant’s definition of the sublime. Since the poet read all three *Critiques* as a student, we can assume that Eliot was familiar with Kant’s description of the sublime as an entity that incites terror in the human subject, but through that terror, yields revelation and transcendence.

Through the peculiar, petrifying stillness, Eliot connects the generative void with sublime revelation. The speaker repeats the word “still” twice: once in reference to “high tide” and again concerning the “seas of experience.” Interestingly, Eliot places the word

⁵⁴⁸ T. S. Eliot, “Silence,” in *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems, 1909-1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (San Diego: Harcourt Brace), 1998. 18.

“still” in close proximity to phrases that describe a most unstill entity: The ocean. This juxtaposition renders the chaotic, ever-moving ocean as powerless against the existential stillness that has the ability to halt its motion. While “stillness” is often interpreted as events of calm and tranquility, the speaker claims to be “terrified” at the “peace” he feels. This eliminates the possibility for a purely serene stillness. Instead, this framing of the concept of stillness implies nothingness; that is, if a thing is “still,” it is unmoving, unanimated, and even aimless. However, rather than succumbing to this abyss of motionlessness, the speaker calls it “the hour for which we waited.” The collective “we” shows that this revelation effects not only him, but perhaps the whole modern landscape. Specifically, his removing the nothingness’s unconstructiveness, and ascribing the feature of abundance to it, as Cunningham argues, uses nothing as a metaphysical tool out of which “something” generates. For the speaker in “Silence,” something indeed does emerge from the stillness: a sublime event, the “ultimate hour / When life is justified.” While Eliot does not say what the stillness reveals, this sublime, generative void divulges something, and this “something” is profound.

While Eliot illustrates the revelatory properties of stillness in “Silence,” the poet adds a transformative capacity to the generative void in “Bacchus and Ariadne: 2nd Debate between the Body and Soul” (1911). Rather than eliciting a “terrifying peace,” Eliot’s silence in this poem shows a space that directly facilitates a progressing change in condition. Interestingly, this poem’s first title bears a striking resemblance to Nietzsche’s anecdote in *Beyond Good and Evil* that casts Dionysus as the tempter who leads humanity to the abyss’s precipice. For Gordon, “Bacchus and Ariadne” shows Eliot’s

movement toward a religious and specifically Christian disposition that pushes beyond the unresolved spirituality of “Silence.”⁵⁴⁹ However, this poem can be read through a philosophical lens given Eliot’s thorough and contemporaneous reading of Kant’s, Spinoza’s, and Hegel’s old nihilism while writing his *March Hare* poems. The speaker describes “a ring of silence” that “closes around [him] and annuls / These sudden insights that have marched across / Like railway-engines over desert planes.”⁵⁵⁰ The silence here acts as a barrier between the speaker and the noise of the outside “drums of life” that threaten to “break like waves” on his “skull,” as they ultimately shattered the lives of other individuals alluded to in the poem.⁵⁵¹ It is the soul that experiences a change in this poem due to the silence’s protective embrace.⁵⁵² Therefore, a generative, transformative void in the poem’s busy midst effectively deflects the chaos of the “drums” and “floods of life.” In this instance, something “pure” is growing from the void that the silence cultivates:

Not to set free the purity that clings
To the cautious midnight of its chrysalis
Lies in its cell and meditates on its wings
Nourished in earth and stimulated by manure.⁵⁵³

⁵⁴⁹ Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, 61.

⁵⁵⁰ T. S. Eliot, “Bacchus and Ariadne: 2nd Debate between the Body and Soul,” in *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems, 1909-1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (San Diego: Harcourt Brace), 1998. 68.

⁵⁵¹ T. S. Eliot, “Bacchus and Ariadne,” 68.

⁵⁵² Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, 56.

⁵⁵³ T. S. Eliot, “Bacchus and Ariadne,” 68.

The soul hangs in a transformative “chrysalis.” The void of silence encloses it in a generative sheath that implies metamorphosis; this transformation is made possible by silence’s nurturing power. As Gordon observes, the soul longs to “unfurl its purity” but remains in its cocoon because it is “fearful that it will miss its moment of birth due to excessive caution.”⁵⁵⁴ Because of silence’s ability to repel the poem’s piercing clamor, something beautiful is conceivable, if not actualized yet. In this poem, Eliot has thus expanded his conception of the generative void: Through silence, the void functions as a protective barrier and a space for creation.

Eliot also hints that the void must first be completely emptied before it can foster creation. More like a poetic exercise than a finished piece, the undated “In silent corridors of death” shows Eliot developing the language of negation that he will use more viscerally in *The Hollow Men* and the *Four Quartets*. This exercise begins and ends in death, the ultimate metaphysical nothingness. However, the speaker’s rendering of “death” is complex and rather than signifying utter despair and darkness, it possesses pleasing qualities. The speaker meditates,

In silent corridors of death
Short sighs and stifled breath,
Short breath and silent sighing;
Somewhere the soul crying.
And I wander alone
Without haste without hope without fear
Without pressure or touch —
There is no moan
Of Souls dying
Nothing here

⁵⁵⁴ Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, 56.

But the warm
Dry airless sweet scent
Of the alleys of death
Of the corridors of death⁵⁵⁵

Eliot begins the exercise in rhyming couplets, only to break that scheme in the fifth line. The couplets' quick pace and "short sighs" immediately slow with the speaker "wandering alone" in the next image. This slowing reflects the vastness of death, or nothingness, which the speaker navigates "without haste." More significantly, however, Eliot employs Spinoza's maxim that "all determination is negation" to characterize his response to the void through which he walks. The speaker eliminates "haste," "hope," and "fear" from his being and even appears to lose his bodily senses of "pressure and touch." In effect, he reduces himself to a type of "nothing" to better understand the void's nothingness. Interestingly, this space contains nothing, not even a "moan" of a "dying soul." However, the speaker senses a "sweet scent," the only discernable characteristic of this void. Here, Eliot indicates that the void, while vast and empty, is a generative space with a positive capacity. By perceiving the nothingness as a "nothing" himself, the poet shows that complete emptiness does not exist. For Eliot, the generative void becomes clearer.

In his *March Hare* poems, Eliot does not fully realize the generative void's power to sustain reality. However, through images of stillness and silence, he gestures toward a

⁵⁵⁵ T. S. Eliot, "in silent corridors of death," in *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems, 1909-1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (San Diego: Harcourt Brace), 1998. 93.

procreative nothingness that sees the void's creative potential. During this time, the poet was already reading Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel, and he even borrows from Spinoza's negation and Kant's sublime to articulate the potential in nothing that he perceives. This is a vision that Eliot develops as his career progresses.

“Between” and “The Shadow”: A Generative Nothing in *The Hollow Men*

After the *March Hare* poems, Eliot's formation of the generative void becomes more refined. During the decade following writing his early *March Hare* poems, Eliot experienced spiritual and personal deterioration not in small part due to his marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood, the tumult which ultimately fostered the mindset that “led to *The Waste Land*” in 1922.⁵⁵⁶ In a sense, Eliot indeed saw himself led to the edge of the abyss, and his journey back from its threshold is due in no small part to his conversion to Christianity. In *The Hollow Men* (1925), Eliot depicts the endgame of *The Waste Land*'s society: a stripping away and disappearance of the world in true Kantian fashion, but after such an abstraction transpires, the search for meaning and truth can begin.

As what is perhaps his most outwardly desolate poem, Eliot's generative void in *The Hollow Men* is hidden from view. “We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men,” the characters almost proudly declare; they compare themselves to effigies “filled with straw” who reside in the “dead...cactus land” where the dryness is almost suffocating.⁵⁵⁷ Even when their voices “whisper together,” the result is “quiet and

⁵⁵⁶ Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, 119.

⁵⁵⁷ T. S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men* in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1980. 56,57.

meaningless.”⁵⁵⁸ In the poem’s handwritten draft, I noticed that Eliot squeezed the line “Walking alone” between “In death’s other kingdom” and “At the hour when we are,” as if the setting demanded another injection of loneliness.⁵⁵⁹ The poem’s structure, with its short lines and stanzas, underscores the setting’s materially and spiritually forsaken atmosphere. However, Eliot’s underlining of “qui negant dari vacuum” in his copy of the *Ethics* (1677) coupled with his consistent marking of passages that discuss the infiniteness of substance suggests that the land of the hollow men is not an empty vacuum. Rather, it is a setting primed for change.

Eliot’s interest in Spinoza’s “vacuum” statement is particularly relevant for *The Hollow Men*; it shows the poet’s disinclination to accept absolute nothingness. In an innovative investigation of Spinozan vacancy, Jonathan Bennett renders Spinoza’s assertion that “there cannot be vacuum” as follows:

Suppose there are three contiguous cubic bodies—A, B, and C—of which the middle one, B, is annihilated while every other body in the universe, including A and C, is held still...The annihilation of a body B was just a thinning out...in that region of space, that the ‘something’ lying between A and C after the annihilation of B is the very same ‘something’ that lay there before B was annihilated.⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁸ T. S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*, 56.

⁵⁵⁹ Typescript of poem *The Hollow Men* by T. S. Eliot, 1925. MS-HB, Box V, Folder 5, Hayward Bequest, King’s College Cambridge Archive Centre, Cambridge, England.

⁵⁶⁰ Spinoza’s footnote reads as follows: “If corporeal substance could be so divided that its parts were redly distinct, why, then, could one part not be annihilated, the rest remaining connected with one another as before? And why must they all be so fitted together that there is no vacuum? Truly, of things which are really distinct from one another, one can be, and remain in its condition, without the other. Since therefore there is no vacuum in Nature (this is discussed elsewhere), but all of its parts must so concur that there is no vacuum, it follows that they cannot be really distinguished, i.e. that corporeal substance, insofar as it is substance, cannot be divided.”; Johnathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), 1984. 396.

Though Bennett's distillation might seem as dense as Spinoza's original wording, he makes a significant observation: That for Spinoza, true annihilation is not possible, and absolutely empty space is impossible. In other words, Spinoza denies that an abyss of absolute nothing can exist; rather, while annihilation might render a change in the form of a body, such an act does not eradicate it absolutely. This idea combined with Spinoza's argument from the *Ethics* that "For each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason, both for its existence and for its nonexistence" demonstrates Spinoza's attraction to a generative nothingness. As Jeffery Howard argues, the imagery and setting of this poem allow for "the presence of both nihilism and hopeful expectation on the part [of the hollow men]." ⁵⁶¹ Their posture, outlook, and act of "leaning together" back to back and head to head, as Howard argues, functions as an imitation of Janus, the Roman god of beginnings, whose two faces see the past and know the future. ⁵⁶²

Eliot's language of negation picks up on this "hopeful expectation" and suggests that the hollow men occupy a prolific void rather than a fruitless abyss. The speakers' repeated references to "without" and "between" exemplify this. While the second stanza, "Shape without form, shade without color, / Paralyzed force, gesture without motion" describe these hollow, incomplete entities, the lines also illustrate the land itself. The "raised, stone images" of this "dead land" lack vigor, and even the hollow men's gestural plea, the "supplication of a dead man's hand," evaporates "under the twinkling of a

⁵⁶¹ Jeffrey Howard, "T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*," *The Explicator* 70, no.1 (2012): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2012.656736>.

⁵⁶² Jeffrey Howard, "*The Hollow Men*," 9.

fading star.” However, “shape,” “shade,” and “gesture” all scrape together a forward potency: the three repetitions of “without” do not indicate “without the possibility of meaning,” but instead that meaning fails to exist yet. The hollow men inhabit a plane of flat, one-dimensional “shape” rather than the three-dimensional composition of “form.” They see in “shades,” but not the more potent “color,” and the small “gesture” rather than the large “motion” characterizes the movement that the hollow men perceive. Here, Eliot seems to again borrow from Spinoza’s *Ethics*. Under the first note to Proposition VIII, “every substance is necessarily infinite,” Eliot scribbled the phrase “all determination is negation,” quotes included.⁵⁶³ This phrase comes directly from Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, a text that Eliot also read in detail, where Hegel paraphrases one of Spinoza’s key ideas: his meditation on substance. To claim a thing is something is to simultaneously say it is not many other things. Eliot followed this logic when fashioning the void in *The Hollow Men*: to say what the poem’s personae and their environment *are*, he first needed to say what they *are not*. Since Eliot read these texts before his clear conversion to Christianity, this philosophical negation predates his reading of St. John of the Cross and thus his clear use of the *via negativa*.

At this point, the poem’s space is incomplete and transitional, but the idea of “between” begins to animate the void. While Hay maintains that the hollow men exist strictly between Heaven and Hell, I contend that Eliot’s use of “between” begins the concrete formation of the generative void, an endeavor that Eliot began in his *March*

⁵⁶³ Benedictus de Spinoza, *Opera*, 1895, MS-HB, Box B, Folder 27, The Hayward Bequest, King’s College Archive Centre, Cambridge, England.

Hare poems.⁵⁶⁴ Eliot first introduces “between” by name in Part V, directly after the hollow men chant “Here we go round the prickly pear...at five o’clock in the morning.”⁵⁶⁵ In a play on the children’s nursery rhyme “Here We Go ‘Round the Mulberry Bush,” the hollow men lack the concept of a green, lush plant filled with nourishing berries, so they sing about the only paradigm of vegetation that they seem to know: a sharp, arid, prickly pear cactus. Interestingly, though, prickly pear cacti do produce consumable fruit and strikingly vibrant flowers; the potential for beauty, creation, and satiation therefore exists for the hollow men, but the speakers fail to fully comprehend this opportunity. Furthermore, Eliot’s inclusion of “five o’clock in the morning,” the traditional time of Christ’s resurrection, emphasizes the latent creative possibility of the hollow men’s environment. While their dancing in an apocalyptic circle around the cactus could be read as the hollow men’s ignorance of Christ’s resurrection,

⁵⁶⁴ In *T. S. Eliot’s Negative Way*, Hay argues that the hollow men exist between “The Kingdom of Heaven...and evidently Hell,” which is “no dream and all to possible” for the hollow men to enter (85-86); Interestingly, Eliot’s meditation on “betweenness” extends late into his career. For instance, Eliot discusses the concept of “between” as it relates to the human mind in his 1937 introduction to *Revelation*, a compilation of theological essays. He states:

“The human mind is perpetually driven between two desires, between two dreams each of which may be either a vision or a nightmare: the vision and nightmare of the material world, and the vision and nightmare of the immaterial. Each may be in turn, or for different minds, a refuge to which to fly, or a horror from which to escape. We desire and fear both sleep and waking; the day brings relief from the night, and the night brings relief from the day; we go to sleep as to death, and we wake as to damnation. We move, outside of the Christian faith, between the terror of the purely irrational and the horror of the purely rational.”

⁵⁶⁵ T. S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*, 58.

this act again ushers in the concept of “between”: the hollow men exist somewhere between salvation and barrenness.

Developing this concept further, Eliot also uses “between” to combat the utter nothingness of the landscape by offering respite through the Shadow. However, this is not the first time that Eliot introduces a shadow into his poetry. In *The Waste Land* (1922), the speaker commands the listener to take shelter from the suffocating dryness in the shadow:

There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.⁵⁶⁶

The shadow of *The Waste Land* is tempting, and the speaker promises a revelation if the listener “comes in” under it. That revelation, however, is decay. Despite this shadow’s ominous nature, Eliot’s allusion to Isaiah 32 in these lines suggests an eventual generative void.⁵⁶⁷ The Bible verse promises that “The effect of righteousness will be

⁵⁶⁶ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1980. 38.

⁵⁶⁷ The full verse of Isaiah 32 is as follows: “See, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice. Each will be like a hiding-place from the wind, a covert from the tempest like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land. Then the eyes of those who have sight will not be closed, and the ears of those who have hearing will listen.”

peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust for-ever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation.”⁵⁶⁸

Eliot’s shadowy space in *The Hollow Men*, on the other hand, is less opaquely generative and ushers in a betweenness that can foster transformation. The personae state:

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow⁵⁶⁹

Here, the proper noun “Shadow” is the closest entity in the poem to a void. The personae seem to lack first-hand knowledge of this void-like space—they have never seen it themselves and can merely speculate—but they are aware of its existence. A shadow, while a body of uncertainty, personifies betweenness; one only forms when an object stands between a light source and the surface. Though a place of obscurity and partial darkness, a shadow also represents a trace, or an indistinct image or idea: a thing that is evolving. The shadow serves as a third space amid two related but different concepts that defines a missing catalyst. This catalyst will turn an “idea” into “reality” and usher the “potency” into “existence.”

In a stanza that pits Platonic and Aristotelian considerations of essence and existence against one another, Eliot again locates an additional place the “shadow” can possibly be: “Between the potency / And the existence / Between the essence / And the

⁵⁶⁸ Isaiah 32: 17-18 Revised Standard Version.

⁵⁶⁹ T. S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*, 58.

descent.”⁵⁷⁰ Plato declares that essence is the ideal and can be expressed in less perfect terms on our plane. Aristotle, however, responds that matter only has potency until form gives it essence, an idea that opens the possibility for something to generate from nothing.⁵⁷¹ Kant takes this idea one step further in Section VI of his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and states that existence is not a property:

Everywhere around us we observe a chain of causes and effects, of means and ends, of death and birth; and, as nothing has entered of itself into the condition in which we find it, we are constantly referred to some other thing, which itself suggests the same inquiry regarding its cause, and thus the universe must sink into the abyss of nothingness, unless we admit that, besides this infinite chain of contingencies, there exists something that is primal and self-subsistent—something which, as the cause of this phenomenal world, secures its continuance and preservation.⁵⁷²

It is toward this Kantian “something,” represented by the murky, nondescript image of a “shadow,” that Eliot is moving in *The Hollow Men*: a “something” that incorporates essence, existence, and potency that resists the abyss of nothingness. The italicized “*For Thine is the Kingdom*” that concludes the stanza, while a clear allusion to the Lord’s Prayer, also could be a narrative voice pointing to that “space between” as the answer to two competing ideas in the stanza; that is, the “shadow” is the personae’s “kingdom.”

⁵⁷⁰ T. S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*, 59.

⁵⁷¹ Eliot studied both Plato and Aristotle while a graduate student at Harvard with Irving Babbitt and George Santayana and Harold Joachim, respectively. As Joseph Maddrey states in *The Making of T. S. Eliot*, a young Eliot had endeavored to replace the religious studied of his youth with Plato’s and Aristotle’s philosophies, which “left him with a fragmented view of the metaphysical world.”

⁵⁷² Scholars mostly agree that Aristotle’s and Kant’s philosophies align on this issue; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 348.

In this yet undefined “between” space, prayer operates as another indication of an emptying out that forecasts a building up. While the hollow men abandon their incomplete, broken prayer rather abruptly, it indicates a movement toward resolution instead of a glaring failure. As the personae attempt to recite the Lord’s Prayer, rather than becoming stronger and ending as a completed undertaking, the prayer manifests as fragments that diminish in physical line length as well as finished content:

For Thine is the Kingdom

For Thine is
Life is
For Thine is the⁵⁷³

Eliot structures these lines in a way that shows the hollow men dissecting the meaning of the completed line of prayer, struggling to comprehend it. The fragments diminish in dimension until only the idea of “Life is” remains, as if that is the query that needs to be answered. The next fragment then begins to swell in length and content; while the idea is still incomplete at the stanza’s close, it gestures toward the desire to build upon its forward-progress. Eliot signifies this through the lack of punctuation at the stanza’s close.

Finally, Eliot ends *The Hollow Men* with a Hegelian maneuver that elicits an annihilation of annihilation itself. For Hegel, the absolute is the nothing that negates itself, but this annihilation is not the harbinger of utter destruction. Instead, Hegelian annihilation is temporary, and to understand such obliteration is to overcome it.⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁷³ T. S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*, 59.

⁵⁷⁴ Michael Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 117.

Hegel's "overcoming" leaps directly from the void, born into the world as an opportunity for creation; he declares, "out of this abyss of nothing...the feeling: God is dead...the highest totality in its complete seriousness and out of its deepest ground, at once all-encompassing and in the most joyful freedom of its form can and must arise."⁵⁷⁵ In other words, no finite or infinite being exists, but all things are collapsed into the idea of negation, which then facilitates a surmounting. This is a nihilism that rebounds and reconstitutes itself as the most comprehensive form order.⁵⁷⁶ In the poem's final stanza, the hollow men chant "*This is the way the world ends ... / Not with a bang but a whimper.*"⁵⁷⁷ Their repeating of "This *IS* the way the world ends" (my emphasis added on "is") appears almost like a command: the hollow men, in perhaps their only deliberate exploit, actively *will* the obliteration of their domain. However, that obliteration does not terminate with an abrupt, harsh "bang" but rather a quiet, soft, prolonged "whimper." As Howard observes, the poem's ending is an "unexpected and almost silent precursor to a spiritual beginning at which they may arrive only by breaching the barrier of despair and death."⁵⁷⁸ By the poem's close, Eliot uses the silence of the void to elicit a multiplicative outcome that annihilates the world and reduces it to nihility.

⁵⁷⁵ Georg Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, 358.

⁵⁷⁶ Michael Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 117.

⁵⁷⁷ T. S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*, 59.

⁵⁷⁸ Jeffrey Howard, "The Hollow Men," 11.

Between and Negation: Ash Wednesday

While the stylistic elements of Eliot's poetry may have evolved by the time he wrote *Ash Wednesday*, he has not reached a theological answer to the "overwhelming question" despite officially converting to Christianity three years earlier. Because of this, Eliot's adoption of old, generative nihilism continues to be valuable in *Ash Wednesday* regardless of the poem's potent religious references and contemplative tone. This post-conversion connection to old nihilism further underscores Eliot's reliance on Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel for his images of generative nothingness.

After the publication of *The Hollow Men*, Eliot experienced several significant life changes. In 1927, he renounced his American citizenship and officially became a British subject, and also formally converted to Anglicanism when he was baptized into the Church of England. Perhaps unsurprisingly, such changes also elicited demonstrable shifts in his way of thinking and, by extension, his poetry, as scholars have investigated. As John Xiros Cooper observes, it is a mistake to say that *Ash Wednesday* (1930), for example, does not contain instances of irony as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady" do. However, more precisely, the irony's "aim and function are quite different": the focus in *Ash Wednesday* is instead the "believer himself" rather than the "emblem of a culture rotted through relativism."⁵⁷⁹

⁵⁷⁹ John Xiros Cooper, *T. S. Eliot and the Ideology of Four Quartets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1995. 7.

Ash Wednesday is a “conversion poem” that possesses noticeable philosophical underpinnings. Craig Raine argues that the poem serves to narrate the journey, struggle and experience of an individual who previously lacked faith and has since resolved to turn to God; however, discussion has moved beyond the poem’s theological implications to interrogate its philosophical engagement.⁵⁸⁰ Donald Childs, for instance, notes that a piece of Eliot’s religious struggle in *Ash Wednesday* is to “allow not just the dogmatic Truth of Christianity, but the small ‘t’ truth of pragmatism.”⁵⁸¹ Eliot’s own explanation of the poem, however, perhaps obscures rather than elucidates his own intent, and when explaining the rationale behind *Ash Wednesday*, the poet has a few things to say. He calls the poem a “modern *Vita Nuova*,” but an understanding of the *Vita* only might be helpful in deciphering the poem.⁵⁸² Eliot also addresses the poem’s association with Christianity. In a May 1930 letter to M. C. D’Arcy, Eliot claims,

I don’t consider [*Ash Wednesday*] any more ‘religious’ verse than anything else I have written: I mean that it attempts to state a particular phase of progress of one person. If that progress is in the direction of ‘religion’, I can’t help that; it is I suppose the only direction in which progress is possible.⁵⁸³

⁵⁸⁰ Craig Raine, *T. S. Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2006. 22.

⁵⁸¹ In Childs’s investigation of *Ash Wednesday*, he argues that the pragmatic statements in Eliot’s dissertation are strongly echoed in the poem. For instance, the lines “Because I know that time is always time / And place is always and only place / And what is actual is actual only for one time / And only for one place” appear in Eliot’s dissertation as “the line between the experienced, or the given, and the constructed can nowhere be clearly drawn.”

⁵⁸² T. S. Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot: Volume 5, 1930-1931*. Eds. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (New Haven: Yale University Press), 2015. Xli.

⁵⁸³ T. S. Eliot, *Letters Volume 5*, 201.

Regardless of its potential religiosity, Eliot extends his consideration of the generative void in *Ash Wednesday* to more comprehensively elucidate the “between” space that he carved out in *The Hollow Men*.

The generative void gains more clarity in *Ash Wednesday* as Eliot applies his reading of old nihilism to the poem. Compared to its seven appearances in *The Hollow Men*, “between” appears 15 times in *Ash Wednesday*, so this idea is clearly still on Eliot’s mind after his conversion. While the speaker, much like the hollow men, narrates the experience of “One who moves in the time between sleep and waking,” he consistently ruminates on the notion of the “Word,” a thing of potency and reality.⁵⁸⁴ It is perhaps the speaker’s fixation on this Word that most clearly separates him from the barren hollow men. He states:

The Word without a word, the Word within
The world and for the world;
And the light shone in darkness and
Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled
About the centre of the silent Word.⁵⁸⁵

While Eliot’s use of the “Word” conjures religious connotations, its close physical placement to “silent” in the stanza is reminiscent of the old nihilistic use of silence in “Silence” and “Bacchus and Ariadne.” That is, the “silent Word” acts as a container, a void that contrasts with the “unstilled world” from which the metaphysical meaning that

⁵⁸⁴ T. S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday* in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1980. 64.

⁵⁸⁵ T. S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday*, 65.

the speaker desires can spring. While the speaker's language, with its abundance of alliteration and slant rhyme, may inject the stanza with an air of bewilderment, the "Word" exists as the fixed point around which the world "whirls," whose "centre" can sustain reality. Furthermore, in an evolution from the description of the moth's feverish circling around the candle flame in "The Burnt Dancer" (1914), Eliot uses dance imagery to consider a generative void. Here, however, the dance becomes more structured. For A.V. C. Schmidt, the formal pattern and fluid movement of the above stanza is evocative of a melodic dance's rhythmed vacillations that encourages the whirling of the world around the Word.⁵⁸⁶ Through this structure, Eliot again uses the typically Dionysian dance as a way to implement order in the space of the poem and reclaims it as Apollonian, thereby distancing the abyss of the "darkness," an ambition that he will fully actualize in the *Four Quartets*.

This idea coupled with the speaker's repeated, prayer-like chant of "Teach us to care and not to care / Teach us to sit still" shows the need for a stillness that is neither motion nor arrest.⁵⁸⁷ Here, idea of "betweenness" is perhaps where Eliot establishes his first palpable motion toward the idea of a "still point," which he will meditate on intently in the *Four Quartets*. In the poem's fourth section, the speaker meditates:

This is the time of tension between dying and birth
The place of solitude where three dreams cross
Between blue rocks

⁵⁸⁶ A.V.C. Schmidt, *Passion and Precision: Collected Essays on English Poetry from Geoffrey Chaucer to Geoffrey Hill* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), 2015. 320.

⁵⁸⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday*, 67.

But when the voices shaken from the yew-tree drift away
Let the other yew be shaken and reply.⁵⁸⁸

The speaker grasps that by learning to “sit still,” he may find quietness that he seeks, which lies in a land of dreamy, amorphous “solitude.” This stillness and solitude again indicates a “space between,” a generative void that facilitates creation. Furthermore, the speaker’s command that the “other yew” be shaken suggests a sublime transformation. At this point, the yew tree’s transformative capacity is latent. However, once the tree is shaken, its power will be prompted in one sublime moment that leads us to the poem’s serene “cry unto thee.”

In *The Hollow Men* and *Ash Wednesday*, Eliot uses his reading of old nihilism to both eliminate the world in Hegelian fashion and find a generative void that can buttress a strong metaphysical and epistemological reality. Through Spinozan negation, Eliot makes the idea of “betweenness” desirable and prepares the landscape for the “still point” that he reaches in the *Four Quartets*.

The Plentitude of Vacancy: The *Four Quartets*

After 1935, Eliot solidified his authority as a master of modern and avant-garde poetry through a string of successful poems and plays, and his publishing authority at Faber & Faber helped to shape a second generation of modernist writers.⁵⁸⁹ As the threat of yet another world war loomed over Europe and America, the late 1930s and early

⁵⁸⁸ T. S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday*, 64.

⁵⁸⁹ John Xiros Cooper, *Ideology of the Four Quartets*, 103-104.

1940s witnessed a repeat of societal upheaval, and during this time, Eliot wrestled with his own internal tumult. The *Four Quartets* (1943) exhibit Eliot's struggle with both internal and external enigmata. As Gordon observes, beginning with "acute personal reminiscence—reunion with an old love or 'things ill done and done to others' harm"—*Four Quartets* recounts Eliot's struggle to recast his lot during his years in the clergyhouse at Kensington," which inspired the initial title, "Kensington Quartets."⁵⁹⁰

Eliot views ordinary life as "waste": In *The Waste Land* waste is "a place, a city full of hopeless inhabitants," while in the *Four Quartets*, the "waste is time."⁵⁹¹ This "waste," the modern manifestation of physical and metaphysical useless emptiness, however, can be overcome and reconciled if considered in terms of old nihilism. As Cooper points out, the *Four Quartets* show Eliot's response to a nihilistic threat that Herbert Read, a coworker of Eliot's at Faber & Faber, claimed had all but entirely engulfed the mindset of the time.⁵⁹² To further expand upon this point, literary critic F. R. Leavis astutely observes that "the explorations which [the *Four Quartets*] propose for itself mean plunging deep into regions of the equivocal."⁵⁹³ Leavis does not have old nihilism in mind when considering Eliot's "regions of the equivocal," but he nevertheless

⁵⁹⁰ Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, 338.

⁵⁹¹ Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot, An Imperfect Life*, 4.

⁵⁹² In the introduction to his "War Diary," Read asserts, "The greatest task of humanity, not that 'God is dead', is, as Nietzsche was the first to realize, the conquest of nihilism. The world has not made much progress in that direction since his famous announcement...Nihilism—nothingness, despair, and the nervous hilarity that goes with them—remains the universal state of mind" (69).

⁵⁹³ F.R. Leavis, *The Living Principle: English As a Discipline of Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1975. 160.

calls attention to a negative, amorphous space that Eliot uses to buttress reality and reveal truth. While Eliot does interrogate the quandary of the new nihilism in his previous poetry, the resolution that he presents in the *Four Quartets* contains his most visceral poetic image of the generative void: A “still point” that the poet gleaned from his reading of old nihilism around which the ever “turning world” rotates, a place that facilitates motion and growth.⁵⁹⁴

Eliot’s reading of old nihilism even gives a more comprehensive picture of his poetic method in the *Quartets*. Although Eliot’s use of the *via negativa* in his poetry—especially the *Quartets*—has garnered much critical attention, his old nihilistic response to emptiness and disarray is sensible; this approach directly takes into account the metaphysical nothingness to which Eliot responds.⁵⁹⁵ In the *Four Quartets*, Eliot aims to answer the question “in what way does one go about locating value in a painful, seemingly meaningless, modern history?” The *via negativa* and its endeavor to know and understand an intangible and eternal God might be one way to interrogate this conundrum, but Eliot’s question is grounded in the present and corporeal. The old

⁵⁹⁴ Conversely, as William Skaff contends, these “still points” represent Eliot’s mystical experiences, and Miller argues that they embody the places where God’s pattern can be perceived (21; 188). Indeed, poetry is mystical according to Eliot, “when it intends to convey, and succeeds in conveying, to the reader...the statement of a perfectly definite experience which we call the mystical experience ... Instead of being obscure, it will be pellucid” (“The Silurist” 190). However, Eliot’s statement, Skaff insightfully proposes, is the reason why other scholars have “studied Eliot’s intellectual and poetic development strictly in terms of mystical experience and religious vision” (208). But to do so is to miss the generative old nihilism that Eliot draws upon to make sense of new nihilism in a modern society that is on the cusp of change.

⁵⁹⁵ See Hay, *T. S. Eliot’s Negative Way* (1982) and Fayek Ishak, *The Mystical Philosophy of T. S. Eliot* (1970)

nihilism of Kant, Spinoza, and Hegel that Eliot read as a graduate student speaks to the worldliness of this question, a consideration that the *via negativa* alone does not entirely reflect. Here, Eliot realizes what the personae in *The Hollow Men* and even the speaker of *Ash Wednesday* do not: the uniting of the Apollonian mode and old, generative nihilism. Through this uniting, Eliot fashions a third space as a position that orders time and place and unites the three old nihilist's philosophies. This unity reimagines the abyss as a void with filling potential that can order the Dionysian chaos and draw sense out of the nonsensical.

In the *Quartets*, Eliot recognizes the need for a stable space where the relationship between the order of logos and the change of flux can exist concurrently. This is the point where an emptied void, a metaphysical space between “plentitude and vacancy,” promotes the possibility for a generative, old nihilism to reclaim the Nietzschean abyss. Eliot imagines this void, the “space between” that the poet references in his *March Hare* poems, *The Hollow Men*, and *Ash Wednesday*, as a foundational, Apollonian structure that has the power to sustain order and existence and remove the negativity of nothingness. For Spinoza, plentitude and emptiness exist together, but are not contradictory or dichotomous. Generally, the principle of plentitude from the *Ethics* (or, the principle of sufficient reason) asserts that the universe contains all possible forms of ideas. Specifically, Spinoza, according to historian of ideas Arthur Lovejoy, “expressed

the principle of plentitude in its most uncompromising form” and “represented it as necessary in the strict logical sense.”⁵⁹⁶

Eliot’s idea of plentitude is another instance where the poet gains important from Spinoza’s old nihilism. In his copy of the *Ethics*, Eliot annotated Proposition I; this is where Spinoza first introduces his principle of plentitude, which the philosopher describes as, “What cannot be conceived through another, must be conceived through itself.”⁵⁹⁷ Furthermore, Lovejoy states that Spinoza’s interest in the principle of plentitude was not the idea that everything that “logically can and will be must be,” but rather a “consideration that everything that is must, by the eternal logical nature of things, have been, and have been precisely as it is.”⁵⁹⁸ Plentitude is the “consequence” of Spinoza’s dialectic, the sense of the utter inevitability of every characteristic and every vicissitude of human life, that was most congenial to his own moral temper and seemed to him most fitted to free men from the torment of the passions.⁵⁹⁹ Eliot employs this “freedom from” that Spinoza aims to gain via the principle of plentitude in the *Four Quartets*. In “Burnt Norton,” for instance, the speaker meditates on “The inner freedom from the practical desire, / The release from action and suffering, release from the inner / And the outer compulsion” that will yield a sense of spiritual fulfillment.⁶⁰⁰ Plentitude on

⁵⁹⁶ Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (London: Taylor and Francis), 2017. 155.

⁵⁹⁷ Benedictus de Spinoza, *Opera*, 1895, MS-HB, Box B, Folder 27, The Hayward Bequest, King’s College Archive Centre, Cambridge, England; Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4.

⁵⁹⁸ Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 155.

⁵⁹⁹ Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 155.

⁶⁰⁰ T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” 119.

its own, however, is not enough to supply Eliot or Spinoza with the answer. Emptiness is also necessary because it provides that space for a generative void, that from which creation and fulfillment can spring.

In *The Hollow Men*, Eliot primes the modern landscape for a prolific void, but he gives that void substance in the *Four Quartets*. This void, a space preceded by the “shadow” in *The Hollow Men*, is the metaphysical consequence of “betweenness” and “the still point”; it exists as a space not yet made or imagined and is a plane beyond time. Eliot continues to determine the void through negation as “Burnt Norton” progresses. In the second section, the speaker states:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline.⁶⁰¹

Interestingly, according to the typescript for “Burnt Norton,” which I examined while at the King’s College Archive Center, this stanza remained essentially unchanged from the first draft to the poem’s published copy. This idea, then, must have been evident to Eliot from the beginning. For his point to be clear, Eliot must form one unified image of what two opposing concepts might look like. The repetition of “neither from nor towards” reinforces a stillness that first appears in “Silence,” but instead of being “terrified” at the “peace,” the speaker yearns for it. Furthermore, Eliot’s use of negative language to

⁶⁰¹ T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” 119.

describe the still point is, as Francesca Cauchi observes, a reaction against Nietzsche's argument⁶⁰² that a "turning away" is a "will to nothingness, to nihilism."⁶⁰³ For Eliot, this turning away and subsequent fixating on a particular point represents a search for the value construction that the still point, a void where the seeds of order and meaning, can be planted. The opposing concepts, "flesh" and "fleshless"; "arrest" and "movement"; "ascent" and "decline" negate each other to form a space that combines "past and "present."

Eliot progressively translates the still point's immateriality into a more palpable terms as the *Quartets* continue, and to do so, he borrows more language from his reading of old nihilism. In the third section of "Burnt Norton," uses more negative language to describe the still point, but he implies that it exists beyond purgation:

Here is a place of disaffection
Time before and time after
In a dim light: neither daylight
Investing form with lucid stillness
Turning shadow into transient beauty
With slow rotation suggesting permanence
Nor darkness to purify the soul

⁶⁰² For Nietzsche, the aesthetic ideal "suffering was interpreted, the enormous emptiness seemingly filled, [and] the door shut against all suicidal nihilism. ... [T]his abhorrence of the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and beauty, this longing for the beyond, away from all appearance, change, becoming, death, desire, even longing itself—all this means, let us dare to grasp it, a will to nothingness, an antipathy to life, a revolt against the most fundamental conditions of life, but it is and remains a will!" (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, III, sec. 28)

⁶⁰³ Francesca Cauchi, "Romantic Skepticism and the Descent into Nihilism in T. S. Eliot's 'Burnt Norton,'" *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture* 64, no. 1: 9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20512856.2016.1221619>.

Emptying the sensual with deprivation
Cleansing affection from the temporal.⁶⁰⁴

This “place” cannot “cleanse” or “purify” because those acts have conceivably already occurred. The “disaffection” that begins the stanza harkens back to the shadowy betweenness of *The Hollow Men*. It is a space of disillusionment, isolation, and emptiness. However, “disaffection” implies action, a deliberate purgation to reach a space of complete nothingness. As the speaker implies through “here,” we have finally reached such a place. The “betweenness” of *The Hollow Men* and *Ash Wednesday* still exists, but this betweenness exists beyond the realm of the “shadow” and possesses God-like qualities; qualities of Spinoza’s One Substance.

After Eliot uses negating language to purge the still point until only generative emptiness remains, he gives it qualities that resemble Spinoza’s One Substance. In the third section of “Burnt Norton,” Eliot uses several words in a short space that characterize this void:

Neither plenitude nor vacancy. Only a flicker
Over the strained time-ridden faces
Distracted from distraction by distraction
Filled with fancies and empty of meaning
Tumid apathy with no concentration
Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind
That blows before and after time,
Wind in and out of unwholesome lungs
Time before and time after.⁶⁰⁵

⁶⁰⁴ T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” 120.

⁶⁰⁵ T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” 120.

When Eliot states “neither plentitude nor vacancy,” he does not mean to reject either concept. Instead, Spinoza’s axiom “all determination is negation” returns. Eliot uses negation to say what the void is *not* so that he can describe what it *is*. “Tumid” and “apathy” together paint an image of lethargy that is swollen and bulging over, a meaningless scene of fury whose indifference renders it useless. This idea elaborates on “filled with fancies and empty of meaning,” adding to the hollowness of the “strained time-ridden faces.” Eliot’s use of “and” to connect these ideas indicates a simultaneity between fullness and emptiness that both contradicts and resolves in a way that reflects Spinoza’s argument that perfection, which he uses synonymously with existence, requires both plentitude and “parsimony.” Considering perfection, Eliot’s notes in his copy of the *Ethics* give us a clearer indication of the still point’s infinitely negative, infinitely generative attributes. First, In Prop. VIII, Eliot underlined the following phrase:

...existence appertains to the nature of substance, [thus] existence must necessarily be included in [the One Substance’s] definition; and from its definition alone existence must be deducible...from this definition, we cannot infer the existence of several substances; therefore it follows that there is only one substance of the same nature.⁶⁰⁶

Furthermore, in Prop. X, Eliot blocked off the following phrase: “Each particular attribute of the one substance must be conceived through itself.”⁶⁰⁷ The One Substance thus has many attributes that extend from it and collapse back into it; that is, this entity is

⁶⁰⁶ Benedictus de Spinoza, *Opera*, 1895, MS-HB, Box B, Folder 27, The Hayward Bequest, King’s College Archive Centre, Cambridge, England;

⁶⁰⁷ Benedictus de Spinoza, *Opera*, 1895, MS-HB, Box B, Folder 27, The Hayward Bequest, King’s College Archive Centre, Cambridge, England; Spinoza, *Ethics*, 53.

a “still point,” a single space with many attributes. If all things flow back into the One Substance and it is the only substance that truly exists, then it is the highest form of reality. While not a direct transcription, Eliot uses Spinoza’s One Substance to imagine the still point as his highest reality, a space of total negation that is bound by neither time nor flesh.

In addition to employing language of negation, in another perhaps contradictory technique, Eliot uses the image of “the dance” in to elucidate the still point’s dynamic yet unmoving nature. The speaker in “Burnt Norton,” for instance, states “Except for the point, the still point, / There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.”⁶⁰⁸ Here, the dance seems dependent upon the still point, but the still point is simultaneously dependent upon the dance in a way that echoes Yeats’s question of “How can we know the dancer from the dance?”, a query he poses at the end of “Among School Children” (1926). Eliot uses “the dance” as a symbol for the “unmoving motion of the timeless” without relegating the “still point” to a state of true motionlessness, which would indicate death.⁶⁰⁹ Like Yeats, Eliot uses the dance and its relation to the still point to obscure the boundary between two images that ought to be separate, like a dancer and the dance itself. Eliot pushes this idea even further and shows “the dance” as simultaneously and perhaps paradoxically exhibiting motionless and motion, the attribute of the “still point.” This image of dancing implies pattern and harmony, and therefore, as William Klein

⁶⁰⁸ T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” 119.

⁶⁰⁹ Staffan Bergsten, *Time and Eternity: A Study in the Structure and Symbolism of T. S. Eliot’s Four Quartets* (Stockholm: Svenska Bokförlaget), 1960. 90.

argues, correlates skillfully with the classical concept of the logos, with which Eliot equates it.⁶¹⁰ This is a striking rhetorical inversion of Nietzsche's consideration of dancing as a representation of Dionysian fervor and ecstasy, an act of wild unrestraint. For Eliot, the dance is therefore rendered beautiful and the still point remains an ideal space beyond time and materiality.

To reach the void—Eliot's "still point,"—however, a total emptying out must indeed occur. If considered alongside Eliot's repeated reference to "between," a Kantian reduction of the subject to nothingness—a version of nothingness that utilizes an "emptying out" to prepare a space for growth—moves further toward rationalizing the void of old nihilism. As Cunningham states, Kantian philosophical discourse is "predicated on the disappearance of the world" and requires a "vanishing" to take place so that Kant can "say something about the truth."⁶¹¹ Kant's formulation of nihilism takes a rational approach as defined in his three *Critiques*: *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *The Critique of Judgment* (1790).⁶¹² Perhaps fittingly, nihilism enters the discussion through an act of disappearance. For Žižek, the Kantian subject becomes "a non-substantial void" where Kant "asserts that the

⁶¹⁰ William Klein, "Aspects of time in Eliot's *Four Quartets*," *Yeats Eliot Review* 13: 28.

⁶¹¹ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 74.

⁶¹² In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, considered by many as most important labor, Kant interrogates the nature of knowledge and concludes that, while human knowledge cannot move beyond individual experience, it is indeed *a priori* to a certain extent and is thus not learned *a posteriori*. *The Critique of Practical Reason* outlines Kant's moral philosophy and contains the discussion of the categorical imperative, his most substantial contribution to ethics. Finally, in *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant explains his aesthetics and teleological philosophy. This work also discusses his view of "the sublime."

transcendental subject is unknowable, empty.”⁶¹³ This fading of the subject is an arduous undertaking and the process requires an epistemological regression, so to speak, to complete it. In the first *Critique*, Kant wants to stake a claim about the truth, and in doing so, he reduces the world to mere appearance. As Cunningham suggests, the world must dissolve before the Kantian subject can make any assumptions, to “say” anything. The second *Critique* steals nature away from the subject to examine “the good life” without any phenomenal intrusion, and thus the subject has lost the ability to “do” anything. Finally, in the third *Critique*, the subject’s world loses all “visible objects,” and so he/she can no longer “see” anything.⁶¹⁴

Having read each of the *Critiques*, Eliot’s endeavor resembles Kant’s own; Eliot, too, was interested in arriving at an ultimate “truth” about the divine, time, and the universe. This pursuit is clear in “Little Gidding,” where the speaker aims to reach a veracity through “...detachment / From self and from things and from persons” and “indifference” that will unlock “not less of love but expanding / Of love beyond desire, and so liberation / From the future as well as the past.”⁶¹⁵ To reach this detachment, the speaker moves through stages of Kantian vanishing. He continues his journey toward the void of the still point and begins the process of shedding the extra clamor, the “attachment to self and to things and to persons,” that inhibit him from reaching the

⁶¹³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso), 1996. 124.

⁶¹⁴ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 74-75.

⁶¹⁵ T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding” in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1980. 142.

stillness and silence of the fixed point. For the speaker, though, the movement toward the void perhaps takes Kant's idea of vanishing one step further where the world of appearances itself will dissipate in the form of a disappearing of human history:

History may be servitude,
History may be freedom. See, now they vanish,
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.⁶¹⁶

People, places, and concepts “vanish” and are “renewed” at this point in the poem. Their “vanishing” is a negation that aims to rejuvenate and “renew,” and like Kant's nihilism, is necessary to reveal an authentic state. The subject disappears along with everything he knows, and an embrace of that disappearance reveals a reconfigured reality. Through the “emptying out” of Kantian vanishing, Eliot finally approaches the “still point,” the void and a nihilistic space that fosters generation rather than chaos.

The *Four Quartets*, like *The Hollow Men*, end with an image of comprehensive annihilation. However, the speaker of the *Quartets* reaches a conclusion that eludes the hollow men: that through annihilation, a reduction to silence and the absolute nihil, the process of recreation can begin within that consequential void. Eliot concludes “Little Gidding” with a nothingness that forecasts “A condition of complete simplicity / (Costing not less than everything),” which rather directly specifies that to reach the “still point” of simplicity, modern society must first undergo an unqualified voiding of worldly desire.⁶¹⁷

⁶¹⁶ T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding,” 142.

⁶¹⁷ T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding,” 145.

Indeed, Eliot's use of "simplicity" conjures imaginings of a lack or an absence, or even a stripping away of excess in an endeavor to empty the void and prepare it for cultivation. As Miller argues, the "infinite plentitude" of "the instant of intense experience" is affirmed through certain images that occur at the "culminating passages of Eliot's poetry."⁶¹⁸ The two contrasting ideas that Miller highlights collapse into the "still point" of an always-existent present from which collective humanity has purged futility, disarray, and total emptiness itself. Through the speaker's second reference to Julian of Norwich's "all shall be well," the Dionysian abyss and the grip of Nietzschean nihilism are banished. Instead, the generative void that Eliot fashions through old nihilism holds the capacity for a rebirth of meaning and morality "When the tongues of flames are in-folded / Into the crowned knot of fire / And the fire and the rose are one."⁶¹⁹ The hopeful, optimistic tone of the final stanza resolves the uncertainty that concludes *The Hollow Men* and *Ash Wednesday* and is perhaps the most potent antidote against the new nihilism's wayward, bleak attributes.

Conclusion

By the time he finishes writing the *Four Quartets*, Eliot identifies the metaphysical "still point," the idea that can imbue reality with the order, meaning, and optimism that preoccupies his poetry since his *March Hare* notebook writings. This "point" represents the generative void, and Eliot reaches this place by applying the concepts that he learned from his reading of old nihilism. Eliot's reimagined void makes

⁶¹⁸ J.H. Miller, *Poets of Reality*, 189.

⁶¹⁹ T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," 145.

the abyss bearable and even desirable and demonstrates his ultimate resistance to the nothingness of the new nihilism. The “peace” that terrifies the speaker in “Silence” no longer inspires fright, and the image of the foreboding “shadow” in *The Hollow Men* becomes the “place of solitude” in *Ash Wednesday*. Finally, at the conclusion of “Little Gidding,” a descent into the “stillness / Between two waves of the sea,” flows melodically into “A condition of complete simplicity,” two images connected through rhyme that demonstrate the void’s allure. Eliot’s conclusion reveals a redemptive space amidst the turbulence of modernity that originates from his reading of Kant, Spinoza, and Hegel and their life-affirming nihilism while a philosophy student at Harvard. Although the hazards that the Dionysian abyss poses have not entirely vanished for the modern world, Eliot has reimagined it as a space for design, and this reimagination keeps the abyss at a distance, and reclaims absolute nothingness as an opportunity for regeneration, just as the philosophies of Kant, Spinoza, and Hegel insinuate

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION:

RECLAIMING THE NIHILIST: MODERNISM READING NIETZSCHE

In the previous five chapters, I have shown the ways that W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot resist the new nihilism in favor of a generative, old nihilism. This old nihilism coincides with the original spirit of nihilism, an idea with a centuries-old lineage. However, there is a figure central to this project who, in a way, may be unfairly considered by literary modernists: His name is Friedrich Nietzsche. As I mentioned earlier, there are as many “Nietzsches” as there are readers of Nietzsche, and it seems that modernists chose the figure who advocated for the destruction of all value systems as their understanding of the philosopher. I therefore wish to conclude with two points. Firstly, while much of his philosophy deliberates annihilation and utter nothingness, Nietzsche also views emptiness as potentially procreative. This thread manifests through the philosopher’s concepts of *amor fati* and, interestingly, the death of God. It is even present, though only through glimpses, in *The Will to Power*. The second point considers *The Will to Power’s* publication and Nietzsche’s involvement in that process. Although Nietzsche penned extensive notes and outlines for the future text, his failing health prevented him from preparing a print copy of *The Will to Power*. The endeavor thus fell to his sister, whose radically-altered version became the 1901 text that a modernist

audience read. These events thus solidified Nietzsche's reputation as the herald of destruction and complete annihilation.

The literary and critical voices of modernism largely understood nihilism, and Nietzsche's new nihilism specifically, as a destructive force. Gottfried Benn argues that the nihilism of modernity, a consequence of Darwinian "survival of the fittest," represents the "dissolution of all old ties, the destruction of substance, the levelling of all values" and "from them came the inner situation that produced that atmosphere in which we all live, from which we all drank to the bitter dregs."⁶²⁰ While his statement seems to buttress the nihilism that Nietzsche presents in *The Will to Power*, Benn claims that Nietzsche did not authentically engage with nihilism until *Ecce Homo* (1908), his last work. Elliot Paul takes this even further and claims that what emerges from a loss of value caused by WWI is even a step beyond Nietzsche's "immoralist" nihilism to an "amoralist" nihilism that "neither feels nor shows superiority, only an utter amorality and clear head which finds futility everywhere and accepts it as natural law."⁶²¹ As Paul de Man reflects, "Nietzsche could rightly be criticized for having warned too much and perhaps for not having thought enough."⁶²² Similarly, in his publications, Alfred Orage emphasizes the language in Nietzsche's works that calls for annihilation. Highlighting Nietzsche's Dionysian-Apollonian dichotomy, Orage was convinced that Dionysus needed to impede and abolish Apollo if Europe was to undergo a transvaluation of

⁶²⁰ Gottfried Benn, "After Nihilism" in *Prose, Essays, Poems* (New York: Continuum), 1987. 100.

⁶²¹ Elliot Paul, "The New Nihilism." *Transition*, ed. Eugene Jolas. May 1927. 165-166.

⁶²² Paul De Man, "The Literature of Nihilism," 164.

values.⁶²³ An event like this—one that forecasts the loss of value—can undoubtedly court bleak meaninglessness.

It is not surprising that Nietzsche's modernist readership broadly understood nihilism in terms of complete emptiness. In the preface of *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche frames the concept as a cataclysmic event that humankind should fear. Donning the mask of a prophet, Nietzsche foretells that nihilism will grip the "next two centuries," and its arrival can "no longer come differently."⁶²⁴ European civilization instead fatally plunges "restlessly" and "violently" toward this unavoidable conclusion with no hope of belying its end. These words are undoubtedly alarming and appear to describe the early 20th-century European landscape, thus giving Nietzsche's prophecy a menacing veracity. And it is these words that most closely inspire modernism's reading of the new nihilism that Podhoretz, Benn, Paul, and Read all transmit. Like the beat of a fatalistic drum, Nietzsche's words continuously characterize nihilism as a completely forlorn state that "becoming" itself exacerbates. He states,

Nihilism as a psychological state will have to be reached when we have sought a 'meaning' in all events that is not there: so the seeker eventually becomes discouraged. Nihilism, then, is the recognition of the long waste of strength, the agony of the 'in vain', insecurity, the lack of any opportunity to recover and to regain composure — being ashamed in front of oneself, as if one had deceived oneself all too long ... now one realizes that becoming aims at nothing and achieves nothing. — Thus, disappointment regarding an alleged aim of becoming as a cause of nihilism.⁶²⁵

⁶²³ Paul Jackson, *Great War Modernisms and the New Age Magazine* (London: Continuum), 2012. 23.

⁶²⁴ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 3.

⁶²⁵ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 12.

Here, “becoming” refers to the possibility of change for a thing that has being or existence. Superficially, the act of “becoming” appears positive and perhaps should yield growth for the subject. Nietzsche, however, not only removes any possibility of change, but he also argues that “becoming” is indeed a fantasy. Individuals essentially court nihilism themselves by ascribing to a belief that both promises and ends in nothing. Nietzsche writes many other foreboding statements similar to this one throughout *The Will to Power*. Although Nietzsche’s words appear ingrained with utter nothingness and despair, Nietzsche was not a nihilist in the “new” sense. Instead, the philosopher desired individuals to be free from old systems of value and love their own existences, which he represents through *amor fati* and, perhaps counterintuitively, “the death of God.” These positive concepts surface in Nietzsche’s earlier work: *The Gay Science* (1882).

For Nietzsche, *amor fati*, to “love one’s fate,” represents the highest goal for an individual. To meet this objective, the individual must view all of his/her life experiences, whether positive or negative, as necessary components of existence. In section 276 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche defines this goal:

I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who makes things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. Looking away shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer.⁶²⁶

⁶²⁶ Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, and Walter Arnold Kaufmann. *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House, 1974. 223.

There is a stoic acceptance in Nietzsche's words. He sees the beauty in necessity and endures the unpleasant and "ugly" facets of existence. Nietzsche's repeated use of "I want" shows that he desires this outcome but has not yet attained it; he must work to become a "yes-sayer" who uncompromisingly accepts his reality. To place value on a thing, especially something as immense as one's fate, fends off nihilism and prevents collapse into complete nothingness.

Throughout his canon, Nietzsche places consistent emphasis on human freedom, an aim that forms the basis of the death of God.⁶²⁷ The philosopher frames God's metaphorical passing as a liberating, essential event in "Parable of the Madman." He declares,

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. 'Whither is God?' he cried; 'I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? ... God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him... There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us—for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.'⁶²⁸

⁶²⁷ The first mentioning of "the death of God" in Nietzsche: *The Gay Science*, 108: "After Buddha was dead, people showed his shadow for centuries afterwards in a cave,—an immense frightful shadow. God is dead: but as the human race is constituted, there will perhaps be caves for millenniums yet, in which people will show his shadow.—And we—we have still to overcome his shadow!"

⁶²⁸ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 181.

For Nietzsche, God is a concept that humans invented to restrain and direct themselves. In this parable, the “madman” functions as a purveyor of light and truth—he carries a lantern to illuminate a future where the individual is the ultimate creator. To do this, however, society must renounce the notion of a rival creator: God. Through his litany of questions, the madman attempts to show that society is indeed not “plunging continually” now that God has “died.” Instead, order exists and will persist through future generations. For Nietzsche, the era after God’s death will presumably be the most inventive epoch yet. Individuals create their own system of values in the absence of an omnipotent deity, thus the vacancy that Nietzsche’s death of God leaves is thus potentially generative. Though perhaps concealed, such a framing of nothingness is even present in *The Will to Power*.

The Will to Power does present nihilism as constructive at key moments, but it appears that modernist readers passed over them. While Nietzsche does associate nihilism with destruction in this book, the philosopher also provides clues that frame such a loss as positive and even essential. He ends the book’s preface with the following statement:

For why has the advent of nihilism become necessary? Because the values we have had hitherto thus draw their final consequence; because nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals — because we must experience nihilism before we can find out what value these ‘values’ really had. — We require, sometime, *new values*.⁶²⁹

That Nietzsche italicizes “new values” is significant: It suggests that he expects society to fill the nothingness that nihilism leaves with something new. For him, this is a

⁶²⁹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 4.

“requirement,” lest society will cease to progress. In fact, nihilism is a necessity—something that we “must” experience so that we can understand the importance of values and whether they are still applicable. Without question, Nietzsche’s descriptions of desolation and hopelessness vastly outnumber positive statements such as this. However, since Nietzsche chose to end the preface with this phrase, perhaps he intends the reader to hold onto that idea. However, Nietzsche’s “intent” concerning *The Will to Power* is difficult if not impossible to ascertain because his original notes may have been altered beyond recognition.

As indicated previously, *The Will to Power* was published posthumously, and so Nietzsche did not have a voice in either the editing or circulation processes. Instead, this duty fell to his sister Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, a well-known German nationalist and anti-Semite who would later join the Nazi party. Elisabeth revised Nietzsche’s unpublished writings to fit her own ideology, often in incomplete or manipulated ways.⁶³⁰ In 1889, Nietzsche’s health began to deteriorate. Psychological and physical ailments plagued the philosopher until a series of strokes in 1898 left him paralyzed; he passed away from a stroke in 1900. When she decided to publish *The Will to Power*, Elisabeth impressed to editors that her brother not only desired this outcome but had also written a full draft of the book before his health failed. To prove this, she cited a 17 March 1887 letter in which Nietzsche communicated his outline for what she called his “magnum

⁶³⁰ Carol Diethe, *Nietzsche’s Sister and the Will to Power: A Biography of Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 2003.

opus,” a plan that included four main headings and several subsections.⁶³¹ However, as Carol Diethe highlights, this letter is not found in Nietzsche’s collected correspondence, thus casting doubt onto Elisabeth’s claim.⁶³²

While Nietzsche did scribble ideas and outlines of what would become *The Will to Power* in his notebooks, a complete, coherent draft has yet to be discovered.⁶³³ In fact, Nietzsche’s notes are anything but coherent—at times, he wrote backwards, in abbreviated font, and scribbled so many annotations and corrections that it would take years of careful consideration to assemble the jumbled pieces.⁶³⁴ After much insistence, however, Elisabeth selected one of Nietzsche’s many different potential outlines for *The Will to Power*, then “raided his notebooks for passages” that would fit her chosen format. Some of Elisabeth’s selected passages even appeared crossed out in Nietzsche’s original notes and outlines, but she failed to indicate this in an appendix.⁶³⁵ The published copy of the book thus contains ideas that Nietzsche presumably would have either omitted or revised.

Some scholars even cast *The Will to Power* as a grand forgery that ultimately sullied Nietzsche’s reputation. William Schaberg calls the belief that *The Will to Power* is “Nietzsche’s book” a “fiction” that the general public and scholars alike often buy

⁶³¹ Diethe, *Nietzsche’s Sister and the Will to Power*, 95.

⁶³² *Nietzsche’s Sister and the Will to Power*, 95.

⁶³³ Diethe, *Nietzsche’s Sister and the Will to Power*, 95-96.

⁶³⁴ Diethe, William Schaberg, and Mazzino Montinari all describe Nietzsche’s notebook as such.

⁶³⁵ Diethe, *Nietzsche’s Sister and the Will to Power*, 96.

into.⁶³⁶ Schaberg even excludes *The Will to Power* from his extensive study on Nietzsche's canon because the philosopher never prepared a print copy.⁶³⁷ For Schaberg, this sheds doubt on Nietzsche's intent to publish the book. Philologist and leading Nietzsche scholar Mazzino Montinari uses even harsher language to criticize *The Will to Power*; he called the book a "historic forgery" and blamed it emphatically for the philosopher's unsavory 20th-century reputation.⁶³⁸ Given the dubious nature of this book's publication, perhaps we can excuse Nietzsche for the ideas contained therein. While this may relieve Nietzsche of some of the blame for the new nihilism, it still fails to absolve *The Will to Power*. Though current scholarship recognizes Elisabeth's liberal editing-hand, this discovery was not "unambiguously clarified" until the mid-1930s and it took until the 1960s to gain extensive critical attention.⁶³⁹ The modernist readership thus remained wholly unaware of this issue, and so associated the nothingness and despair of the new nihilism with Nietzsche, the "author" of *The Will to Power*.

In the Musarion edition *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche writes that his work is a "book for thinking, nothing else: it belongs to those for whom thinking is a delight, nothing else."⁶⁴⁰ Here, Nietzsche's words cast the *Will to Power* as nothing more than a

⁶³⁶ William H. Schaberg, *The Nietzsche Canon: A Publication History and Bibliography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1995. 178.

⁶³⁷ Schaberg, *The Nietzsche Canon*, 5-6.

⁶³⁸ Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, and R.J. Hollingdale, "A Continual Challenge: On Mazzino Montinari's Relationship with Nietzsche." *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 4/5 (1992): 112. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20717573>.

⁶³⁹ Mazzino Montinari, *Reading Nietzsche*, trans. Greg Whitlock (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 2003. 18.

⁶⁴⁰ Thatcher, *Nietzsche in England*, 160.

lengthy thought exercise, a series of musings that could spur intellectual progress rather than pose a definitive new view of nihilism. This quote does not appear in popular editions of the book, nor was it included in editions that the modernists would have conceivably read. Nietzsche's new nihilism, an idea that changed the landscape of 20th-century Western society, was at best a thought exercise and at worst a blatant forgery.

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