Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory/Revue canadienne de théorie politique et sociale, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Spring-Summer/Printemps-Eté 1978).

NIHILISM AND MODERNITY

Barry Cooper

Stanley Rosen, *Nihilism, A Philosophical Essay*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969, pp XX, 241.
George Grant, *Time as History*, C.B.C. Massey Lectures, 1969, Toronto: pp. 52.

The term *nihilism* is a neologism coined by Jacobi to describe the efforts of Fichte to ground the world in the ego. Jean Paul took over the term from Jacobi to describe the romantic movement as "poetic nihilism" and the word gained a general currency in Germany among Christians such as von Baader as a synonym for atheism. The Hegelian notion of negation re-imported the notion of *nothing* into philosophy whence it passed into the hands of the epigones, including Marx who in 1843 spoke of the *Nichtigkeit* of the ancient regime. Negation as a principle of political action became famous with the anarchism of Bakunin and the conspiratorial revolutionary terrorists in the reign of Alexander II (1855-81) in Russia, and is with us still. But the activist nihilism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a late development: according to Rosen, nihilism is a perennial human potential, even while taking a particular form in each historical manifestation. Both books under review, in characteristically distinct ways, are concerned with the topic. Paraphrasing Nietzsche, they both raise the question: is everything permitted? If so, what does this mean? If not, why not?

To talk of nihilism or, to use a more popular idiom, to express one's concern about "the crisis of our times" is in no way out of order. The details are presented with each morning paper — the reading of which, Hegel said, was the daily benediction of the modern realist. What we read informs us not just of fresh external disasters but of an internal loss of meaning. The crisis is a crisis in what we are, as well as what we do, and most clearly may be seen in how we understand ourselves, what words we conventionally and sometimes deliberately employ to describe significance. Rosen and Grant are agreed on the centrality of the term "history" for our self-understanding, whether this be in the area of philosophical discourse, Rosen's subject, or everyday speech, Grant's.

Rosen considered specifically the two most fashionable philosophical movements of the day, language analysis and existentialism and centred his discussion on the question of reason and goodness. He did not, of course, deny that language analysis and existentialism were full of useful insights. Rather, he insisted that, notwithstanding whatever truthful accounts of human things these philosophical movements happened to possess, they were and are unable to account for the merit and significance of those insights because of a common and central feature, the separation of reasonableness and goodness. To employ reason nowadays means to undertake mathematical or quasi-mathematical analyses and to suppress or exalt the pre-rational (or irrational) "poetic sense of life". The significance of the first is suggested by Rosen's account of Wittgenstein and of the second by his account of Heidegger.

The early Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein I, accepted the view that reason was equivalent to logical calculation and scientific verification of "what is the case". He grew dissatisfied with this formulation for the obvious consequence was that there was nothing inherently reasonable in the ends towards which a contingent and instrumental reason was directed. The apprehension of truth seems to lie in the silence of vision (*noēsis*) utterly cut off from explicatory discursive thought (*dianoia*). The later Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein II, apparently repudiated this and emphasized *dianoia*. It did not, however, lead to *noēsis* but to the quasi-*noēsis* of the language-game, which is to say, convention. To raise the question of goodness was now possible, but the answer was: The good is the ordinary, the conventional, etc. Then if we asked: What good is what is ordinary? The answer was: The good is the ordinary because that is what we mean. And if one should object to this, one would be unreasonable because to be reasonable means to speak in the ordinary way and so on *ad infinitum*. One is reminded here of the opinion of Humpty Dumpty:

> "When *I* use a word," Humpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."
> "The question is," said Alice, "Whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "Which is to be master — that's all."

The moral and ethical implications of Humpty Dumpty's opinion are well-known; Rosen's point is that nihilism is only secondarily a matter of morality because morality is derived from our conception of reason: If morality is non-rational, reason is non-moral and the consequence is the willful and arbitrary

attribution of sense to nonsense. Perhaps it is enforced, perhaps not. In either case, conventions are hostages to history: new times, new conventions, new truths. And this, he said, is nihilism.

If such a reason were impotent in matters of goodness, perhaps the answer was romanticism: The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know. The vulgar may be seduced by the promise of more fun; the learned by the astringent teaching of Heidegger. In his dialectic of ontic speech and ontological silence we find an equivalent to Humpty Dumpty: If the object of our care and concern is Being and we can speak only of beings, and if Being is *hidden* by beings, then speech and reason only serve to hide Being even more. Being must reveal itself and we, like the Beatles, must "let it be". The medium through which Being is revealed is human history, which is also the medium through which it is concealed. Whether revealed or concealed, Being depends upon fatal (in both senses) contingencies about which meaningful debate is impossible. Hence it is impossible to distinguish between good and evil or speak rationally about the goodness of reason. This essential feature of existential nihilism has the direct political implication that the individual cannot be held responsible for his actions because what happens is the gift of Being, the self-revelation of Being coming-to-be. Responsibility, perhaps even of Ministers of the Crown, can be eclipsed by the unfolding of the universe. Accordingly, it makes no difference whether we understand our acts as resolution in the face of death or submissiveness before the revelation of Being; nor are we given the means to distinguish resoluteness from stubbornness or submissiveness from cowardice.

Wittgenstein and Heidegger are joined, Rosen argued, by their common commitment to history as the repository of all meaning. It provides the actual contents of the language game; it is the revelation of Being. It is true that sometimes we distinguish history from nature, but at least since the popularization of Darwin's theories, to say nothing of neuro-pharmacology or the contemporary practice of recombinant DNA-technologies, nature and history have been blended in our understanding of ourselves to such a degree that it now makes sense for ever larger numbers of people to say that man, the historical one, can change and even conquer nature even while he sees that conquest as the perfection of his "natural" (meaning willful or historical) inclinations. It is here that Grant has put his readers in his debt by trying to think out what this signified. What does it mean to conceive of the world as an historical process, to conceive time as history, to conceive man as an historical being — all of which expressions are equivalent?

Time as history, Grant said, is the animator of our existence, our everyday existence: subways, supermarkets, the CN Tower, Revenue Canada Revenu, all that constitutes life in technical society. To conceive time as history is to be oriented towards the future, to be "progressive", to make tomorrow as we will.

It is, therefore, to emphasize that part of our being that makes things happen. The "historic" men of the age are precisely those who made the biggest things happen. And while it is true that historic individuals may be found in China or Africa, *the* historic collectivity is European and latterly North American. Historic activity necessarily exalts will and correspondingly de-emphasizes the useless and invisible mental activities of reflecting, deliberating, feeling, thinking, and judging.

Put crudely, the ancient philosophers taught that a natural bond united reason and goodness: the good was reasonable and reason was good. Modern man, who has no conception of nature in the old sense, asserts that goodness is created amid the indifference of an animate and inanimate nature-at-hand by an act of will. History is the pragmatic wake left by man's actualization of a meaningful world. Reason, our quasi-mathematical calculative faculty, is therefore bent to the purposes of will. In modern technical societies one can observe few purposes beyond innovation, novelty and change. Our concupiscent resoluteness in the pursuit of change increases as less and less of the presently existing seems admirable or lovable. But if what is unlovable about the present stems from our exaltation of will, it can hardly be comforting to hope that improvement will result from more of the same.

These commonsensical observations deal with the outside and the visible aspects of modernity, and are familiar enough. In turning to Nietzsche's thought, Grant encountered one who brought to light the hidden, internal, and dark meaning of what it is to be a member of Western society. He makes explicit what earlier was implicit — in Marx, for example — and makes clear to us, who have come after, just what the conjunction of nihilism and modernity is. Nietzsche affirmed the separation of reason and goodness even while he declared them to be creatures of the will, "values", as he was the first to call them, whose acceptance depended upon a prior commitment to certain conventions or "horizons". Once we know that our horizons are man-made they can no longer sustain us as truth independent of our will. But this presupposes that men are creatures in need of being sustained, which Nietzsche denounced as weakness. The hard truth, according to Nietzsche, is that we cannot know what we are fit for — or rather, there is nothing we are fit for and nothing we are not fit for. We can make it up as we go along, because our purposes are a matter of will, and they always have been, even though it was up to modern man to find this out.

Let us see further what this means. We no longer believe our purposes in life are ingrained in the nature of things, in the structure of reality. Because we no longer experience the limitedness of creatures we can see ourselves as masters over all. And this sene of mastery (even if it turns out, centuries hence, to be temporary) comes, precisely, from recognizing that all horizons are so-called limits — including God, the horizon of horizons, who is dead. But if all this is

so, why bother? If all is conventional, why will anything, since one just as well, just as reasonably, etc. might not? It used to be thought that the purpose of unlimited mastery was the realization of the slogan of the French Revolutionaries, *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, with variations according to local custom and sensibility: liberal democracy, democratic liberalism, democratic socialism, social democracy, republican democracy, people's democracy, guided democracy, and so forth. All that used to be the end of history, the point of all progress. But progress, Nietzsche showed, was a secular Christianity; before God all human souls were equal, but God has died and man has forgotten about, or perhaps mislaid, his soul.

Men who are no longer Christians and who no longer see the natural goodness of reason but who are still of the species *homo sapiens*, Nietzsche called last men and nihilists. The former seek happiness bereft of nobility and purpose; the latter seek only to be resolute in their willfulness. Both are moved by a spirit of revenge, a spirit of resentment that arises when our wills are thwarted. The last men want revenge against nobility, and it takes the form of trivializing everything; nihilists want revenge against their own joylessness, and theirs takes the form of violence against the present.

Even deeper is their common desire for revenge against the past, which has made the present what it is and against which they (or is it we?) seek revenge. To overcome the spirit of revenge fully is to have desired and willed what has happened. It is the *amor fati*, the endurance of the eternal recurrence of the identical, from which, Nietzsche said, emerges a joyful willing of novelty. This conception of time as history is therapeutic nihilism because it accepts gracefully the dominance of time, which is to say, since human existence is temporal, that man extends grace to himself.

So now there arises a new urgency: Are there men who can supplant the last men and the nihilists, who know, as moderns, that they are the authors of their own horizons, that they create their own values, but who do so joyfully not vengefully, and so deserve their mastery?

Before seeing why or why not such a question can be answered, let us look more closely at the condition for its being raised, namely the death of God. While one can find equivalent symbolisms in Hellas — Prometheus' hatred of the Olympian gods, for example — the death of God, or rather his murder, seems intimately tied to Biblical religions. Gershom Scholem reported a golem-legend from the twelfth century in his *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* that is helpful in seeing the significance of Nietzsche's murder of God.

In the story, two adepts made a man through magical operations with the Hebrew alphabet and placed the word *emeth*, truth, on their creature's brow as God had done with man to show that man was the perfection of his creation. But the golem rubbed out the initial aleph, transforming *emeth* into *meth*, dead, so as to indicate that the truth was God's alone and that if man tried to

copy God's creation he would surely die. In another version, the words *Yahweh Elohim Emeth*, God is truth, appeared on the golem's brow. Again he rubbed out the aleph and his creator, horrified, asked what this meant. The golem informed his creator that his success in creating an homunculus would lead him to revolt against God in an attempt to become a second God. With even greater horror, the adept asked the golem how to avoid such a thing, and received the magic formula to destroy his creature, which he then employed. He concluded with the observation that one ought to study magic and kabbalah only to learn of the omnipotence of God and not to create a golem.

In aphorism 125 of *The Gay* [or *Joyful*] *Science*, Nietzsche told a similar tale, entitled "The Madman". A Diogenes-like character ran into the marketplace crying "I seek God!" He found not God but men who did not believe in God but made jokes about his having emigrated or gotten lost. The madman replied that he had not gone away but had been killed "by you and I". God was dead and, unlike the golem story, "God will stay dead!" God, having bled to death under human knives, enabled man to create a golem in his place. At first man was afraid and sought consolation. But this proved impossible: God would stay dead, the murder could not be reversed, and man must raise himself, by that bloody murder "to a higher history than all previous history!" As in the second golem story, the murderer of God became a second God. But the madman's audience was silent and uncomprehending; he hurled his lantern down and declared that he had come too soon — even though the deed had been done.

Eric Voegelin's comments on this passage (in *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, pp. 63ff.) are particularly instructive for our purposes. The madman, he said, unlike the original Diogenes, was not searching for man but for the new man, the super-man who lived on a higher historical plane than all previous history, and who emerged from the murder of God. The madman's stupid audience knows not what they have done. Doubtless in an effort to inform them, the madman, Nietzsche told us, entered several churches to sing his *requiem aeternam deo*. This activist element, which is often forgotten, suggests the non-philosophic singificance of the madman's search. As in the golem stories, we are dealing with a magical operation and as Voegelin remarked, "the interpreter of a magic *opus* need not, to put it bluntly, be taken in by the magic."

Grant's resistance to Nietzsche's sorcery began by questioning his notion of the *amor fati*. How, he asked, could anyone love fate, including the absurdities, injustices, alienations and exploitations of time without the occasional intimation that our fate may be perfected? How ever could we be freed of a spirit of revenge in the absence of that intimation? Is Nietzsche's therapy, therfore, not just a deeper, because self-conscious, nihilism? Such questions reintroduce the rabbinic understanding of the golem legends. The magical

murder of God can only express man's self-willed alienation from reality — in theological language, his rebellion against God.

If this is true, one is not condemned to the fatal acceptance of the self-interpretation of the age. Indeed, one's duty may lie in resisting it. But, as Grant has often insisted, the task of reappropriating what an intimation of perfection, eternity, God, might mean for a modern man is an enormous difficulty whose dimensions we can only suggest with the observation that the language we use is so infected with modernist connotations — our chatter about "values", for example — that its very structure denies a proper place for such terms. Rosen has attempted in the concluding two chapters of his book to suggest what it means to speak of the goodness of reason, and his argument in large measure is an exegesis of pre-modern thought. To moderns, it is strange stuff, as anyone who tries to explain his argument to a group of intelligent undergraduates (or even to one's colleagues) will discover for himself or herself quickly enough.

Perhaps the opacity of modern minds can be pierced only, to use a phrase from Grant's *Technology and Empire*, by intimations of deprival. These at least cause suffering that in no way can be ignored. Not that suffering is to be desired of itself, but, in the words of Anaximander (D-K, B 1): "It is necessary for things to perish into that from which they were generated, for they pay the penalty to one another for their injustices, according to the ordinances of time." Or, as other ancient authors, both pagan (Aeschylus) and Biblical (Deutero-Isaiah), said, suffering may be transfigured into the beginnings of wisdom. This hard teaching, which may be extracted from both Rosen and Grant, is difficult for the last man in all of us to accept. The quite viable and seemingly more comfortable alternative may well consist in an external tyranny run by Nietzsche's managerial nihilists whose internal expression is continuous self-laceration.

Political Science
York University