This thesis has been submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for a postgraduate degree (e.g. PhD, MPhil, DClinPsychol) at the University of Edinburgh. Please note the following terms and conditions of use:

- This work is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, which are retained by the thesis author, unless otherwise stated.
- A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge.
- This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the author.
- The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the author.
- When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given.
In the Absence of God: Case Studies on the Use and Value of Nietzsche in Avant-Gardist Thought 1905-1945

Joshua Bowker

History of Art, PhD
University of Edinburgh
2022
Abstract and Lay Summary

This thesis considers how Nietzsche was interpreted and misinterpreted by a range of artists and writers who were prominent in avant-garde circles in the first half of the twentieth century. Through a series of case studies, I address Nietzsche’s reception among a variety of avant-gardists, and the effect of his thought on their overall milieux and personal projects. I ask what were the conditions that made his philosophy so appealing and useful for these figures—even in cases of misuse/misinterpretation. With the prominence of fascism growing in Western Europe in these years, a further complication of cultural political context affected his reception and interpretation due to the appropriation of his philosophy by fascist thinkers, and I therefore also ask how this altered his use among avant-gardists of varying political affections. The principal avant-gardists studied are, in sequence, Wassily Kandinsky, Hugo Ball, Richard Huelsenbeck, F.T Marinetti, Wyndham Lewis, Georges Bataille, and André Masson.
# Contents

Acknowledgements | 5  
List of Illustrations | 7  
List of Abbreviations | 9  

Introduction | 10  

**Part I**  
Introduction | 30  
1. Nietzsche in the Air: The Spiritual Path from Expressionism to Dada through the Aesthetic Theories of Wassily Kandinsky | 32  
2. Richard Huelsenbeck and Dadaist Morality Beyond Good and Evil | 77  

**Part II**  
Introduction | 110  
3. Marinetti Contra Nietzsche | 112  
4. Nietzsche and the Vortex: Nietzscheanism in the Works of Wyndham Lewis | 141  

**Part III**  
Introduction | 175  
5. Bataille et Les Fascistes | 177  
6. Acéphalic Being: Masson, Bataille and a Revolutionary Nietzscheanism | 206  

Conclusion: Variegations in Thought | 238  
Illustrations | 245  
Bibliography | 267
Acknowledgements

There are a great many people that helped me get here and deserve acknowledgment. First and foremost, my supervisory team, and especially my incredible principal supervisor, Prof. Neil Cox. Over the years, this last year in particular, this must have seemed like the labour of Sisyphus (I was the boulder), but hopefully he'll happy with what is here. It was taking Neil’s Master’s course, ‘Surrealism, Violence and History’, that provided me the initial spark of an idea that would become thesis, so if he isn’t happy, he only has himself to blame. Without his encouragement and guidance, I would certainly not have made it this far. Thank you. I am also greatly indebted to my secondary supervisor Prof. Christian Weikop who is always generous with his time, insightful with his comments, and has been there with an encouraging word on the multiple occasions I turned up in his office and said something like ‘what the f**k is the point?’ And finally, to Prof. Jolyon Mitchell. When it has come to the more esoteric side of my studies, his incisive comments have always helped me clarify my thinking and understanding of even the most obtuse ideas.

For their formative feedback and comments, I must thank Professors Peter Vergo and Carol Richardson who sat on my first-year review committee. And also, Professor Rose-Carol Washton Long who generously provided me with her time and some excellent guidance on my chapter regarding Kandinsky.

Of my friends and family several people deserve special praise. My sister, Daniela Bowker who has been my proof-reader in chief, and my expert on hand for all things related to grammar in languages both living and dead. Matthias Pfaller, without his skill in translation, a good portion of this thesis would be entirely different. My Aunt-in-law, Leah Greenwood-Dougherty, who insisted on reading everything I have ever written and
indicating every single excessive run-on sentence, of which there were (and still are) many.

I would also like to thank numerous friends and colleagues who have provided informal advice, research help, feedback, emotional support, inspiration, and on occasion, some much needed distraction. Naomi Stewart, Frances Blythe, Sydney Ayers, Deborah Chu, Alex Highfield, Jenny Armstrong, Punit Desai, Alex Grafen, Daniel Mills, Hailey Maxwell, Laurens de Rooij, Karolina Koczynska, Bill Vine, Anne Pfautsch, Erica Russell, Sofia Rodriguez, Tony Moore, Elodie Boublil, Amanda Webster, Jamie Williams, Katy Daly, Megan Liberty, Alex Ross (no, not that one), Jaime Eisen, Iain Tournay, Samantha Bryden, Rich Lapham, Eric Sturm, Sam Bromer, and Kelly Henson.

Finally, my family. My unbelievably supportive parents, Rodney and Jacquie Bowker who really should have stopped putting up with my nonsense ages ago. My Nana, Sadie del-Vallé whom I love beyond words. My mother-in-law Alice Temnick who has kept me company in the library on more occasions than I can count. And of course, my intelligent, talented, and supportive wife, Greer Temnick, who has been with me all the way, been encouraging when I needed it, and stern when I needed it, and who will probably vomit in disgust if I spend another moment gushing about her. Thank you all.
List of Illustrations

Fig.1 Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Brücke Program*. 1906, woodcut print, 15.1 x 7.5cm, MoMA, New York.

Fig.2 Erich Heckel, *Franzi Reclining*. 1910, woodcut, 22.7 x 41.9cm, MoMA, New York.

Fig. 3 Max Pechstein. *Killing of the Banquet Roast*, 1912, woodcut with watercolour, 22.6 x 26.4cm, MoMA, New York

Fig.4. Erich Heckel. *Friedrich Nietzsche*, 1905, woodcut, details unknown.

Fig.5 Wassily Kandinsky. *Departure*, 1903, Woodcut Print, as reproduced in *Verses Without Words*, 7.7 x 8.2cm, MoMA, New York

Fig.6. Wassily Kandinsky. *Colourful Life*, 1907, tempera on canvas, 130 x 152.5cm, Lenbachhaus, Munich.

Fig.7. Wassily Kandinsky. *Composition V*, 1911, oil on canvas, 190 x 275cm, Private Collection.

Fig.8. Wassily Kandinsky. *Composition I*, 1910, photograph of oil on canvas, original destroyed.

fig.9 George Grosz, *The Funeral*, 1917/18, oil on canvas, 140 x 110cm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.

fig.10 George Grosz, Detail of *Germany: A Winter’s Tale*, 1917-19, as reproduced in *Faces of the Ruling Class: 57 Political Drawings* (1921)

fig.11 George Grosz. Illustration for the poem ‘Don Inigo of Loyola: Final Song’ by George Grosz for 1920 edition of *Phantastische Gebete* by Richard Huelsenbeck, University of Iowa Dada Archive.

fig.12 George Grosz, *Panorama (Down with Liebknecht)*, 1919, pen and Ink with watercolour, dimensions unknown, Private collection, New York.
Fig.13 Wyndham Lewis, *The Enemy of the Stars*, 1913, pen and ink wash, 44 x 20cm, location unknown, as reproduced in *Blast I* (1914)

Fig.14 Wyndham Lewis, *The Vorticist, 1912*, pen and ink and watercolour 42 x 30.5cm, Southampton City Art Gallery.

Fig.15 Wyndham Lewis, *The Dancers (Study for Kermesse)*, 1912, pen and ink and watercolour, gouache 29.5 x 29cm, Manchester Art Gallery.

Fig.16 Wyndham Lewis, *Figure (Spanish Woman)*, 1912 Pen and ink and goache on paper 31 x 21cm, Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust.

Fig.17 Umberto Boccioni, *States of Mind I: The Farewells*, 1911, oil on canvas 70.5 x 96.2cm, MoMA, New York.

Fig.18 Umberto Boccioni, *States of Mind II: Those Who Go*, 1911, oil on canvas 70.8 x 95.9cm, MoMA, New York.

Fig.19 Umberto Boccioni, *States of Mind III: Those Who Stay*, 1911, oil on canvas 70.8 x 95.9cm, MoMA, New York.

Fig.20 André Masson, Cover of *Acéphale*, issue 1 ‘La Conjuration Sacrée’, 1936.

Fig.21 André Masson. *Dionysos*, as reproduced in *Acéphale* 3-4, 1937.

Fig.22 André Masson. *La Mère*, 1925, Indian ink, 44 x 30.8cm, reproduced in *André Masson: Drawings*, 1972.

Fig.23 André Masson, *Titan*, pencil and dry point etching, 1971, 47.5 x 33.5cm Private Collection.

Fig.24 André Masson, *Osiris*, 1936, as reproduced in *Sacrifices* (1936)

Fig.25 André Masson, Barcelona Juillet 1936, (A.K.A ‘The Barcelona Acéphale) (1936) Zinc Plate

Fig. 26, Artist unknown, frontispiece for first edition of Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, 1872.
List of Abbreviations

Works by Nietzsche are cited in parentheses within text using the following abbreviations, followed by a combination of titular and numerical reference to indicate the appropriate section. For example, (GM, II, §1) indicates On the Genealogy of Morals, essay two, section one. Translations used are listed in the bibliography.

AC  The Anti-christ
BGE  Beyond Good and Evil
BT  The Birth of Tragedy
D  Dawn
DWV  The Dionysian Worldview
EH  Ecce Homo
GM  On the Genealogy of Morals
GS  The Gay Science
HH  Human all too Human
TI  Twilight of the Idols
TL  Truth and Lie in an Extramoral Sense
UM  Untimely Meditations
WP  The Will to Power
Z  Thus Spoke Zarathustra
In the Absence of God: Case Studies on the Use and Value of Nietzsche in Avant-Gardist Thought 1905-1945

Introduction

The figure of the philologist-turned-philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, looms large over the twentieth century. Born in 1844 in the village of Röcken, Saxony, Nietzsche’s ideas did not gain much traction during his lifetime, but after his death, on the 25 August 1900, Nietzsche’s writings started to flow through the intellectual and cultural milieu of the early twentieth century and acted as a fertile soil in which new ideas could grow. Whether in philosophy, literature, culture, politics, or visual art, his presence seems nearly inescapable. In this thesis I seek to demonstrate how Nietzsche’s thinking permeated and affected the development of Western European Avant-Gardist thought in the first half of the twentieth century. Nietzsche is an interesting problem to deal with in the historiography of the early twentieth century as he comes up time and again in different places with different meanings, having been widely read and vastly influential, but with that influence coming in many different manifestations. These multiple manifestations are no doubt to do with the open nature of his writings, and the multiple contradictions within them, creating a hermeneutical issue that can make parallel studies such as this one a difficult task. Through a series of case studies, I explain how his philosophy was (mis)interpreted, and (mis)used by several prominent figures from different avant-garde circles, and I ask what were the conditions that made his philosophy so appealing and useful for these figures, even in cases of misuse/misinterpretation. These case studies show how over time and changes of historical context, specifically the rise of European fascism, the use and use value of Nietzschean philosophy altered for these thinkers and thus, so did the ways they engaged with his thought.
While Nietzsche’s importance to post-modern thinking (having been the subject of books and essays by Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault) is often considered of great significance, as scholars such as Siobhan Lyons have noted, his relationship with modernist thought is not always as clearly identified. However, the ‘ambiguity’ of this relationship, as Lyons describes it, may be less to do with the existence of the relationship, but rather more to do with the spirit in which avant-gardists of that era engaged with Nietzsche. It is clear to see the foundational aspect of Nietzsche for thinkers in the postmodern era such as Foucault, who writes of Nietzsche’s genealogical method, using the very same cognitive mode he is describing. Foucault argues that this method is ‘situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body.’ This describes a version of a Nietzschean method of philosophy that falls in line with Foucault’s post-structuralist thinking that is identified more broadly with postmodernism. Nietzsche’s method then, especially in The Genealogy of Morals (1887), becomes a blueprint for deconstructing language and meaning for these thinkers. But for avant-gardists of the modernist era, Nietzsche was not a site of deconstruction, but an opportunity for construction. Matthew Rampley’s assertion that ‘Nietzsche’s thought is organised around the central problem of modernity, namely, interrogation of the means by which modernity may derive its normativity from itself’ suggests that, for modernists, the same element of Nietzsche’s philosophy that opened up avenues for post-structuralist critique inspired a wave of thinking in the arts that sought to create new meaning through their works.

3 Ibid.
The principal figures I discuss in this thesis represent a range of writers, artists, and thinkers, all of whom were chosen for their prominence in the historical avant-garde, being paradigmatic within their specific movement, and the revolutionary aspects of their projects (which were sometimes, but not always, political). In each of these cases, there is a shift in their engagement with Nietzsche’s works, showing dimensions of a broader pattern in how his philosophy was utilised within avant-gardist thought. There are six chapters, and the thesis is divided into three parts, each with its own introduction explaining further why the two case studies in that section are paired, the Nietzschean themes they deal with, and works discussed. Given the chronological overlap in the careers of these avant-gardists the order of sections is driven more by the type of engagement with Nietzsche’s philosophy. In part one, the subjects are Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), Hugo Ball (1886-1927), constituting the first case study, and Richard Huelsenbeck (1892-1974), constituting the second. It charts the way that Nietzschean thought traversed from German Expressionism into Dadaism, and how the spiritual concerns of Kandinsky, whose idea to launch art into an ‘epoch of the great spiritual’ took advantage of the way Nietzschean thought had decimated the legitimacy of spiritual/religious institutions. This led to Kandinsky becoming for Ball the vision of a truly Nietzschean artist. Ball was not just the originator of Zurich Dada and founder of the Cabaret Voltaire, before moving to Switzerland he lived in Munich for a while where he knew Kandinsky, and was a part of Expressionist circles. As such, Ball represents the crossing over point from Expressionism into Dada, as his own fascination with Nietzsche, in tandem with his admiration for Kandinsky’s spiritual project, appears to lay the foundations for a Dadaist spiritualism. But this spiritual concern was transformed into more of a moral imperative for Huelsenbeck. Huelsenbeck was a collaborator of Ball’s in the Cabaret Voltaire, the paragon of Zurich Dada, (he also contributed to the single issue of the Cabaret Voltaire magazine (1916) along with Kandinsky), before moving back to Germany in 1917 and becoming a leading figure in Berlin Dada. Huelsenbeck was not just reacting to the erosion of trust in the church as prescribed by

---

Nietzsche, or the instability of science that shook Kandinsky, but also a self-inflicted delegitimising of the German clergy through their support for the First World War. His reaction was an envisioning of Dadaist morality, a morality beyond good and evil, greatly indebted to Nietzsche.

In part two, I have devoted chapters to Filippo Marinetti (1876-1944), and Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957). These two have been paired in order to consider the role of right-wing thinking in modernist Nietzscheanism, with both men identifying with fascism at some point in their career. But considering them together also demonstrates how their Nietzscheanism – and perhaps modernist Nietzscheanism in general - was fickle. Both men were prone to self-mythologising, and in doing so both tried to distance themselves from Nietzsche despite there being an obvious debt to his thinking in both Vorticism (Lewis) and Futurism (Marinetti). These two chapters have also been paired given the close relation of Vorticism and Futurism. As discussed in the chapter pertaining to Lewis, Vorticism was very much a reaction to Futurism, though not necessarily a positive one. Lewis encountered Marinetti in London, and famously disrupted Marinetti’s recital at the Doré Gallery in 1914. But prior to this the Futurist exhibition at London’s Sackville Gallery in 1912 clearly had a decisive impact on the direction of Lewis’s artistic practice. These chapters deal not just with Nietzschean themes in the works of Lewis and Marinetti, but also with his reception in their milieux. Though we see a similar anti-clericalism in the likes of Marinetti as we do with Huelsenbeck, it is clear this anti-clericalism is founded on an entirely different sentiment.

In part three I focus in both chapters on a single figure, Georges Bataille (1897-1962), though I do consider his shared projects with his collaborator André Masson (1896-1987) in the final chapter. Bataille deserves this extended consideration because by the 1930s with much of Europe having descended into fascism, Nietzsche’s thinking, as malleable as it was, was co-opted by a number of prominent fascists, including Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, as well as fascist philosophers and commentators. Thanks to the work of prominent Nietzsche scholars like Walter Kaufmann and Alexander

---

Nehamas, it is now more well-known that Nietzsche’s sister, Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche, and his cousin Richard Oehler manipulated his works after his death to align with their own antisemitic and fascist views.\(^8\) Hitler himself famously visited the Nietzsche archive at the invitation of Förster-Nietzsche.\(^9\) Work to resist fascist appropriations and restore Nietzsche’s name was initially undertaken by Bataille through his magazine *Acéphale*, and it was Bataille who, as Nehamas puts it, ‘exposed once and for all the unsoundness of the Nazi claim to Nietzsche’.\(^10\) As such the extent of Bataille’s Nietzscheanism warrants further discussion than that of others in this thesis; there is one chapter dedicated to Bataille’s project of reclaiming Nietzsche, and a further chapter investigating the way Bataille used Nietzsche’s philosophy as a basis for his own thinking during the 1930s and 1940s, and the implications of this engagement. The question of the fascist interpretation of Nietzsche becomes unavoidable at this juncture, and it would be a disservice to not explore it at length given Bataille’s role in this discourse, but I also wished to discuss Nietzscheanism in other areas of Bataille’s thinking. Where the prior case studies are centred on leading figures of canonical avant-garde groups, Bataille’s importance to the avant-garde is as a parallel to the original group of Surrealists led by André Breton. Bataille is now seen widely as a luminary for the so-called dissident Surrealists, who like him were those that did not align with Breton’s vision for the group and were cast out in the ‘Second Manifesto of Surrealism’ (1929).\(^11\) Bataille and Breton were opposed intellectually, as a materialist and idealist respectively, their different ideas of Surrealism were seemingly irreconcilable. Elsa Adamowicz writes of this feud between the two of them through the story of their courting of Salvador Dalí and interpretations of his works.\(^12\) But despite his outsider status to the more famous Surrealist group, the value of dissident Surrealism should not

---

\(^9\) Ibid. p.23.
be overlooked. Over the last 40 years his presence in scholarship related to the avant-garde has increased in prominence, notably in the 1986 special edition of *October* magazine edited by Annette Michelson dedicated to Bataille, and numerous edited collections of both Bataille’s writings and of essays on Bataille. As editor of journals such as *Documents* and *Acéphale*, which promoted a different kind of Surrealist vision, Bataille forged a distinctive intellectual and polemical position which often drew deeply from his reading of Nietzsche.

The geographical expanse of this thesis, covering Germany, Switzerland, Italy, the U.K, and France speaks to the wide dissemination of Nietzsche’s ideas, and through the thesis I spend some time exploring this dissemination through articles in ‘little magazines’ and early translations. There was also a certain amount of itinerancy, and cross-border cultural exchange among the avant-garde which is often in the background to this thesis. Small connections and coincidences are frequent, such as Kandinsky’s nephew Alexander Kojève’s involvement with Bataille’s College of Sociology, or Lewis including a review of Kandinsky’s *On the Spiritual in Art* in the first issue of *Blast*. It should also of course be noted that in each of the chapters other prominent avant-gardists and thinkers that orbited or influenced the figures considered as case studies also come into the discussion where appropriate. Furthermore, in almost all cases Nietzsche’s thought is expressed as a synthesis with other ideas. Notable examples of

---


15 Credit towards the forging of position should also partially belong to the German writer Carl Einstein, who contributed to and co-edited *Documents* with Bataille. Rainer Rumold for example asserts that ‘Lest one concede and attribute to Bataille the role of mastermind of Documents, it should be noted that Einstein more succinctly developed long-standing ideas, rather than gaining altogether new insights into painting as a “language.”’ Rainer Rumold. “Painting as Language. Why Not?” Carl Einstein in “Documents,” *October* Vol.107 (2004) p.79.
philosophers and writers who figure significantly in such syncretisms are G.W.F. Hegel, Leo Tolstoy, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Georges Sorel, and Gabriele D’Annunzio.

Why Nietzsche and the Avant-Garde?

The history of the word ‘avant-garde’ has been written on extensively and the etymology is, by now, well known.16 Coming from the French military term for the forward guard, the first into battle, and slowly gaining traction as a way to describe artists who had a certain political view that was being proselytised through their works. Its dissemination as an artistic term was notably thanks to Henri de Saint-Simon in the nineteenth century and Renato Poggioli in the twentieth.17 But what sets ‘avant-garde’ apart, and makes it a useful term in the context of this thesis? In the seminal essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939), Clement Greenberg argues that avant-garde culture is a result of ‘a superior consciousness of history—more precisely, the appearance of a new kind of criticism of society, an historical criticism’.18 While there is some debate about whether or not there is a difference between the terms ‘modernist’ and ‘avant-garde’,19 I have chosen to use avant-garde in this study as it arguably ties its proponents to a more programmatic way of thinking and praxis which was often articulated through manifestoes and a prominent ‘little magazine’ culture. For example in his attempt to map a serviceable definition of ‘avant-garde’ in comparison to ‘modernist’, Astradur Eysteinsson, (despite confessing a certain ambivalence over the difference) includes in his description of the former ‘radical representation / the “shock” of the new’, ‘the movement element / group activity’, ‘the anti-aesthetic / anti-art / iconoclastic representation’, and ‘political representation / attacks on political institutions, dominant ideologies and discourses’ among other

elements that differ from a softer, more aesthetically focused, definition he offers for what he labels ‘classical modernism’. Looking at other attempts to define this difference, Matei Calinescu argues that ‘modernism, whatever its specific meaning in different languages and for different authors, […] conveys that sense of universal and hysterical negation so characteristic of the avant-garde. The antitraditionalism of modernism is often subtly traditional.’ The sense of social historical criticism, characterised as negation by Calinescu, implies a certain politicisation of art that is labelled avant-garde, and this is certainly an aspect of the avant-garde as described by Peter Bürger in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984). Bürger argues that the art of the avant-garde intends to sublate the praxis of life into art, rejecting the bourgeois institution of artistic practice that preceded it. He writes:

The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men. When the avant-gardistes demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of contents of individual works. Rather it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular content.

Bürger is not always convinced of the success of this sublation, but it seems to be the intent that matters, that desire to oppose the way in which art functions in bourgeois institutions. Essentially, the avant-garde, in Bürger’s formulation represents a break, and a rejection of the artistic tradition of aestheticism in which the content of art signifies nothing. Instead, the avant-garde ‘attempt[s] to organise a new life praxis from a basis

---

20 Ibid. pp.32-3.  
This is indeed a critical element to the avant-gardists under study here. Their practice of negation is creative, invoking the Nietzschean Maxim that ‘We can destroy only as creators.’ (GS §58), a recurring theme throughout these case studies. Furthermore, avant-gardists, particularly through the medium of the manifesto, started to take on a new role in this period. In describing the importance of the manifesto to the avant-garde Sascha Bru states that ‘emphatically it highlights the inherently programmatic nature of the avant-gardes. It shows us that for avant-gardists, it no longer sufficed to express oneself as an artist or to develop a personal style, leaving matters of interpretation to critics or art historians.’ This multifaceted role as artist-critic-theorist has been a determining factor in choosing my case studies. Their extended engagement not just with artistic production—whether it be visual or literary—but also with a visionary programmatic element of a defined movement (even in the case of Bataille, though again he is something of an outlier, as the closest thing to a ‘movement’ in this sense that he participated in was his secret society/journal Acéphale) opens them up for a deeper engagement with the less aesthetically focused elements of Nietzsche’s philosophy.

The multifaceted nature of these avant-gardists is partially why I have chosen to exclude Picasso from this study. Despite his Nietzschean declaration that ‘We all know that art is not the truth. Art is the lie that makes us realise the truth’, Picasso does not quite fit with these case studies. Several scholars have already undertaken a good amount of work tying Picasso to Nietzsche. In 1980 J.M Nash and Mark Rosenthal both published essays on the Nietzschean element of Picasso’s art, a 2003 essay by Lisa Florman delves into the Dionysian aspects of Picasso’s Demoiselles d’Avignon, inspired by an earlier essay by Leo Steinberg that notes Nietzschean aspects in the same painting, and more recently T.J Clark’s 2013 book Picasso and Truth does a great deal

to read Picasso’s works in a Nietzschean light. Though this is well-trodden ground, as Nash’s argument shows, Picasso even while being a great proponent of Cubism, was not a theorist of his art in the same way that the other visual artists in this study were. Indeed, while I do discuss some visual works of both Kandinsky and Lewis I treat Kandinsky mainly as a theorist, and Lewis primarily as an author, as these are the sites of their work where Nietzsche comes most critically to the foreground. Though I deal with the Expressionist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner a little, this is also the reason I do not undertake a fuller examination of his work or that of any other Brücke Expressionist. Even though there is a strong Nietzschean element in his work, and Kirchner did attempt some theorisation of his work in the ‘Chronik der Brücke’ (written in 1913, but unpublished until 1948), and with the reviews he wrote of his own work under the pseudonym Louis de Marsalle, he cannot be considered an author to the same extent as Kandinsky and Lewis.

In the case of Picasso, to uncover the Nietzscheanism inherent to his practice of Cubism, Nash has to look to Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger’s 1912 text *Du Cubisme*. Florman also uses intermediaries to deal with Picasso’s Nietzscheanism in the form of the critics Steinberg and William Rubin. Rosenthal takes a slightly different approach, and looks at Picasso’s development from his Blue and Rose periods into Cubism, and interprets the transition as Picasso embodying the Nietzschean ‘man of action’ and asserting his will to power. He notes the prevalence of Nietzsche in

---

28 Weikop, ‘Ernst Ludwig Kirchner as His Own Critic: The Artist’s Statements as Stratagems of Self-Promotion,’ *Forum for modern language studies* Vol.48, no. 4 (2012).
Barcelona and in the magazine *Arte Joven* that Picasso co-founded and co-edited, but shows no rigorous intellectual engagement with Nietzschean ideas on Picasso’s part, or even opinions of Picasso on Nietzsche. Clark, takes the safer route and decides to eschew questions of influence altogether, admitting that Nietzsche may well not have influenced Picasso, and instead uses his philosophy as a framework to better understand Picasso’s work, asking ‘Is not Picasso Nietzsche’s Painter?’

This is not to be derogatory of Clark’s lectures, since his diagnosis of Picasso’s Cubist period as being a reaction to a dissolution of the value of truth is well considered, and a theme that crops up across various avant-gardists, but my own goals in this thesis are more to do with avant-garde thinking than artistic practice. That is also why I focus primarily on textual analysis rather than visual. Where I do incorporate visual works it is deepen engagement with a text and illustrate examples that speak to my arguments. Since I am asking not so much how we might read these avant-gardist’s works as Nietzschean, but how Nietzsche is present and utilised in the overarching project of this artist or that writer. I found a text-based approach to be more effective in understanding the level of engagement that these subjects had with Nietzsche. And this is another reason for choosing my particular case studies over the likes of Picasso and other primarily visual artists, such as Kirchner. As the pre-existing work on Picasso shows, it is difficult to offer an analysis of his Nietzscheanism based on anything more than aesthetics. In my case studies, even where the physical evidence for meaningful engagement (citations, library records etc.) with Nietzsche is thin, there is enough to grapple with in terms of aspects of thinking indebted to Nietzscheanism that enables me to construct a pattern of engagement. For example, in Kandinsky’s extensive theoretical writings over the course of a career that spanned decades, he only makes two direct mentions of Nietzsche. Marinetti’s most prolonged engagement with Nietzsche is in a vituperative manifesto that disavows his influence on Futurism. But as I show in the

---

32 Ibid, p.87.
relevant chapters, even this minimal engagement speaks to a greater presence of a Nietzschean context for these avant-gardists. From the specific citations of Nietzsche, it is possible to learn about overlapping preoccupations. By studying where their thought comes up against his, whether in conflict or agreement, allows for judgement on what value Nietzsche’s thought had in these cases, and to grapple with the hermeneutics of Nietzsche’s oeuvre in an avant-gardist context. But what is this presence? In Nietzsche’s sprawling philosophy, which themes are most consistently under avant-garde scrutiny?

**The Thematic Elements of Avant-Garde Nietzscheanism**

The central contention that holds throughout this thesis is that this collection of avant-gardists, were each responding to a particular set of problems that Nietzsche’s works had brought into a sharp relief, though not always with Nietzschean solutions. Through their innovations in their respective fields, I show that the ‘new life praxis’ Bürger describes is often created out of a dialogue with Nietzsche’s philosophy. The most famous of these problems that these avant-gardists had to contend with is the death of God. The declaration that ‘God is Dead’ (*GS* §125) was initially made by Nietzsche in 1882 in his famous passage ‘The Madman’ from *The Gay Science*. The madman warns a marketplace full of people of the hubris of discarding God, the stabilising influence, upon which morality and value systems are founded, he is fearful of what we (for as the madman says, ‘we’ are God’s murderers) have done by effacing the locus of understanding existence. God’s death, or more the death of belief in God is a serious issue for Nietzsche that poses an existential quandary as to how we are to create value systems when all that we had previously known, and the way we function within society, had been predicated on the existence of a God whose domain was judgement for our moral actions. It was through religion that society’s understandings of good and evil were maintained, and so without the arbitration of a divine being, new value systems needed to be created to ward off the creeping nihilism that accompanied the death of God. When I initially began this thesis, this particular issue was at the core of my concerns, spurred by the claim Terry Eagleton had made in his 2014 book *Culture and
the Death of God, that ‘[t]he history of the modern age is among other things the search for a viceroy for God. Reason, Nature, Geist, culture, art, the sublime, the nation, the state, science, Humanity, Being, Society, the Other, desire, life force and personal relations: all of these have acted from time to time as forms of displaced divinity.’\textsuperscript{35} I believed I would find that these avant-gardists were indeed often reacting to a lack of divinity in modern society, but had a suspicion they would also follow Hegel’s logic that ‘The peculiar nature of artistic production and of works of art no longer fills our highest need. We have got beyond venerating works of art as divine and worshipping them. The impression they make is of a more reflective kind, and what they arouse in us needs a higher touchstone and a different test.’\textsuperscript{36} I thought the conclusion would be that art itself would not necessarily be the thing to take up the mantle of the divine, but instead the members of the avant-garde engaging with this problem would be using their work to communicate new ideas of divinity outside of art. Naturally, this led to an expansion of the set of problems that I saw these avant-gardists as dealing with; given the interrelation of the different areas of Nietzsche’s thought - his ideas on decadence, the inversion of values, overcoming, and the Übermensch also become prevalent themes in the avant-garde. Though these themes are discussed in the chapters themselves, I would like to do some groundwork here to tie them together.

The latter of these themes is recurrent in this thesis. The pan-European idea of a “new man”, and its origin in Nietzsche’s concept of the Übermensch is a prevalent example of how Nietzsche’s ideas affected multiple avant-gardists in similar, yet subtly different ways. The Übermensch is the kind of being that can create values, and hence is able to deal with the crushing uncertainty instigated by the death of God; he is also a projected or future being that emerges out of the post-theological crisis. An Übermensch type in the form of the ‘new man’ cropped up across Europe and had various presentations in different avant-gardes. There was the Futurist multiplied man, the Expressionist neue mensch, the Dadaist neue mensch, and Sorel’s mythic heroes just

to name the ones discussed in this thesis. The idea of a new man was widely taken up: as well as its prominence in Western European avant-gardes, it was mentioned in Central European publications as well, such as in the manifesto by the Croat poet Branko ve Poljanski written for his single issue of the Ljubljana based magazine *Svetokret* [Blueprint] in 1921.\textsuperscript{37} The commonality is that these avant-gardists are dealing with Nietzschean problems, though not all seek the solutions to these issues in Nietzsche’s philosophy, the ‘new man’ is one example in which they do. Each iteration of the new man is different from the next, and they each show how the avant-gardist that envisioned them sought to impose their own will on the future, these new men are often excellent examples of how Nietzsche was synthesised into avant-gardist vision.

Decadence is the next most prominent theme in this thesis, and after the death of God, is arguably the most important issue at stake, and is similarly linked to the new man and avant-gardist thought. As Peter Nicholls puts it, decadence signified:

> the ashes from which a new regenerative culture might rise … the new Nietzschean man would seek to harness the transformative energies of the modern to his own project of self-renovation. The present could now be regarded not as impasse and decline but as a moment of decisive change.\textsuperscript{38}

Decadence as a term only appeared toward the end of Nietzsche’s career, notably in *Contra Wagner* (1889) and the autobiographical *Ecce Homo* (written in 1888 and posthumously published in 1908); however, despite being unnamed until late on, it is arguably a presence in his writings from *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) onwards. As the philosopher Andrew Huddleston says, Nietzsche ‘is a diagnostician of decline, warning us that our culture is careening toward mediocrity’\textsuperscript{39}. In *The Birth of Tragedy* it is there in

the paralleling of mid to late nineteenth-century European culture and the degradation of Greek tragic culture post-Socrates (who, it should be noted, Nietzsche considered to be a decadent).

For Nietzsche, decadence is both individualistic and cultural and these two forms are of course related. In his recent book, Huddleston does an excellent job of explaining how these elements relate, and how Nietzsche twists the term. In brief, for Nietzsche, decadence in the individual sense is more of an overcompensation for a failing of character that may or may not be an excessive hedonism. As is discussed throughout this thesis, the dichotomy of instinct against intellect recurs again and again in Nietzsche’s work, and it should be understood that a healthy dose of instinct is a good thing, and the self-denial of these instincts, as in the case of that character Nietzsche so despised, the ascetic priest, is not something Nietzsche views positively. To read Nietzsche in a Deleuzean anti-dialectical manner: by overcompensating for an instinct which is deemed immoral or hedonistic in a societal context, one is succumbing to external actors, and no longer creating values that affirmatively stem from the will. Furthermore, this ties in with the importance of perspectivism in Nietzsche’s thought, as denying the natural instincts usually results in following a moral code laid out by an external influence which Nietzsche believed necessarily narrows perspective. Elaborating on this notion in Beyond Good and Evil he writes ‘Whichever moral code we inspect in that light, its “nature” teaches to hate the excessive freedom of *laisser-aller* and instils a need for limited horizons, for immediate tasks—it teaches us to *narrow our perspective*, and thus in a certain sense, to be stupid, as a precondition for life and growth.’ (*BGE* §188) This is why the composer Richard Wagner, formerly so admired by Nietzsche that he dedicated his first book to him, believing his music to be the answer to the cultural decline that surrounded him later became treated by Nietzsche as the decadent par excellence. Nietzsche rejected the opera *Parsifal* (1882) in particular, in which the ‘pure fool’, Parsifal, helps the knights of the holy grail reclaim the spear which pierced Christ’s side after his crucifixion from the evil sorcerer Klingsor. In the second act Parsifal quite literally negates instinct, as he denies any sexual animus he may have while on his quest to help the knights when Klingsor sends his flower maidens to tempt
Parsifal and waylay him, and he resists their advances. Parisfal’s worldview is limited by his purity, and by the prevailing morality of the religious knights. *Parsifal* is an overtly Christian work, and its blatant ascetic message was unforgivable for Nietzsche, a betrayal of Wagner's potential to spark a cultural renewal that might overcome the negation of the self.

Decadence, then, is not something to be eradicated via a strict regimen and self-denial; it must be recognised as a part of the self, as something important to the unity of the whole that makes one what one is. Nietzsche certainly recognised it in himself. Cultural decadence is much the same. It must be recognised and accepted. In Freudian language, it can be sublimated, but it should not be denied. Cultural decadence was undoubtedly a prominent concern for the various Western European avant-gardes at the time. I discuss this theme most in the chapters concerning Huelsenbeck, Kandinsky, and Bataille (though more as a concern of Nazism in this instance). However, the issue of Nietzschean decadence is equally evident in the Futurist disdain for history and championing of new technologies, and in the Vorticist maxim that ‘blasts’ a languishing of culture in Britain.

**Situating this Thesis**

Over the years there have been several studies pertaining to the influence of Nietzsche on various avant-garde movements, artists, and writers, as well as of course to Nietzsche’s views on art. This thesis is not in the same vein of the latter. While the likes of Julian Young and Philip Pothen offer excellent insights into Nietzschean aesthetics my aim is not to use the avant-garde to explain Nietzsche, but rather to situate these avant-gardists as part of a Nietzschean tradition.⁴₀ My intention is for this thesis to be a work on the intellectual history of the avant-garde, in a similar vein to Sascha Bru’s *Democratic, Law and the Modernist Avant-Gardes: Writing in the State of Exception*

---

(2009), which looks at how European democratic crisis, and states of exception\(^\text{41}\) in Western Europe during the 1910s and 20s shaped the development of multiple avant-gardes, through studies of Marinetti, Huelsenbeck, and the Belgian expressionist Paul Van Ostijen.\(^\text{42}\) But this thesis is also a history of the interpretation of Nietzschean thought.

In terms of full length works that delve into the thorny realm of Nietzsche’s influence upon avant-gardists some of the best tend to be focused on German Expressionism. More generally speaking there is Seth Taylor’s thesis and book \textit{Left Wing Nietzscheans: The Politics of German Expressionism 1910-1920} (1990), and Christopher Short’s PhD thesis \textit{Friedrich Nietzsche and German Expressionism} (1995). Short is also one of the few who seriously considers the possibility of a Nietzschean Kandinsky, though Mark Roskill also makes passing mention of this in \textit{Klee, Kandinsky and the Thought of their Time} (1992). With regards to specific artists, Sharon Jordan has written extensively on Nietzsche’s impact on the Brücke expressionist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner both in her thesis and in essay form.\(^\text{43}\) In other areas of the avant-garde and of modernism Alexandra Emmanuel’s PhD thesis \textit{The Literary Reception of Nietzschean Ideas in Relation to Works of Modernist Literature} (2010) focuses on the reception of Nietzsche among British and Irish authors. There is also the 2014 book \textit{Giorgio de Chirico and the Metaphysical City: Nietzsche Modernism, Paris} by Ara H. Merjian which focuses on de Chirico’s works in 1914, and what de Chirico called his ‘Nietzschean method’ of metaphysical painting which Merjian describes as interrupting the ‘correlation between physical integrity and semantic sense – between realism and the real – without announcing its interruptions as such’\(^\text{44}\), though as Merjian indicates, de Chirico himself was somewhat resistant to being labelled a modernist or avant-gardist.\(^\text{45}\) Scholarship

\(^\text{41}\) Giorgio Agamben’s term, which Bru defines as being ‘declared when political officials face crises and aporia threatening democracy as they are irresolvable through normal democratic procedure or consensus.’ Bru. \textit{Democracy, Law and the Avant-Gardes: Writing in the State of Exception}. (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh: 2009) p.4.

\(^\text{42}\) Ibid.


\(^\text{45}\) Ibid.
with the aim of analysing the Nietzschean elements of Futurism is more difficult to come by, at least in English, though as noted in my chapter on Marinetti a good many scholars insist on the connection. A reasonably sustained engagement on the topic can be found in Ernest Ialongo’s thesis *Filippo Tommaso Marinetti: The Artist and his Politics* (2009), Ialongo tries to resolve the problem of Marinetti’s contradictory politics, and he sees Nietzsche as a precursor to Marinetti’s view of the crowd, his anti-democratic stance, and his anti-clericalism (a theme I also cover). Work on the Nietzschean elements of Lewis are a lot easier to come by, especially in the writings of Paul Edwards. But though some of these works may bring in other avant-gardes at some point, they by and large stick to a single movement or avant-gardist. The comparative element of this thesis, taking avant-gardists from different groups into consideration, puts it a similar territory to Mark Antliff’s *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (1993) as he considers Cubists, Fauvists, and Futurists in relation to the French philosopher Henri Bergson.

A collection of essays published in 2019 titled *Understanding Nietzsche, Understanding Modernism* attempts to capture the Nietzschean milieu of the modern era, that is similar to—though far larger in scope than—this thesis. There is some overlap between this book and my study—one chapter by Kaitlyn Creasy dedicated to European Dada focuses on Ball and Huelsenbeck along with Tristan Tzara, and another by Tim Themi includes Bataille in a discussion of Nietzsche’s importance for psychoanalysis. However, my approach to Ball and Huelsenbeck differs from Creasy’s who is primarily focused on their time in Zurich Dada, while I choose to pair Ball with Kandinsky in his pre-Dada days and look at how a combination of Nietzscheanism and a veneration for Kandinsky affected his Dadaist outlook. And I primarily look at Huelsenbeck post-Zurich, when he had returned to Germany and helped found Berlin

---

Dada. Further to this, Creasy argues that these Dadaists were ‘heirs to the destructive projects of Nietzsche’\textsuperscript{49} and is of the opinion that the Dadaists were ultimately nihilists, an opinion I refute in my own arguments. Meanwhile, the section of this thesis concerning Bataille does not engage with his involvement with psychoanalysis, of which Bataille was an early patient, but instead focuses on Bataille’s engagement with Nietzsche in fascist thinking and in his peculiar anti-fascist praxis.

Of course, no study on Nietzsche and avant-gardism or modernism could ever be comprehensive. Even among the minor inclusions I have made in this thesis to provide wider context there are those such as the poets Stefan Georg and Gabriele d’Annunzio who would have also made for strong inclusions (even if a good part of their careers occurred before the rise of the avant-garde). But by selecting these particular case studies I have been able to show how the engagement with Nietzsche across the development of multiple avant-gardes is a hermeneutical issue dependent upon context. Having examples that span from prior to the first world war to the end of the second world war, that parallel the rise of European fascism, accentuates the delicate nature of Nietzsche’s texts. Indeed, I am not attempting to show a likeness in method, or a universal avant-gardist approach to interpreting Nietzsche, but show the commonality of having to reckon with Nietzsche, as his philosophy shaped the cultural environment in which the avant-garde developed. And even though there may be recurrent themes, individual responses to Nietzsche’s philosophy differ wildly. He is simultaneously a spiritual, moral, and political problem able to be appropriated to multiple (and even opposing) causes, especially in the immediate aftermath of his death, as his writings grew in popularity. We might think of the case studies as being emblematic of some of these different causes, leaders in the arts who sought to change the way we live through their work. Kandinsky and Ball attempting to make sense of the world through a primacy of spiritual art; Huelsenbeck attempting to take morality to new, godless, heights; Marinetti attempting to revolutionise our concept of humanity, and give ourselves over to violence; the more cynical Lewis seeking not so much to change how

we live, but how we see with a critical focus on the subject; finally, Bataille, attempting to reignite a sense of the sacred in everyday life. Each of these men existed in a Nietzschean moment that demanded his ideas be confronted.
Part I

Introduction

In this first part I begin my inquiries into the use and value of Nietzsche by looking at three distinct, but related figures. The Russian-born expressionist Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), the founder of Zurich Dada, Hugo ball (1886-1927), and then in the second chapter, the German Dadaist poet Richard Huelsenbeck (1892-1974). These three men present a lineage in the German artistic tradition, Kandinsky and Ball were strong friends, and Ball, the younger man, looked up to Kandinsky, and held his artistry in the highest esteem. Meanwhile, Huelsenbeck was something of a protégé to Ball, moving to Zurich and joining the Cabaret Voltaire at his behest before returning to Berlin with the message of Dadaism. Nietzsche’s reputation had already been well established in Germany by this point, and access to his texts was relatively easy. This lineage presents an opportunity to see how a Nietzschean thread wove its way through successive iterations of related artistic movements in Germany. I also extend the study of this lineage by looking at some of the significant Nietzscheans that contributed to the intellectual environment of pre-First World War Germany that Kandinsky would have likely interacted with. This is not to say that I am looking for common ground or a pattern in their attitudes towards the use of Nietzsche in their thinking, if anything it is the differences that are most important here. As I show, tracing this Nietzschean thread reveals that his philosophy was interpreted and used in very different ways by each of these men, with each finding an element in his philosophy that resonated in their own practice. It also demonstrates how with the change of political context going from a pre-war environment to an art movement founded in the midst of the First World War, the philosophical concerns alter. The position of Germany as the instigator of the war, naturally also had an effect on the sense of crisis as perceived by these avant-gardists. Where Kandinsky called for a renewed spiritualism founded in veiled Christian symbolism, as his adoptive country hurtled towards conflict, the Berlin Dadaists,
following the anti-war stance of Zurich Dada were avowedly anti-clerical, which I argue was a symptom of the German Church’s pro-war stance.

This anti-clericalism foregrounds a good portion of the chapter on Huelsenbeck which concerns his attempt to create a Dadaist morality through his vision of a Dadaist Neue Mensch [New Man]. To support this, I have included visual works from Huelsenbeck’s fellow German Dadaist, George Grosz, which are often brimming with anti-clerical sentiment. It should be noted that Grosz also produced a collection of artworks under the title *Ecce Homo* in 1923. Naturally as this collection shares a name with Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo* (1908) I would be remiss not to mention its existence, but it is not as pertinent to my thesis as other works of his I discuss such as *The Funeral* (1917/18).

The principal works under discussion in the following chapters are Kandinsky’s 1912 book *On the Spiritual in Art*, as this contains the most comprehensive outline of Kandinsky’s aesthetic theories; Ball’s lecture on Kandinsky delivered to the Galerie Dada in 1917, which elucidates Ball and Kandinsky’s view of spiritual crisis; and Huelsenbeck’s manifesto *Der Neue Mensch* (1917), which is a heavily Nietzsche-inspired work that reimagines the Übermensch relative to Dadaism. I also make reference to several of Kandinsky’s visual works to support an analysis of the artistic vision espoused within his texts, and as way to discuss the Christian worldview that his works conform to, including *Colourful Life* (1907), *Composition I* (1910), and *Composition V* (1911).
II Nietzsche in the Air: The Spiritual Path from Expressionism to Dada through the Aesthetic Theories of Wassily Kandinsky

When it comes to Friedrich Nietzsche’s effect on German artistic circles at the turn of the twentieth century the story is different compared to elsewhere in Europe. The most significant German avant-garde of this period is undoubtedly Expressionism, which already has a strong association with Nietzsche in existing literature. Indeed, Chris Short goes as far as to describe considering the two in relation as ‘an art historical commonplace.’ As such, it would be impossible to write this thesis without a study of Expressionism. Aside from Short’s own writings on Nietzsche and Expressionism, including his doctoral thesis, *Friedrich Nietzsche and German Expressionist Art*, which is among the most extensive of studies in this area, the connection between the two, either considering Expressionism as a whole, or specific Expressionists, has also been written about by scholars such as Sharon Jordan, Seth Taylor, Donald Gordon, Richard Gray, Paul Crowther, Christian Weikop and many others, both in detail and in passing. This chapter attempts to take a different approach, focusing on how Nietzsche’s ideas permeated the Expressionist milieu, and how his diagnosis of a decadent society, and the existential challenge of value creation post the ‘death of God’ affected the ideas of spirituality held by the artist Wassily Kandinsky, and the poet Hugo Ball. Starting with a wider look at Nietzsche’s prominence in German artistic circles at the turn of the twentieth century I then go on to analyse Kandinsky’s theories and how an amalgamation of his influences, including Hegel, Tolstoy, and of course Nietzsche himself, informed his response to these challenges, and further discuss how Ball, even after the establishment of Zurich Dada, saw Kandinsky as the Nietzschean artist par excellence, whose art was a shining beacon of hope in a world from which Ball was

---

gradually growing more and more disenchanted. I show that Kandinsky’s use of Nietzsche was somewhat idiosyncratic to others that surrounded him. Despite an obvious awareness of and similar view to Nietzsche in terms of a crisis in the modern era, Kandinsky posed a solution that would likely have been anathema to Nietzsche himself, largely due to an overtly Christian sensibility in his work, remodelled into ‘the spiritual’.

The younger of the two men, Hugo Ball is, generally speaking, more readily associated with the movement he helped to found, Dada. But, prior to moving to Zurich and opening up the Cabaret Voltaire, Ball was involved with the Expressionist movement, writing for Expressionist magazines such as Die Aktion, Der Sturm, and Die Neue Kunst, and in 1913 Ball co-founded the Expressionist magazine Die Revolution alongside the playwright/poet Hans Leybold. He was also a dedicated student of Nietzsche, having written an unfinished doctoral thesis titled Nietzsche in Basel: A Polemic at the University of Munich in 1910. While no English translation currently exists of this thesis, a good understanding of it can be attained through various interpretations in English that have been published since. Seth Taylor summarises its purpose as being ‘to refute contemporary conceptions of Nietzsche as an adherent of Schopenhauer or as an uncritical enthusiast for classical culture and to present him as what Nietzsche always thought himself to be: the first immoralist.’

There is also a good deal regarding Ball’s thesis in Gerhardt Edward Steinke’s The Life and Work of Hugo Ball (1967), which draws heavily on the previous work of Eugen Egger and the somewhat biased accounts of Ball’s life published by his wife, the dancer/poet Emmy Hennings. In the introduction to the English translation of one of Ball’s later works, Critique of the German Intelligentsia (1919), Anson Rabinbach describes Ball’s thesis as being mistitled, stating that rather than being a polemic it: ‘Presents the view of the philosopher then prominent among the Munich avant-garde.’

---

that ‘However much Ball sought to subordinate conventional morality to what he called Nietzsche’s “cosmodicy,” he nonetheless remained, psychologically speaking, a moralist, not least in his assertion that a new type of “philosopher-artist” was to be the harbinger of the regeneration of German culture.’

If any artist that Ball knew fit the mould of this ‘philosopher-artist’, it would have been his friend Wassily Kandinsky. Ball met Kandinsky in Munich in 1912, after he returned to the city where he had previously been working on his thesis. Kandinsky and Ball shared this interest in spirituality, and preoccupation with the place of the spiritual in modern society and how art and artists related to the creation of a better world. Though Deborah Lewer has recently written of how she believes that ultimately it was a certain disillusionment with Kandinsky in particular that tipped Ball’s hand to move away from the avant-garde and towards an ascetic Catholic life, in the early years of their friendship he clearly had great respect for the Russian.

In her autobiography *Ruf und Echo* (1953), Hennings includes the following quote from Ball, written not long after he met Kandinsky: ‘If we speak of Kandinsky and Picasso, we don’t refer to painters but to priests; not craftsmen but to the creators of new worlds, new paradises.’ In a lecture Ball gave in 1917 on Kandinsky at the Galerie Dada, he delved further into how he perceived the nature of these two artists, characterising them as opposite ends of the modern-spiritual spectrum, stating:

> Our age has found its strongest artistic types in Picasso the faun and Kandinsky the monk. In Picasso the darkness, the horror, and the agony of the age, its ascetism, its deepest suffering, its groaning and grieving, its hell and nameless sorrow, its corpselike face and black pain. In Kandinsky its joyousness, its festive tumult its élan, its fugue of archangels, its quixoticism, its violet *Marseillaises*, its

---

5 Ibid.
blessed disintegration, its upward surge—cherubim summoned by yellow and blue fanfares and soaring into the infinite.  

As will be discussed further on in this chapter, Ball’s lecture frames Kandinsky’s work and theories in a distinctly Nietzschean context. But far more than that, it also frames Ball’s work and ideas in a Kandinskyian frame. In his commentary that precedes this lecture in the English translation of Ball’s diaries, *Flight out of Time* (the German original was published in 1927), John Elderfield states that ‘To Ball, Kandinsky was an ideal modern artist—the ideal artist, in fact—and largely because of the comprehensiveness of his vision.’ This comprehensive vision being an art that turned from the realm of the material to that of the spiritual, with a practice that attempted to imbue plastic art with the values and power of music. The art historian Peter Vergo discusses Kandinsky’s ideas regarding the relationship between visual art and music in several essays. In ‘Kandinsky and Music’ he discusses Kandinsky’s preoccupation with the idea that music is able to have an emotional impact on its audience even when it is abstract with no narrative referent, something he wished to be able to do with painting. Not only did this lead to Kandinsky’s non-objective works of art, but like several other artists around the turn of the twentieth century, including Ball, it also manifested in an interest with the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Despite turning to art later in his life, Kandinsky’s career as an artist spanned nearly five prolific decades, during which his artistic style changed dramatically from neo-romantic landscapes, through Symbolism and Expressionism, and into abstraction. Kandinsky began his painting career in Munich in 1896 at the age of 30, studying first under Anton Azbe, and then under the Munich secessionist Franz von Stuck, whose style was firmly rooted in Symbolism. In this pre-war phase of his career alone

---

Kandinsky founded/co-founded three artistic groups: Phalanx (1901-1905), the Neue Künstlervereinigung München (NKVM) (1909-1912), and Der Blaue Reiter (1911-1914). It is during this period that Kandinsky has sometimes been credited with creating the first truly abstract painting in the Western art tradition (though this claim is highly debatable and was recently called into question in 2019 by the monumental Hilma af Klint exhibition at The Guggenheim New York). This period is also when he published the first edition of his most influential book *On the Spiritual in Art* (1912). After the First World War he spent some time living back in Russia, unaffiliated with any group, before he joined Walter Gropius as an instructor at the Bauhaus back in Germany in 1922. During this time Kandinsky published the other of his two most important treatises on art: *Point and Line to Plane* (1926). After the Bauhaus was dissolved in 1933, Kandinsky moved to Paris where he developed his abstract style into what has been labelled ‘biomorphic abstraction’. This chapter largely concerns the more overtly Expressionist phase of his career, that is to say, the period prior to the First World War, especially the years encompassing Der Blaue Reiter. However, even though his artistic style continued to develop, Kandinsky’s theories on art changed little from the publishing of *On the Spiritual in Art* until his death, meaning that drawing on later writings is still useful when assessing his earlier works. Further to this, the first ideas and drafts of some of his writings were written well before they were first published, which may explain some of the continuity of his thought over long stretches of time. For example, *Point and Line to Plane*, and *On the Spiritual in Art*, were mostly written much closer together in time than the fourteen-year gap between their publication dates.

---

12 This attribution of creating the first purely abstract work was made by Kandinsky himself, and dated the discovery to 1911, stating that he had managed to expel both the subject and the object from his painting. C. F. Kandinsky, ‘Abstract Painting,’ in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* ed. Kenneth Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Da Capo Press, New York: 1982) p.785. The claim has been reinforced by some scholars, and more causal books, for instance by the collector and president of the Neue Galerie, Ronald Lauder, in his preface to the exhibition catalogue for the Neue Galerie’s 2013-14 exhibition: *Vasily Kandinsky: From Blaue Reiter to Bauhaus 1910-1925*, ed. Jill Lloyd (Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern: 2013) p.7. The mere title of Andrei Nakov’s 2015 study *Kandinsky, The Enigma of the First Abstract Painting*, also serves to reinforce this idea of Kandinsky as the originator of abstract painting.
suggests as Kandinsky began working on the second treatise after only having just published the first one.\textsuperscript{13}

Kandinsky makes for one of the more curious cases in the topic of this thesis as in his vast catalogue of theoretical writings there are only two direct references to Nietzsche. However, as will be shown below, Nietzsche’s influence was nigh on inescapable in Germany at the turn of the century, with his work either excerpted or cited in numerous little magazines, the popular reading matter used to exchange new ideas among avant-garde circles throughout Europe at the time.\textsuperscript{14} Even with a lack of direct reference to Nietzsche, there are a number of tell-tale marks of his thinking present in Kandinsky’s work. The first time he is directly mentioned by Kandinsky is in a 1911 essay titled ‘Whither the New Art’, and the second in his book published the same year (though written largely in 1910), \textit{On the Spiritual in Art}. Kandinsky finds use for Nietzsche in his view of the spiritual state of society. In ‘Whither the New Art’ he writes ‘Consciously or unconsciously, the genius of Nietzsche began the “transvaluation of values.” What had stood firm was displaced—as if a great earthquake had erupted in the soul. And it is this tragedy of displacement, instability, and weakness of the material world that is reflected in art by imprecision and by dissonance.’\textsuperscript{15} And in \textit{On the Spiritual in Art} he continues along the same vein, writing ‘When religion, science, and morality are shaken (the last by the mighty hand of Nietzsche), when the external supports threaten to collapse, then man’s gaze turns away from the external toward himself.’\textsuperscript{16} These quotes will be explored in more depth later in this chapter as it seems that Kandinsky is using a Nietzschean basis to launch into his own aesthetic theories, the very theories which he intended to take his practice, and art in general, out of a world of decaying materialism and usher in ‘the epoch of the great spiritual’.\textsuperscript{17} As Rose Carol

\textsuperscript{13} Lindsay and Vergo eds. (1982) p.524.
\textsuperscript{15} Wassily Kandinsky, ‘Whither the New Art,’ in Lindsay and Vergo, ed. (1982) p.103.
\textsuperscript{16} Kandinsky. ‘On the Spiritual in Art,’ ibid. p.145.
Washton Long phrases it, Kandinsky was ‘committed to a messianic view of the artist,’ and I argue that this messianism was born out of a shared worldview with Nietzsche.

To attain a better grasp of Kandinsky’s reaction and use of Nietzschean philosophy some context is necessary, and other Expressionists and members of the intelligentsia who surrounded Kandinsky during his time in Germany (especially before the First World War) will also be discussed, as will some of Kandinsky’s Russian influences. I will begin with a larger picture of Nietzsche’s popularity among other Expressionists and then move to a more localised picture regarding the city of Munich where Kandinsky first moved to in Germany, where as Paul Klee described it in a diary entry from 1898-99, Nietzsche was ‘in the air’.

The Nietzschean Spirit of Expressionism

After his death, Nietzsche’s philosophy quickly captured the imagination of many of Germany’s artists and intelligentsia, and this happened to coincide with the development of what we now call Expressionism. As such his writings and ideas found purchase in numerous works of art produced by the painters and writers of this period. Such was the cultural importance of Nietzsche at this time that some scholars refer to the existence of a ‘Nietzsche Cult’, though Steven Aschheim describes it more as ‘a series of Nietzsche cults’. The intensity of Nietzsche’s presence within this milieu was so strong that Richard Gray has argued that when it comes to literary Expressionism if one were to take Nietzschean ideas out of the movement it would lose all its defining 

characteristics, e.g. pathos, the new man, and immoralism.\textsuperscript{22} It is important to note that what we now call Expressionism covers a variety of art forms. There were numerous groups and individuals in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century creating what is now labelled ‘Expressionist art’ whether in the form of painting, poetry, dance, literature, theatre, music, architecture, or film. Usage of the word in years contemporaneous with the movement was even broader than the mostly German association that it now holds, as Peter Selz notes, Expressionism was initially used as a catch-all for numerous pan-European styles and artists.\textsuperscript{23} If one were to look to Austrian writer Hermann Bahr’s (1863-1934) account of Expressionism, originally published in 1916, alongside artists who are now commonly thought of as Expressionists, he also names some who would now be more readily associated with other canonical movements, namely, Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973).\textsuperscript{24} Other commentators, like Peter Lasko, have pointed out that the difficulty with Expressionism may well stem from its lack of self-definition. As he says, Expressionism ‘is not descriptive of style … Expressionism is one of the modern movements in the literary, musical and visual arts that was neither preceded by, nor accompanied by a manifesto written by the artists themselves or their friends’.\textsuperscript{25} Yet, even without a manifesto, it is still an avant-garde best defined by the ideas that tie its various threads together. Ideas that I will argue are distinctly Nietzschean.

In the visual arts the two most well-known circles in German Expressionism are Die Brücke [The Bridge], and Der Blaue Reiter [The Blue Rider]. Die Brücke was the earlier group, formed in Dresden, 1905, by a group of architecture students at the Dresden Technical College: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Fritz Bleyl, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
Erich Heckel. Der Blaue Reiter, less of a group and more of a circle intent on publishing and exhibiting, coalesced around Kandinsky, Franz Marc, and August Macke in Munich in 1911. While neither group produced manifestoes in the style of say the Futurists, with a programmatic guide to what defines the movement and its goals, there is a literature associated with both, rich in ideas. Though this chapter largely concerns Kandinsky and Ball, the importance of Die Brücke, not just as expressionists, but also as Nietzschean artists should not be effaced in this account. Indeed, given the impact that that Brücke artists had on Kandinsky’s closest collaborator at this time, Marc, and the exchanges between the two groups including invitations to exhibit works with one another, they warrant some discussion here.  

In terms of a statement of their ideals, the closest Die Brücke came to a manifesto was produced in 1906 in the form of a woodcut print known as the [Brücke Program](#) (fig. 1), attributed to Kirchner, but with the text likely co-written by the group. It stated: ‘With faith in evolution, in a new generation of creators and appreciators, we call together all youth. And as youths, who embody the future, we want to free our lives and limbs from the long-established older powers. Anyone who renders this creative directly and genuinely is one of us.’ It was the founding statement for a group of visual artists, but rather than prescribe an aesthetic to conform to (although the bold roughly presented text bears the hallmark of a number of later works as mentioned below), it does something more important, it underlines the idea that their goal as artists was not really about a style, it was more about an ideal and feeling. Stylistically speaking however, with regards to the Brücke there are some frequently used aesthetic ideas within their works which give them a cohesive appearance as well: a vivid use of unnaturalistic colour (though this is not exclusive to this group given their French

---

contemporaries the Fauves were also practicing this), a flattening of perspective was also common, and their subjects were often angular, or simplified, rather than naturalistic. See for example Erich Heckel’s *Franzi Reclining* (fig. 2) or *Killing of the Banquet Roast* by Max Pechstein (fig. 3) (who joined Die Brücke later in 1906 in time for their second exhibition at the Seifert Lamp Gallery in December of that year). These works are almost ‘primitive’ in their execution, and this is not coincidental, the Brücke artists were very familiar with the artworks and artefacts of the Dresden Ethnographic Collection, the items therein were seen by the Brücke artists as more authentic, as they existed outside of decadent bourgeois culture of turn of the century Germany. As per the Brücke Program, this level of authenticity was to be aspired to, as they wished to create art free from established conventions.

As Christian Weikop notes, aside from the works themselves, the artistic medium and how it is used is also a defining characteristic of Brücke works. Most innovatively their rough-cut approach to woodcut print making, in which the artists carved directly into the plank of wood they were using was different from earlier etching techniques, and gave a more unrefined look to their work, displaying a certain influence from primitive art. Weikop also goes on to discuss the physicality of the Brücke artists’ works, observing that there is a relative nature between their use of woodblock prints and their paintings, arguing that:

> The subtracting of fibers from the woodblock in the act of printmaking can be seen as the reverse process of layering paint in the impasto treatment of the canvas. In both cases the physical property of the artistic material is stressed and surface illusionism is not sought. There are a number of Brücke woodcuts from this period in which the knife-marks and gouges of the chisel or graver seem to

---

echo the bold slashes and broken brushwork of their Van Gogh inspired paintings.\textsuperscript{32}

But despite the common stylistic threads in their works, it still cannot be said that Die Brücke had a cohesive attitude to how their art should look. Instead, it is possible to say, certainly taking a cue from the Brücke Chronicle, that the prevailing attitude was more towards what art should express. The coherence of their style was born out of their group practice—often working all out of the same studio, painting the same subjects, and offering intense critiques of one another’s work—and their objective of creating an art for the youth of Germany, art for a new generation. The art historian Sharon Jordan argues that the methodologies developed by the Brücke artists were favoured because these practices had inherent Nietzschean qualities, their quick drawing exercises inspired by Zarathustra’s commandment to ‘remain true to the earth’, and the physical nature of their printmaking, and the end result it produced—the bold and simplified forms, ‘enabled them to preserve their observations with Dionysian intensity.’\textsuperscript{33}

Although the label ‘Expressionism’ was applied to a number of artists after the fact, and was a label some even disagreed with, it does speak to a certain quality of their artworks: the value of expression. If this movement cannot be defined entirely by its visual aesthetic, can it be defined by its artists’ preoccupation with the expression of emotion? This notion may well stem from the theories of the Jugendstil artist Hermann Obrist, who taught Kirchner when he studied in Munich for the Winter semester of 1903-4.\textsuperscript{34} It should also be mentioned that Obrist was friends with Kandinsky at this time, though it is not known whether he ever introduced him to Kirchner. But, as Peg Weiss notes, the Obrist-Debschitz school, was just across the road from where Kandinsky had his Phalanx school.\textsuperscript{35} Weikop posits that while Kirchner was studying with Obrist he

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid. pp.87-88
\textsuperscript{33} Sharon Jordan. “He is a Bridge”: The Importance of Friedrich Nietzsche for Ernst Ludwig Kirchner,’ in Lloyd and Staggs ed. (2019) p.93.
certainly would have seen some of the woodcuts Kandinsky exhibited in the eleventh Phalanx exhibition, and believes they may well have influenced Kirchner’s own practice.\textsuperscript{36} If nothing else we can infer that the shared milieu would have meant a convergence of influences that each of these artists would have been responding to at this point in their career. In The Expressionist Roots of Modernism, Lasko quotes Obrist at length, demonstrating many similarities between his theories and the artistic mindset of Die Brücke’s artists.\textsuperscript{37} In one notable passage Obrist declares ‘he shall now, with enthusiasm, deepen, strengthen, heighten, to something more than mere nature, to artistic creation, by presenting that, which stirred him intensively, so that the spectator receives the same strong feelings the artist himself had experienced.’\textsuperscript{38} Aside from the ideas of Obrist, the ideas of Nietzsche were also of significant importance to the members of Die Brücke, to such an extent that their very name is thought to be a direct reference to Thus Spoke Zarathustra: ‘What is great in the human is that it is a bridge and not a goal: what can be loved in the human is that is a \textit{going-over} and a \textit{going-under}.’ (Z, Prologue, §3) Further to this, Kirchner’s recollection of the first time he met Heckel involved Heckel loudly proclaiming passages from Zarathustra while he climbed the stairs.\textsuperscript{39} Bleyl attributed the name to Heckel, while Heckel claimed in a letter dated from 1953 that Schmidt-Rottluff was the one to think of it.\textsuperscript{40} Regardless of whoever thought of the name, it is clear Heckel admired Nietzsche a great deal, even depicting him in a woodcut in 1905 (fig. 4). The portrait has a gravity to it, with Nietzsche’s eyes being sharp, bright, determined, the angularity of his face giving him an air of severity and importance, more so than the 1899 Hans Olde etching of Nietzsche it was based on which appeared in the magazine Pan, an influential journal for Brücke members. In contrast, it almost seems as if Heckel is depicting Nietzsche at the height of his powers,

\textsuperscript{36} Weikop, ed. Price (2020) p.83.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, pp. 39-40.
\textsuperscript{40} Lasko (2003) p.36.
making Olde’s etching appear melancholy as if it were the debilitated Nietzsche grasping for sanity after his mental breakdown in Turin in 1889.

Evidence of Nietzsche’s influence on the Brücke members does not stop with the name of their group. Jordan has already chronicled specifically how Nietzsche’s thought affected Kirchner’s work, especially in the period of 1914-17 (after Die Brücke disbanded), in her doctoral thesis *Philosophers, Artists and Saints: Ernst L. Kirchner and Male Friendship in Paintings, 1914-1917.* While *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is usually the main reference for those considering Nietzsche’s impact on Kirchner’s career, especially in his earlier years, in her thesis Jordan demonstrates that there was also a period in which he became greatly influenced by Nietzsche’s earlier works thanks to his close friend Botho Graef. Graef, having a particular interest in Hellenic cultures and philology introduced Kirchner to Nietzsche’s first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Jordan argues that the themes of Nietzsche’s first book, the duality of Apollo and Dionysus, and cultural renewal through the reconciliation of opposite creative drives, had a significant impact on Kirchner’s works. Jordan also discusses Kirchner more in relation to *Zarathustra* in her essay “‘He is a Bridge’: The Importance of Friedrich Nietzsche for Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’ written for the accompanying book for the 2019 exhibition of Kirchner’s works at the Neue Galerie, New York. Jordan describes the bridge motif itself as being symbolic of ‘a lifeline over an abyss that represented stagnant and outdated nineteenth-century traditions they were determined to leave behind.’⁴² Continuing to say that ‘On one side of the bridge was their connection to their admired Northern European Renaissance predecessors, particularly Albrecht Dürer and Lucas Cranach … Their destination on the other side remained unknown, reinforcing the exploratory process of self-discovery inherent in becoming true artists in Nietzschean terms.’⁴³ This stagnation of culture, is something that Seth Taylor identifies as being one of the aspects which aided in the rise of Nietzsche’s popularity in the

---

⁴³ Ibid. p.88.
1890s, as Nietzsche’s notion of decadence became the definitive term for the cultural decline which had begun to preoccupy Germany’s intellectuals at that time.44 As Jordan also notes, no doubt the onset of Nietzsche’s completely debilitating mental illness in 1889 and his subsequent death in 1900 also helped to mythologise him, and paint him as a genius or prophet, whose philosophy was essential to understanding the challenges of the modern era.45

Speaking more generally of Nietzsche’s impact on Expressionism, in his 1987 book *Expressionism: Art and Idea*, Donald Gordon describes how ‘The very content of Expressionist art, like that of Nietzsche’s teachings, depends fundamentally on antithesis or contradiction.’46 Gordon is referring here to the tension inherent in the core themes of Expressionist art, and also in Nietzschean philosophy. The way in which seemingly contradictory ideas or emotions interplay and necessitate one another, for example the way in which Nietzsche recognised decadence as being both a detestable state of society or in an individual, but also pivotal to the creation of better stronger ideas and ways of life.47 Similarly in Expressionism, decadence, in the Nietzschean sense, is recognised but also made into the theme of great works of art. This supposed weakness gives the works a vital human element. This had unfortunate repercussions for Expressionist artists later in the century as the idea of decadence became tied with the term ‘degeneration’, the theory of which was promulgated by the journalist Max Nordau in his 1892 book *Degeneration*. Nordau’s book experienced a resurgence in popularity and inspired a wave of thinking within the Nazi party that sought to expunge this degeneration from culture, and the works of numerous Expressionists ended up in

---

44 Taylor (1990) p.16.
47 Decadence is a complex concept in Nietzsche’s thought, one he simultaneously loathes but cannot seem to do without. For example, in *The Will to Power* §40 he writes: ‘The phenomenon of decadence is as necessary as any increase and advance of life: one is in no position to abolish it. Reason demands, on the contrary we do justice to it … A society is not free to remain young. And even at the height of its strength it has to form refuse and waste materials. The more energetically and boldly it advances, the richer it will be in failures and deformities, the closer to decline.’ I discuss this theme in more detail in chapter two.
the Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937 which was held with the intention of ridiculing these works and castigating their creators as degenerates themselves. *Degeneration*, as described by Steven Aschheim, was ‘a veritable diatribe of cultural criticism that characterized virtually every modernist fin-de-siècle current as a symptom of exhaustion and inability to adjust to the realities of the modern industrial age.’ Aschheim goes on to indicate that Nordau’s attitude towards what can be described as degenerate in the fin de siècle is a summation of the Nietzschean characteristics of the age. For example, a contempt for the morality of custom, a turn toward the instinctual/animalist qualities of humanity, and of course a lack of faith in the established social order. These Nietzschean qualities that Nordau was so concerned about in 1892 did not lessen in prominence after the turn of the century, and it is these views which contributed to the intellectual development of certain elements of Expressionism.

The notion of a shared *Weltanschauung* between Nietzsche and Expressionist artists persists in much of the literature regarding the relationship between the two and is the foundation of the perceived debt that Expressionist artists owe to Nietzsche. This has already been demonstrated in Gordon’s work, but the sentiment is also found in the writings of Mark Roskill who states, ‘In the first decade of the century, for Central European artists in the developing Expressionist current, Nietzsche’s writings provided early on, metaphors for the nature of artistic creation.’, and also Lasko, who holds that:

For artists of the avant-garde in Dresden and Munich and perhaps even more so for the generation of artists after the First World War, Nietzsche’s frequently expressed moral agnosticism which eventually led to his belief that ‘Nothing is True’ with the inevitable result that ‘Everything is Permitted’, was bound to be

---

49 Ibid p.644.
attractive license to create individually without belief in, or reliance on, traditions or any kind of continuity.\textsuperscript{51}

In other words, Lasko believes that Nietzsche's attacks on the value of truth enabled avant-garde circles within the Expressionist movement to break away and create in more experimental ways than previous artists. This is, however, not a wholly convincing argument, especially with regards to German Expressionism, given many of the artists associated with the movement were not solely trying to create a new art, but also an inherently German art. The Brücke artists for example, looked to previous generations and the German renaissance with their use of the woodblock print, and veneration of artists such as Lucas Cranach and Albrecht Dürer, often making visual references to the works of these masters in their own paintings. Many of these visual references have been identified by Weikop in his essay \textit{Brücke and Canonical Association}. They include self-portraits by Kirchner and Emil Nolde, which bear comparison to similar works by Rembrandt and Dürer, as well as religiously themed works by Nolde from his Messianic Expressionism period which seem to reference Matthias Grünewald.\textsuperscript{52} Yet, there is a synthesis to these works, and the veneration of Dürer and Cranach found among Brücke artists can be likened to Nietzsche's own veneration of ancient Greek culture. Naturally, there were elements of ancient Greek culture which were also inhibitive, and \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} contains the argument that it was the influence of Socrates, whom Nietzsche labelled ‘that despotc logician’ (\textit{BT} §14) which ended the great era of Dionysian tragedies, claiming that ‘it is certain that the first effect which the Socratic drive aimed to achieve was the disintegration of Dionysiac tragedy, a profound experience in Socrates’ own life compels us to ask whether the relationship between Socrates and art is \textit{necessarily} and exclusively antithetical’ (\textit{BT} §14). It is important to note that though there exists a view that Nietzsche was no fan of Socrates (not an

unreasonable assumption given that part of *Twilight of the Idols* is titled ‘The Problem with Socrates’) this has been called into question by several scholars.

Walter Kaufmann first opined on Nietzsche’s admiration of Socrates, arguing that he is an essential part of the cultural dialectic, that antithesis of tragedy which would eventually see the synthesis of art and philosophy.\(^{53}\) Even Werner Dannhauser, who in his book *Nietzsche’s View of Socrates* in which he ultimately concludes that Nietzsche attempts to paint Socrates as the villain to Nietzsche’s hero, proceeds from the notion that even if one were to view Nietzsche as being antagonistic toward Socrates, that view should only be held tentatively.\(^{54}\) For his part, Hugo Ball viewed Socratism to be the enemy of the Dionysian, which considering Nietzsche’s later self-identification as Dionysus, may well be interpreted as Socratism against Nietzscheanism. Ball writes of this dichotomy as a kind of culture war, in which Socratism must perish so that the Dionysian may triumph.\(^{55}\) Meanwhile, the philosopher Alexander Nehamas criticises what he labels the ‘unequivocal’ views of Kaufmann and Dannhauser (he no doubt would have taken issue with Ball’s interpretation as well), and describes Nietzsche’s relationship to Socrates as being ‘highly complicated, deeply equivocal.’\(^{56}\) However one views it, and I am largely in agreement with Nehamas that there may not necessarily be sides to take in this argument, there is an undeniable link between the two philosophers, and Nietzsche has, wittingly or not, tethered himself and the task of his philosophy to Socrates. Thus, Nietzsche has charted a course in which the direction of modernity lies in the balance between the ancient and the modern. Likewise, while the influence of Dürer and Cranach on Die Brücke is undeniable, their distortions of their predecessors’ artworks, the way in which they have responded to them in a new and vibrant way\(^{57}\)

---

57 c.f Weikop’s essay ‘Brücke and Canonical Association’ in Heller ed. (2009) for an in-depth analysis of Brücke works which make direct reference to the paintings of German renaissance artists.
displays a need and a desire to move on from the past while still accepting it as a piece that makes the present what it is. Living up to its legacy not through a faithful nostalgic recreation, but through an idealistic homage. An homage which reflects the philosophy of Nietzsche, forging forward while looking to history to provide a footing for the great new culture that is to come, and rectify the decadence of the present. Yet this aesthetic ideal that sought to incorporate what was great in the past into the present was not one shared by Kandinsky. In the opening lines of On the Spiritual he boldly states:

Every work of art is the child of its time, often it is the mother of our emotions. Thus, every period of culture produces its own art, which can never be repeated. Any attempt to give new life to artistic principles of the past can at best only result in a work of art that resembles a stillborn child. For example, it is impossible for our inner lives, our feelings to be like those of the ancient Greeks. Efforts, therefore, to apply Greek principles, e.g. to sculpture, can only produce forms similar to those employed by the Greeks, a work that remains soulless for all time.\(^5^8\)

This is certainly not a Nietzschean formulation of aesthetics, and indeed, Lisa Florman traces the foundational philosopher for Kandinsky’s assertion here (and in general for much of Kandinsky’s aesthetics) to be Hegel, and argues convincingly that this section is a simplified version of a passage from Hegel’s Aesthetics.\(^5^9\) Florman also suggests it is no coincidence that Kandinsky chose to publish On the Spiritual in German rather than his first language of Russian, as the German word Geistige [Spiritual] brings forth immediate Hegelian connotations, again especially from Aesthetics. As Hegel says, ‘Art too belongs to the absolute sphere of the spirit [Geist], and therefore, in its content, art stands on the same ground with religion’.\(^6^0\) Taking the Hegelian supposition that art allows us to see the true nature of things, and to comprehend them much easier than

\(^{59}\) Lisa Florman, Concerning the Spiritual—and the Concrete—in Kandinsky’s Art (Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2014) pp.5-6.  
we can in reality, ‘The hard shell of nature and the ordinary world make it more difficult for the spirit to penetrate through them to the Idea than works of art do,’\textsuperscript{61} Kandinsky’s project of abstraction as a process of expressing the spiritual seems to be an extension of this philosophy, allowing art to not only reveal the inner nature of the external world, but of the internal as well. As Sixten Ringbom says, ‘Kandinsky, Klee, Mondrian, van Doesberg, and other abstract pioneers made claims to supernatural knowledge in stating they had penetrated the outer shell of nature while still upholding the connection with the cosmos and its laws.’\textsuperscript{62} However, the question remains as to why was this project so vital to Kandinsky? And this is where Nietzsche rears his head. While other Expressionists may have expressed Nietzschean philosophy through their artistic practice, Kandinsky was attempting something greater. He was using a synthesis of philosophic ideas to grapple with the explicitly Nietzschean challenges of his age, decadence and the quest for the creation of new internal values. In order to better understand the nature of Kandinsky’s interpretation of Nietzsche, I will move on to a brief outline of the Nietzschean milieu that surrounded him during the early part of his artistic career.

\textbf{The Nietzschean Air of Munich: A Path to Inner Necessity}

Having established a wider context for Nietzsche’s importance on Expressionism at large, it is important to look at his popularity in the environment that would have most influenced Kandinsky, fin-de-siècle Munich. It would have been slightly more difficult for Kandinsky to access Nietzsche’s works prior to his move to Munich as they were largely censored in Russia from 1872 until 1898, and this censorship was not completely lifted until 1906.\textsuperscript{63} Given the heavy influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, and Nietzsche’s frequent literary attacks on Christianity it is unsurprising. When works that

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid, p.9.
\end{flushleft}
did make mention of Nietzsche passed the censor, it was those that were critical of his thought, such as the Nordau’s *Degeneration*, the Russian translation of which was approved in 1893.\textsuperscript{64} It is of course possible that Kandinsky had access to some of the works in the original German as the censor was not always fully effective, though access to Russian translations would have been far less likely. There were some initial forays that flew under the censor in the late 1880s, and certainly there was academic discussion of Nietzsche in the 1890s, as the first scholarly study of Nietzsche in Russian was published in 1892. However, the full works of Nietzsche were not available in Russian until 1911 with most translations being written between 1895-1910.\textsuperscript{65}

Therefore, while Kandinsky was in Russia for the very earliest Nietzsche criticisms, he had already moved to Munich by the time Nietzsche was gaining serious traction in Russia. In the case of Ball, Nietzsche had already been a large part of his life prior to his time in Munich, first reading the philosopher in his teenage years, causing him to abandon the Catholic faith his mother had instilled within him, until he returned to Christianity much later in life.\textsuperscript{66} Ball also had an attachment to Munich. It was the University of Munich which Ball first attended in 1906, though he spent his second academic year in Heidelberg before returning to Munich for the following two years, before then moving again to the Bavarian countryside to focus on writing his thesis.\textsuperscript{67}

Then, in 1910, he attended the Max Reinhardt School in Berlin for a year and then spent the following year as Dramaturg at the Plauen Staadttheater for the duration of the 1911-12 season, before returning to Munich in the summer of 1912, taking up a post at the Munich Lustspielhaus which he renamed the Munich Kammerspiele.\textsuperscript{68} However, Nietzsche’s presence was already one that was felt strongly in other literary circles in Munich prior not just to either Kandinsky or Ball’s relocation there, but even before what we now call Expressionism had begun to take shape.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid. p.iii.
\textsuperscript{66} Steinke (1967) p.22.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid. p.27 + p.45.
During Kandinsky’s early years in Munich there were two groups in particular who had developed a great affinity for Nietzsche, though their memberships had significant overlap: Die Kosmiker, sometimes known as Kosmikerkreis, or Kosmische Runde, (usually translated in English as the Cosmic Circle) a loose band of intellectuals formed around the trio of Alfred Schuler (1865-1923), Ludwig Klages (1872-1956), and Ludwig Derleth (1870-1948), and the so-called George-Kreis, which revolved around the poet Stefan George (1868-1933) with members such as the Ernst Bertram, Freidrich Gundolf, and Friedrich Wolters, among others.69 George was also a peripheral member of Die Kosmiker, and Klages and Schuler were also involved in the George-Kreis— which was in essence a breakaway group from the George-Kreis—with Klages even writing a book about George published in 1902, in which he declares Nietzsche and Friedrich Hölderlin to have been of primary importance to George’s development.70 Of these figures George was no doubt the most important for spreading Nietzschean ideas in Munich, and even beyond. Several of his circle went on to take lecturing positions in a number of German universities and one of the most popular early interpretations of Nietzsche, Bertram’s *Nietzsche Attempt at a Mythology* (1918) (a book I discuss in more detail in the chapter relating to Georges Bataille) was also influenced by the George-Kreis interpretation of Nietzsche. Bertram wrote the book at the behest of his friend Ernst Glöckner who was one of George’s most dedicated disciples.71 George’s influence even reached the artists of *Die Brücke* as Ernst Morwitz who was a good friend of Heckel, and Kirchner’s great friend Botho Graef (though in this case their friendship was after Kirchner’s time with Die Brücke), were also part of the circle.72 This may have had some bearing on the Brücke artists’ veneration of the Dionysian aspects of Nietzsche as the Dionysian drive was a preoccupation for both Die Kosmiker and the George-Kreis.73 Furthermore, George in particular was not content to merely be a student of Nietzsche,

---

70 Short (1993) p.64.
but saw himself as ‘a prophet to whom Nietzsche was merely a precursor.’\textsuperscript{74} George’s vision of himself, however farfetched it may seem now, was one that seemed to carry weight with those around him. As H. Janse van Rensburg describes, a number of the George-Kreis supported the notion that he was a man capable of surpassing Nietzsche by achieving what Nietzsche could only theorise.\textsuperscript{75} Though, such grandiose self-opinions were not unique to George; Schuler (arguably the leader of die Kosmiker) thought himself a reincarnated Roman leader from pre-Christianity, and claimed to be clairvoyant thanks to his ability to commune with pagan gods.\textsuperscript{76} Along with their Nietzscheanism, there was a certain spirituality inherent in these groups, something that should not go unnoticed when considering Kandinsky’s own theories.

Kandinsky, famously believed in a spiritual dimension to art and in his early Blaue Reiter years, and notably in \textit{Der Blaue Reiter Alamanach}, prophesied the ‘epoch of the great spiritual,’\textsuperscript{77} which as Weiss has already shown in her monograph on Kandinsky’s Munich years, bears a striking resemblance to George’s writing two decades prior in the first edition of his magazine \textit{Blätter für die Kunst}, in 1892, just four years before Kandinsky moved to Munich.\textsuperscript{78} Weiss and others, like Rensburg, argue that though there is no explicit proof that Kandinsky ever met George himself, there is much to show that he moved in the same circles. Weiss focuses in particular on Kandinsky’s friendship with Karl and Hanna Wolfskehl, Karl Wolskehl being a close friend of George, and the couple’s home being a prominent Munich salon for gatherings of luminaries such as Martin Buber, Rainer Maria Rilke, Stefan Zweig, and many others, including of course George and Kandinsky.\textsuperscript{79} Wolfskehl also had some early involvement with Die Kosmiker, but it was ultimately a breakdown in Wolfskehl’s

\textsuperscript{75} Janse van Resnburg (1987) p.250.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid. pp.82-3.
relationship with Schuler and Klages which caused the two groups to become separate as the two Cosmics grew increasingly antisemitic and hence hostile towards the Jewish Wolfskehl.\(^{80}\) Nietzsche’s influence was not lost on Wolfskehl, whose poem ‘Zarathustra’ was published in \textit{Blätter fur die Kunst} in 1901, the year after the philosopher’s death.\(^{81}\) Further to this, Kandinsky’s friend, the composer Arnold Schönberg’s Op. 15, \textit{The Book of the Hanging Gardens} (1909) was a cycle of 15 songs setting several poems by George to music, and not to mention Kandinsky even paid tribute to George in one of his earlier woodcuts, \textit{Departure}, a work from a 1903-4 series titled \textit{Verses Without Words} (fig. 5). In this very small woodcut, George is depicted in profile as an armoured knight readying to mount his horse, making this one of Kandinsky’s earliest works involving his recurring theme of the rider. The woodcuts in this series were created out of Kandinsky’s frustration with his attempts to write poetry at the time, and the collection of them, published as a small album, has been described by Weiss as a ‘miniature gesamtkunstwerk,’ as for Kandinsky the woodcut was an attempt to express one artistic form through another, combining poetry, music, and visual art, which he labelled ‘Klang.’\(^{82}\) While Kandinsky recreated George’s likeness, this should not be taken as proof that the two met, as Weiss shows this work as being a clear reference to a portrait of George produced just the year prior, by the artist Karl Bauer, again in profile and clad in a knight’s armour.\(^{83}\) However, we can at least glean that Kandinsky had an awareness of George and his works, and given the flattering representation (noting Kandinsky’s love of riders) also an element of respect for the poet. Several years later, in the second edition of \textit{Der Blaue Reiter Almanach} (1914), Kandinsky also included George’s poem \textit{Ihr Tratet zu dem Herde} [\textit{You Approached the Hearth}], from George’s 1897 collection \textit{Das Jahr der Seele} [The Year of the Soul], set to music by Anton Webern. Given Kandinsky’s highly selective nature concerning inclusions to the almanach, this is a sign that he held George in some esteem.\(^{84}\) Indeed, George and his

\(^{81}\) Short. (1993) p.60.
\(^{83}\) Ibid. p.277.
circle shared some similar opinions with Kandinsky regarding the relationship between the arts and life. As Aschheim puts it, for George: ‘Science and scientists could not teach men how to live; poetry and the poet gifted with intuitive prophetic powers could. “Inner Experience” was both method and key to salvation—history was to be transfigured back into consciously forged myth.’85 This view is partially indebted to Nietzsche’s stance on the sciences: ‘Perhaps there is a kingdom of wisdom from which the logician is banished? Perhaps art may even be a necessary correlative and supplement of science?’ (BT §14). Nietzsche calls the Socratic belief that ‘thought, as it follows the thread of causality, reaches down into the deep abysses of being, and that it is capable not simply of understanding existence, but correcting it’ a delusion (BT §15). He continues: ‘This sublime metaphysical illusion is an instinct which belongs inseparably to science, and leads it to its limit time after time, at which point it must transform into art; which is actually, given this mechanism, what it has been aiming at all along.’ (BT §15). Lasko also holds that along with his frequent repudiations of Christianity, it was Nietzsche’s rejections of science that fostered his popularity among the German intelligentsia at this time.86 Similarly to his German peers, it was also a disillusionment with science, caused by the splitting of the atom, that would help spur Kandinsky to turn his back on the realm of the material, and to turn his attentions to art, where he would develop his philosophy of the spiritual in art.87 Recounting the experience he wrote:

A scientific event removed one of the most important obstacles from my path. This was the further division of the atom. The collapse of the atom was equated in my soul, with the collapse of the whole world. Suddenly the stoutest walls crumbled. Everything became uncertain, precarious and insubstantial. I would not have been surprised had a stone dissolved into thin air before my eyes and become invisible. Science seemed destroyed: its most important basis was only

an illusion, an error of the learned, who were not building their divine edifice stone by stone with steady hands, transfigured by light, but were groping at random for truth in the darkness and blindly mistaking one object for another.\textsuperscript{88}

The tenor of Kandinsky’s loss of faith in science echoes Nietzsche’s remark that ‘even physics is only a way of interpreting or arranging the world … and \textit{not} a way of explaining the world.’ (\textit{BGE} §14) Not only does physics fail to explain the world, but the new discoveries of the field undermine its previous theories which acts to make the world even more incomprehensible. Ball also reflected on the destabilising nature of the sciences in his lecture on Kandinsky, which opens:

\begin{quote}
Three things have shaken the art of our time to its depths, have given it a new face, and have prepared it for a mighty new upsurge: the disappearance of religion induced by critical philosophy, the dissolution of the atom in science, and the massive expansion of population in present-day Europe.\textsuperscript{89}
\end{quote}

If science is the problem here, art is the answer, especially in the practice of Kandinsky. Ball compares Kandinsky favourably with Picasso and Rembrandt in this lecture, and speaks only glowing praise for his theories, his project, and its timeliness. He is variously described, in a highly Nietzschean tone, as ‘one of the great innovators, purifiers of life’, one of the ‘strongest artistic types’, and ‘a herald of his people’s freedom.’\textsuperscript{90} The thing which makes Kandinsky’s art so effective, and such a curative for the chaos caused by science’s upheavals is what Kandinsky calls ‘innere notwendigkeit’ or ‘internal necessity’, sometimes translated as ‘inner necessity’.

\begin{quote}
Kandinsky spends a good portion of \textit{On the Spiritual in Art} discussing inner necessity, largely in chapters 6 and 7, but it still remains a vaguely defined idea. This is both because in \textit{On the Spiritual} Kandinsky’s writing is by turns both beautiful and confounding, leaving the reader grasping for a semblance of understanding, and
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{88} Kandinsky, ‘Reminiscences,’ in Lindsay and Vergo eds. (1982) p.364.
\textsuperscript{89} Ball. (1974) p.223.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid, pp.226-228.
because the idea of ‘inner necessity’ has a convoluted history behind it. Nietzsche himself uses the phrase ‘innere Notwendigkeit’ in *The Anti-Christ* (1895) in a section that serves as a criticism of Kant, writing that ‘working, thinking and feeling, without inner necessity is a ‘recipe for decadence’ (*AC* §11), but he does not elaborate further on what he means by the phrase. In his essay ‘Art in the ‘Epoch of the Great Spiritual’: Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting’, Sixten Ringbom argues that Kandinsky’s idea of inner necessity is a direct reference to the aesthetics of Goethe in which necessity is equated with divinity. But Kandinsky’s inspiration for this concept has also been attributed to several others. Andrei Nakov gives a strong historical account of the term in *Kandinsky the Enigma of the First Abstract Painting*, and describes it as being ‘an imperative existential justification’ for an artwork akin to the way religious conviction requires no explanation. He argues that Schönberg would have been the natural touchstone for the term for Kandinsky after the composer discussed the idea in an 1909 interview for the *Neue Wiener Journal* and furthermore having written to Kandinsky about it in 1911. In turn he believes that the idea came to Schönberg from Nietzsche’s disavowed idol, Richard Wagner. In Short’s discussion of inner necessity, he notes that art historian Reinhold Heller attributes Hegel with having been a significant influence on the idea, but Short himself takes a view more in line with Ringbom, arguing that Goethe seems to be the more natural precursor, with Hegel’s dialectics being indebted to Goethe. However, there is also a distinctly Russian context for the term, and Kandinsky’s formulation of it, which neither Nakov nor Ringbom discuss. Even though Kandinsky is somewhat critical of the great Russian author Leo Tolstoy, Tolstoy’s theory of ‘inner need’, which he expounds in his 1896 book *What is Art?* bears far more than a passing resemblance to Kandinsky’s

---

93 Ibid, pp.61-2.
description of inner necessity in *On the Spiritual*. It is worth exploring as this syncretism of Tolstoy into Kandinsky’s philosophy of art will no doubt have a bearing on any of Kandinsky’s inherent Nietzschean elements, especially given the central place of inner necessity to Kandinsky’s thought and practice in this period. Furthermore, in *What is Art?* Tolstoy is often critical of Nietzsche. Or as it was characterised in 1900 by the Russian philosopher Lev Shestov, Tolstoy ‘entered into combat with Nietzsche and his followers with the freshness, conviction, and passion of a young man.’95 Shestov’s metaphor is apt, though Tolstoy never quotes Nietzsche in the book, the few times he mentions him it is certainly in a pejorative sense. For example, he denigrates Nietzsche for promoting a view that denies everyone a right to art, and makes the bizarre assertion that to Nietzsche, art is only for the Übermensch.96 Later on in the book Tolstoy goes on to assert that due to the influence of Nietzsche and Wagner, that ‘the artists in the new age conclude that it is unnecessary for them to be intelligible to the vulgar crowd’.97 This stratification of art is undoubtedly a negative in Tolstoy’s opinion, and this can be seen in his description of inner need.

To Tolstoy, inner need is the source of ‘real art’. Tolstoy believes there are three conditions upon which “the infectiousness of art” (which is to him a marker of an artwork’s quality) is dependent:

1. On the greater or lesser individuality of the feeling transmitted; 2. On the greater or lesser clearness with which the feeling is transmitted; 3. On the sincerity of the artist, i.e., on the greater or lesser force with which the artist himself feels the emotion he transmits … but they may all be summed up into one, the last, sincerity, i.e. that the artist should be impelled by an inner need to express his feeling.98

97 Ibid, p.83.
Furthermore, Tolstoy also states that “The absence of any one of these conditions excludes a work from the category of art and relegates it to that of art's counterfeits. If the work does not transmit the artist's peculiarity of feeling and is therefore not individual, if it is unintelligibly expressed, or if it has not proceeded from the author's inner need for expression — it is not a work of art.” If these statements are compared to Kandinsky’s writings describing the sources of internal necessity there are multiple similarities to be found. Kandinsky writes:

Internal Necessity arises from three mystical sources. It is composed of three mystical necessities:

1. Every artist, as creator, must express what is peculiar to himself (element of personality).

2. Every artist, as child of his time, must express what is peculiar to his own time (element of style, in its inner value, compounded of the language of the time and the language of the race, as long as the race exists as such).

3. Every artist, as servant of art, must express what is peculiar to art in general (element of pure and eternally artistic, which pervades every individual, every people, every age, and which is to be seen in the works of every artist, of every nation, and of every period, and which, being the principal element of art, knows neither time nor space).  

Both Kandinsky and Tolstoy are arguing that what makes art effective is the creation of a sense of connection between the viewer, listener, or reader, and the artist, and that connection is founded upon a dual sense of self and the moment in which the artist is alive. Tolstoy believes that these conditions will be met if the artwork arises from the artist’s inner need, and likewise Kandinsky believes internal necessity to be essential to the creation of effective art. This interpretation gives weight to the claim made by

---

Vincent Tomas (one of the few scholars to have ever written about the link between the aesthetic theories of Kandinsky and Tolstoy) that On the Spiritual in Art, would have been better titled ‘Concerning the Expression of Emotions in Art.’

Previously Kandinsky had been critical of Tolstoy’s opinions on art, taking issue with him in a 1901 essay titled ‘Critique of Critics’, attributing to Tolstoy the view that ‘the artist is a man who devotes his life to acquiring the capacity of recording’—a view at odds with creation for internal necessity. But despite this denigration of Tolstoy’s view, the similarity of thinking mentioned above is not the only one. Peter Vergo and Kenneth Lindsay also note the similarity between the start of second chapter of On the Spiritual, which is the oft quoted comparison of society to a giant moving triangle, and Tolstoy’s description of humankind’s spiritual progress in What is Art? In this matter, both Tolstoy and Kandinsky take on a positive view of progress in which artistic taste, and the understanding of life slowly improve due to the efforts of a few, more enlightened, people. In Kandinsky’s view, artists were these very people, and internal necessity their means of dragging the rest of civilisation up behind them. In this light, internal necessity can be seen as being a distinctly Nietzschean formulation. It bears great similarity to both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer’s idea of ‘Will’, what with it being an internal force that drives the artist to create and therefore imprint themselves upon the world. But more than this, due to the importance of internal necessity for spurring on the new era, Kandinsky’s epoch of the great spiritual, it can be seen as a process not just of artistic creation, but of value creation. Short also notes the similarity of these passages, and in doing so brings to light an interesting feature of Kandinsky’s writing. With regards to Tolstoy, a man Kandinsky criticises, his ideas share a remarkable parity, but with Nietzsche the inverse is true. In one of Kandinsky’s brief mentions of Nietzsche, his name is used with a certain reverence, it was Nietzsche’s ‘mighty hand’ that shook morality. In this passage, in which Nietzsche is granted a status of import,

104 Kandinsky, ibid, pp.133-4. and Tolstoy (1904) p.53.
Kandinsky conveniently omits one of the salient details in Nietzsche’s critique of morality, its specificity to Christian religious morality (Short uses the term Judeo-Christian, but this is a thorny piece of nomenclature that elides a great deal of nuance between the value systems of Judaism and Christianity). Given the nature of Kandinsky’s intellect, his academic background in the study of law, this shows him to be a manipulative writer using sly omissions to represent his and others’ thought in an altered light to better support his own goals.\textsuperscript{105} It also shows Kandinsky’s thinking to be a synthesis of Nietzsche and Tolstoy, both these men had ideas about moral/cultural renewal, but while Nietzsche’s moral upheaval rejected religious doctrine, Tolstoy found it indispensable. Like Nietzsche, he similarly rejected Christianity, doing so in his 1882 book \textit{A Confession}, but like Kandinsky after him, his Christian upbringing undoubtedly coloured his outlook – and spirituality was a panacea for the ails of life.\textsuperscript{106} \textit{A Confession} ends up being a perfect illustration of Nietzsche’s issue with the Death of God (coincidentally \textit{The Gay Science} and \textit{A Confession} were published the same year).

Tolstoy begins his book with an account of his rejection of Christianity and his first encounter with the idea that God is an invention and does not exist, and while these opening pages deal with the subject with all the excitement of a secret learned, as the book continues this becomes an issue for Tolstoy, which drains life of meaning, forcing him to contemplate suicide, writing:

\begin{quote}
I do not live when I lose belief in the existence of God. I should long ago have killed myself had I not had a dim hope of finding Him. I live, really live, only when I feel Him and seek Him. “What more do you seek?” exclaimed a voice within me. “This is He. He is that without which one cannot live. To know God and to live is one and the same thing. God is life.” “Live seeking God, and then you will not live without God.” And more than ever before, all within me and around me lit up, and the light did not again abandon me.
\end{quote}

And I was saved from suicide.”

Aside from the above critiques of Nietzsche in *What is Art?*, Tolstoy was also particularly condemnatory of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), and for his part Nietzsche considered Tolstoy a decadent and a pessimist. Given the way in which Kandinsky’s thought skews towards Tolstoy’s in matters of spirituality, we might assume that had Nietzsche been alive for Kandinsky’s rise to prominence, he would have thought similarly of the artist.

This is not to say that there is no equivalence to be drawn between Nietzsche and Kandinsky and their thought. Kandinsky agreed with Nietzsche that society was infected with a spiritual decay, to Kandinsky this was due to the burden of an overly materialistic society, his need to create art was to find a solution to this decay. Kandinsky writes ‘Our souls, which are only now beginning to awaken after the long reign of materialism, harbor seeds of desperation, unbelief, lack of purpose.’ This echoes the conundrum Nietzsche poses in his parable of the madman in *The Gay Science* (1882), in which God is declared dead, and the madman begins asking a torrent of existential questions that ultimately amounts to, what do we do now that the being which gave our lives meaning is no more, how will we know how to live? (GS §125) Nietzsche considers his madman to be untimely, ‘I have come too early … this tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men.’ (GS §125) With those around him reacting with ridicule to his seeking of God, Kandinsky, some 30 years later, believed that the question of unbelief, and subsequent lack of purpose was becoming ever more pressing, and the time for its resolution, immanent.

Delving further into Kandinsky’s analogy of the triangle, which he says represents the ‘spiritual life’, the triangle is divided into unequal section which at the most acute end

---


are very narrow, the sections get wider as the triangle gets further down, with the size of the sections being representative of the number of people that occupy them. The triangle is constantly moving upwards so eventually the larger bottom sections reach the place in which the most acute point was previously. The pinnacle of this triangle is the place for untimely genii, usually just one man (for in Kandinsky’s thinking it must be a man), these genii are those for whom their ‘joyful vision is like an inner, immeasurable sorrow.’\textsuperscript{109} But even worse, ‘Those who are closest to him do not understand him and in their indignation call him deranged: a phoney or a candidate for the madhouse.’\textsuperscript{110} While Kandinsky uses the example of Beethoven as one of these figures, Nietzsche is just as likely a candidate to be at this apex. By Kandinsky’s estimation, he was a genius: ‘Consciously or unconsciously, the genius of Nietzsche began the “transvaluation of values.”’\textsuperscript{111} His thought was untimely, concerned with the existential problems to come, which for Kandinsky had now arrived. The question is, was Kandinsky also the kind of figure that was wilful and creative enough to occupy the most acute point of the spiritual triangle? It seems clear that he believed so. Short goes as far as to say this ‘betrays an elitism which possibly exceeds even Nietzsche himself.’\textsuperscript{112} There was certainly an element of messianism to his project, something which Washton Long has also indicated.\textsuperscript{113} And for his part, Ball certainly had a great deal of faith in what could be accomplished through Kandinsky and Kandinskian art, as will be shown below.

**From Gesamtkunstwerk to Abstraction: The Spiritual Dimension in Ball and Kandinsky**

In *Left Wing Nietzscheans* (1990), Seth Taylor describes Ball’s outlook upon his turn to Expressionism (around 1912-14, after having met Kandinsky) as being a form of synthesis between Nietzsche and Kandinsky ‘which continued to center on the

\textsuperscript{109} Kandinsky, in Lindsay and Vergo ed. (1987) p.133.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid. p.134.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid. p.103.
\textsuperscript{112} Short (1993) p.130.
\textsuperscript{113} Washton (1968) p.30 + p.156.
irrationalism that would ignite individualism and a turn from the conventional life.¹¹¹

Nowhere is Ball’s conflation of the ideas of these two men more evident than in the lecture on Kandinsky he gave at the Galerie Dada in 1917. In Ball’s lecture, Kandinsky’s work is framed by Nietzschean problems. As Philip Mann has indicated, Ball, especially in his more religious phase, struggled a great deal with the problem of the death of God and the absence of order left in God’s wake.¹¹² And it is with direct reference to this issue, as well as with several other paraphrases and quotations from Nietzsche that gives the lecture context, it could either be a Dadaist’s stream of conscious, or an urgent cry of worry, confusion, or oddly, a fragment of hope:

God is dead. A world disintegrated. I am dynamite. World history splits in two parts. There is an epoch before me and an epoch after me. Religion, science, morality—phenomena that originated in the states of dread known to primitive peoples. An epoch disintegrates. A thousand-year-old culture disintegrates. There are no columns and no support, no foundations any more—they have all been blown up.¹¹³

Standing against this chaotic backdrop, on the precipice of the new epoch is Kandinsky. And without saying it in so many words, Ball describes the importance of internal necessity, and how art in the way Kandinsky theorises it, is a reaction, the only sane reaction even, to the ongoing Nietzschean spiritual crisis that surrounds them. ‘The artists of this time have turned inward. Their life is a struggle against madness. They are disrupted, fragmented, disserter, if they fail to find in their work a moment of equilibrium, balance, necessity, harmony.’¹¹⁴ When the world in its materialist epoch has fallen into a state of such calamity, the internal world, the spiritual world, becomes the logical way out. Internal necessity becomes not just a need to communicate, but a need

to communicate a vision that can alleviate, or in the case of Kandinsky, even guide a way out of the tumult of the present. And if it is the material epoch that has given rise to such confusion, then it only seems logical to remove the material entirely from the art that is communicating this spiritual vision. As Lewer shows, this is entirely commensurate with Ball’s interpretation of Nietzsche, having written in his thesis: ‘Already in Basel Nietzsche speaks of the gap that would open up after the annihilation of morality, and in which, instead of a new religion, one will have to place a kind of philosophical artwork with aesthetic values.’ Ball himself had attempted to create a book in a similar vein to the Blaue Reiter Almanach and under the same publisher, Piper Verlag, titled Das Neue Theater, which was intended to have had contributions from Kandinsky and a number of other prominent Expressionists such as Marc, Oskar Kokoschka, and the composer Thomas von Hartmann. It was to be a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk, expanding the artistic consciousness intending to draw together a community of artists that he dubbed ‘The International Society for a New Art’, however, with the outbreak of the War this vision never came to fruition.

The scholar Peter Dayan believes that Ball ‘provides the missing link between Dada and the history of Wagnerianism in his writings, not on Zurich Dada performance, but on creators who might be considered among its intellectual precursors: Nietzsche and Kandinsky.’ It is logical that the Wagnerian idea of Gesamtkunstwerk would attract Kandinsky and Ball, as for Wagner and Nietzsche the term was bound to the idea of a cultural renewal. The Scholar David Roberts writes ‘The synthesis of the arts in the service of cultural and social regeneration was a particularly German dream, which made Wagner and Nietzsche the other center of aesthetic modernism, alongside Baudelaire and Mallarmé.’ According to Taylor this was something Ball identified in Nietzsche’s interpretation of Wagnerian theatre as well, identifying it as ‘a means for the

---

creation of a unified aesthetic national culture through the elimination of that conventional life which has obfuscated the inner content common to all German people. Kandinsky’s attempts at Gesamtkustwerke also continue in this tradition of the total work of art being a vessel for his spiritual message, though Kandinsky was somewhat critical of Wagner’s attempts in his essay ‘On Stage Composition’, which featured in Der Blaue Reiter Almanach. In one passage of the essay Kandinsky recognises Wagner as having advanced the form of monumental art, but simultaneously pronounces that Wagner’s operas to still be too rooted in the external, something he sought to improve upon himself. Even if their methods differed, however, Kandinsky and Wagner still shared the same goal for their Gesamtkunstwerke. Richard Sheppard observes, Der Blaue Reiter Almanach itself could be considered a Gesamtkunstwerk: ‘with St. George on its cover, and Apollo, the god who taught mankind the art of healing, on its second frontispiece [the almanac] was designed as a Gesamtkunstwerk whose purpose was to propagate Kandinsky’s religious view of history and offer spiritual hope to the reader.’ This is of course, not unlike Wagner’s own intentions for his opera-based Gesamtkunstwerke to be ‘religious works of art which could reach the masses, renew their spirit, and infuse them with a purified Christianity.’ This Christian element becomes particularly prominent in Wagner’s final opera Parsifal (1882), which indicated a departure from the Greek tragedy inspired form of work which had so endeared him to Nietzsche.

In the context of Sheppard’s argument Der Blaue Reiter Almanach comes at a time when Kandinsky’s view of history is changing, or indeed has changed. In the final essay of the almanac, written by Kandinsky, ‘On the Question of Form’, the previous Tolstoyan idea of history as being an upwardly moving triangle, spearheaded by the

---

brilliantly-minded avant-gardist expressed in *On the Spiritual in Art*, has given way to a vision of history as apocalyptic struggle, Sheppard writes:

> According to this view, modern humanity, unlike medieval humanity, has rebelled against God and formed a hard crust around its spiritual consciousness through the over cultivation of the intellect and fixation upon the material world. The crust will, however, be broken open apocalyptically by the irruption of God into human history; and after a period of redemptive chaos, a proper consciousness will be re-established and an “Epoche des grossen Geistigen” [Epoch of the Great Spiritual] inaugurated.\(^{127}\)

Kandinsky’s *The Yellow Sound*, a stage composition published in *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac*, may also be considered a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk, Washton Long describes it as ‘multiple art work,’\(^{128}\) as it made use of music, dance, and coloured lights, whereas others have described it as an ‘abstract drama.’\(^{129}\) The composition ends with overt Christian symbolism with a yellow giant throwing out their arms, mimicking the pose of Christ on the cross. The romantic idea of the unification of multiple artforms becomes the expressionist reaction to the disjointed nature of society, ending with the message that it is religion that will save us from the darkness of the world. *The Yellow Sound* had quite an impact on Ball, in his diaries he cites the compelling nature of its ‘series of contradictions’\(^{130}\) His description of the work makes it sound cacophonous and unwieldy, difficult even (though Kandinsky’s intent was for it to be intuitively understood). Indeed, Ball’s interpretation of *The Yellow Sound*, brings to mind descriptors of the numerous Dada soirees that he helped organise and perform in at the Cabaret Voltaire, giving some credence to Dayan’s interpretation of the Dada soiree as

But as Dayan wryly observes, where Kandinsky’s reflections on Gesamtkunstwerk are of a Wagnerian vein, Dada soirées are simply non-Wagnerian, neither for nor against him. And this is because they operate outside of the same traditions of the artwork as the ones Wagner and Kandinsky operated within, they are not as Dayan notes, a ‘work with a title and a creator to be envisaged as a whole … A Zurich Dada soirée is never a work with a title and a single creator.’ Still, despite this difference in traditions in both cases, and regardless of their success (or lack thereof) in applying a defibrillator to a dying culture, these different forms of Gesamtkunstwerk were still formed in reaction to the same Nietzschean issues that surrounded them both—a decline in society predicated on the dominance of a materialist outlook at the expense of a spiritual one, or a world in the grip of war with a morally bleak present and future. More than this though, they were also formed in the spirit of Nietzsche as Ball understood his philosophy. As Philip Mann indicates, Ball’s unfinished thesis on Nietzsche ‘remarks that Nietzsche’s Greek studies, which were strongly influenced by [Jakob] Burkhardt and Wagner, led him to the idea of an aesthetic basis of culture, and to the belief that a combination of the ideas of Wagner, Schopenhauer and Ancient Greece might lead to the destruction of over-intellectualized, over-rationalized contemporary society.’ A nod to the aesthetic justification of existence, in Nietzsche’s Wagnerian *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872).

In Gordon’s *Expressionism Art and Idea*, this reactive element of Expressionism is described as one of its hallmarks, and his description supports this argument that the Expressionist interest in Gesamtkunstwerk follows in the same tradition of Wagner’s view of it as redemptive. ‘Expressionism was a cumulative reaction to many different intimations of decline: to an imagined decrepitude in society, a supposed running down of the cosmos, and an alleged decay in culture. It was a universal fear of degeneration

---

131 Dayan (2014).  
133 The idea of Dadaism as a reaction to the horrors of the First World War will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.  
that prompted a utopian hope for regeneration’. For Kandinsky this utopian hope was the aforementioned epoch of the great spiritual. The transition from the epoch of materialism to that of the spiritual is elaborated within the *Blaue Reiter Almanach* (1912). Marc, Kandinsky’s co-editor, and the other significant artist of Der Blaue Reiter, wrote in his essay for the almanac, titled ‘Two Pictures’, that ‘we are standing today at the turning point of two long epochs, similar to the state of the world fifteen hundred years ago, when there was also a transitional period without art and religion—a period in which great and traditional ideas died and new unexpected ones took their place.’

While this theme evidently preoccupied Marc, Kandinsky’s essay ‘On the Question of Form’ (the longest piece in the almanac by a considerable margin) is the almanac’s most intense engagement with the dichotomy of the material and the spiritual. In this essay, Kandinsky attempts to lay out the defining characteristics of how the spiritual epoch comes to be represented in art contemporary to its time. Kandinsky’s explanation of how art and its condition improves in a more spiritual epoch is lengthy and not particularly easy to follow, but it essentially comes down to freedom. As Mark Rosenthal suggests, ‘constraints of any kind—stylistic and otherwise—were anathema’ to abstractionist artists both in Kandinsky’s era, and for the later Abstract Expressionist school of painters from the United States. Artists are not obligated to create for external reasons, but can create out of internal necessity, there is a greater variety of forms to use, and thus to be created, and here, by way of a clarification, Kandinsky even paraphrases Nietzsche: ‘everything is permitted.’

It is with this same attitude that the first stirrings of Kandinsky’s new abstract approach to art was conceived. In his 2009 book on the philosophical significance of Kandinsky’s work, the French philosopher Michel Henry draws upon Kandinsky’s 1926 book *Point and Line to Plane*, to declare that the most important aspect of Kandinsky’s

---

work, both within his writing and painting, is what it reveals about both external and internal experience, and how this dichotomy ‘holds the fate of abstract painting’.\textsuperscript{139} Upon inspection of Kandinsky’s theories and the way he sought to efface the material/external, and bring expression to the spiritual/internal, Henry’s claim certainly holds weight. I have already discussed above the Hegelian qualities of piercing the outer shell of things in order to represent their true nature, and the point of abstraction in this process. It is worth mentioning however, that Kandinsky’s conviction in the necessity of representing inner experience took root well before he took to art as a career. The art critic Noemi Smolik covers this in her article ‘Kandinsky — Resurrection and Cultural Renewal’.\textsuperscript{140} Part of Kandinsky’s university studies followed in the footsteps of his teacher, the economist/theologian Sergei Bulgakov, visiting Vologda (around 280 miles north of Moscow) to conduct research into its judicial system in comparison to that of Russia’s main cities. The experience was formative enough for Kandinsky to mention it in his autobiographical work \textit{Reminiscences} (1913). Bulgakov and Kandinsky found that criminal trials conducted by the serfs in more rural areas meted out punishment in a very different way to the Tsarist courts. There was no strict code of law, and instead punishment was assigned ‘according to the man’, so, it was possible, as Kandinsky put it, to punish ‘lesser guilt severely and greater offences leniently or not at all.’\textsuperscript{141} Kandinsky described this flexible system as being ‘determined not by the external, but exclusively by the internal.’\textsuperscript{142} In other words, it did not succumb to rigid material demands, but rather allowed for spiritual guidance to be taken into account. Like Bulgakov, the philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, and the author Fyodor Dostoevsky, who had also studied this phenomenon,\textsuperscript{143} Kandinsky found this internal method preferable to the constraints of the external Tsarist law. When Kandinsky turned his attention to art and to aesthetics, he took this view with him that it is better to allow the internal to speak

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
for itself, than be subjugated to formal constraints. This was even evident in works prior to his development of an abstract style, such as works that explore Russian folklore, and the rural communities he visited and admired. The most famous example perhaps being his 1907 oil painting *Colourful Life* (fig. 6).

*Colourful Life* depicts many themes that would reoccur in Kandinsky’s oeuvre, such as the rider and various religious figures (Kandinsky also created numerous depictions of saints prior to his move to abstraction), and while the content is overtly material, it is attempting to speak to the spiritual nature of this content. Up to this point Kandinsky had painted a good deal of landscapes and made images that were to all intents and purposes (even with their vibrant non-naturalistic use of colour) pictorial representations of the real and the material. *Colourful Life* on the other hand was a painting conceived of internally. In the painting, Kandinsky consciously made an effort to create ‘a confusion of masses, patches, lines [using] a “bird’s eye view” to place figures one above the other.’\(^{144}\) The painting was not about the accurate reproduction of a material image, but rather about the reproduction of a rich internal life. Kandinsky displayed further interest in the exploration of internal life with the formation of the Neue Künstlervereinigung München (NKVM), the most notable other members being Kandinsky’s partner Gabriele Münter, and Munich based Russian artists Alexei Jawlensky and Marianne von Werefkin. Writing the foreword to a 1909 exhibition programme to garner interest for the new group Kandinsky wrote:

> Our point of departure is the belief that the artist, apart from those impressions that he receives from the world of external appearances, continually accumulates experiences within his own inner world. We seek artistic forms that should express the reciprocal permeation of all these experiences—forms that must be freed from everything incidental, in order powerfully to pronounce only that which is necessary—in short artistic synthesis.\(^{145}\)

---


\(^{145}\) Kandinsky in Lindsay and Vergo, ed. (1982) p.53.
Reinhold Heller describes the aesthetic aims of the NKVM as striving toward ‘a new recognition of subjective responses and experiences that would produce images representing a fusion of “external objectivity” and “internal subjectivity.”’

Heller goes on to note that by this time Kandinsky had finished the first draft of *On the Spiritual in Art* and had formulated his concept of ‘inner necessity’. Incidentally, it was Kandinsky’s continued striving to represent this inner subjectivity, that would lead to his dramatic departure from the NKVM, as the more conservative members of the group rejected his monumental work *Composition V* (1911) (fig. 7) from inclusion in a group exhibition, supposedly for being too large, though this excuse was seen as spurious by Kandinsky, leading him, Marc, and Münter to resign their memberships of the NKVM.

The painting was ultimately reproduced in *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac*.

*Composition V* was, according to Kandinsky, based on the theme of the Resurrection. Besides *Composition V*, Kandinsky completed six other paintings with the musical title of Composition between 1910 and 1913, and three more between 1923 and 1939. Of particular interest in this study are those first seven. Several of these works are based around distinctly biblical themes, aside from Kandinsky’s own admissions of these themes (in the same lecture in which he identifies *Composition V* as a Resurrection he also notes that *Composition VI* (1913) is based on Deluge)

Rose Carol Washton Long has done much work unveiling the Christian symbolism hidden within these paintings, notably in her book *Kandinsky: Development of an Abstract Style* (1980), and an earlier article, ‘Kandinsky’s Abstract Style: The Veiling of Apocalyptic Folk Imagery’ (1975). Kandinsky himself defined the Compositions in the closing passage of *On the Spiritual in Art*, in conjunction with his other two main abstract practices at the time, his ‘impressions’ and ‘improvisations’:

---

147 Ibid. p.68.
148 Ibid. p.71.
150 Ibid.
1. The direct impression of “external nature,” expressed in linear-painterly form. I call these pictures “Impressions”

2. Chiefly unconscious, for the most part suddenly arising expressions of events of an inner character, hence impressions of “internal nature.” I call this type “improvisations”

3. The expressions of feelings that have been forming within me in a similar way (but over a very long period of time), which, after the first preliminary sketches, I have slowly and almost pedantically worked out. This kind of picture I call a “Composition.” Here, reason, the conscious, the deliberate, and the purposeful play a preponderant role. Except that I always decide in favor of feeling rather than calculation.\textsuperscript{151}

It is clear from the religious themes in these paintings, these ‘feelings’ which were forming within Kandinsky while gestating his Compositions were, like his theoretical writings, related to the coming spiritual epoch which he and Marc prophesied. The themes in the two compositions which Kandinsky himself identified, and those that have been discussed at greater length by Washton Long, are not simply Christian themes, but eschatological Christian themes, stemming from the \textit{Book of Revelation}. For example, from the existing black and white photographs of the now destroyed \textit{Composition I} (1909) (fig. 8), three of the four horsemen of the apocalypse are present, with Death being the missing rider.\textsuperscript{152} In this period of Kandinsky’s career he was preoccupied with the idea of the spirit, and relating the spiritual through the work of art. In a 1912 article for \textit{Der Sturm} he even equates the work of art with spirit itself, writing: ‘The work of art is spirit, which speaks, manifests itself, and propagates itself by means of form.’\textsuperscript{153} This is a far cry from the sensual Nietzscheanism found in works of the Brücke artists, and could be seen as a particularly Russian Orthodox view of art. As Smolik has observed, in the tradition of Russian icon paintings there exists a belief that

\textsuperscript{151} Kandinsky, in Lindsay and Vergo eds. (1982) p.218.
these images are not merely representations of the saints, but that a spiritual essence of the saint themself resides within the image. She posits that this means that the image of the saint in these icons are ‘in effect an interface – a physical link – between the materiality of the present and the world of the spirit.’

For Kandinsky this ambition to imbue his works with a Christian spirituality is where we begin to see a significant divergence from Nietzsche. Despite the Nietzschean milieu of turn-of-the-century Munich, and other artistic circles elsewhere in Germany, despite Kandinsky’s admission that it was Nietzsche who shook morality, the shared idea of art as means of cultural renewal, especially in the German tradition of the Gesamtkunstwerk, and the shared view that this renewal was needed due to a spiritual decay initiated in the absence of religiosity/spirituality, Christianity proves to be an irresolvable issue between the two. Where Christian morality is considered a step backwards, and is anathema to Nietzsche, something he tried to inspire a vision beyond, Kandinsky found himself unable, even in his early attempts at abstraction to escape Christianity’s rich visual language, veiling the eschatological within his most important works.

Meanwhile Ball, for whom Nietzsche’s influence was a catalyst for his lapsed Catholicism, also found Christianity inescapable, but to a much greater extent. In Ball’s life, he vacillated between different prospects of hope for the improvement of the human condition: Christianity, Nietzsche, Anarchism, the artist (especially in the form of Kandinsky) before finally returning to his Catholicism. Even though Ball sought a kind of refuge in art, and clearly did truly believe it to have significant powers, even if just for a time, perhaps religion was always casting its shadow over him, as his fellow Zurich Dadaist Hans Arp would later write: ‘We spoke of Dada as a crusade that would regain the promised land of creativity. We spoke confidently of the art that can conjure up the creative, just as religion can conjure up the unspeakable.’

Like his friend Kandinsky,

---

155 Hans Arp, apud. Mark E. Pegrum, *Challenging Modernity: Dada between Modern and Postmodern* (Berghahn books, New York and Oxford: 2000) p.40. Own translation. It should also be noted that in the original German, which is quoted in Pegrum’s book, much of the wording takes on an even more religious significance. The word used for ‘creative’ is Schöpferische, stemming from the word Schöpfer, meaning God, and therefore implying the divine form of the creative in this instance. Similarly, the word
even though Ball’s intellectual development and ideas owed a great deal to Nietzsche after years of experimentation and expression, he ultimately found no solace in the philosopher’s ideas, and instead withdrew from society into a reclusive ascetic Catholic life.

In terms of his own work, Ball followed Kandinsky’s move toward abstraction within his poetry, stripping words of their meaning, creating nonsense words and stringing them together in what he called ‘sound poems’ or, perhaps with a tip of his hat toward Kandinsky’s 1903-4 collection of woodcuts discussed earlier in this chapter, ‘poems without words’. Ball performed these poems in elaborate costumes and in the unusual form of simultaneous reading practiced by the Dadaists that further obfuscated traditional forms of engagement with his poetry. However, even in the seeming incomprehensibility of his poems, for Ball a religious element shone through. In a 1916 diary entry regaling his performance of the sound poem ‘Gadji beri bimba’ Ball describes how in reading the poem he took on a liturgical sense of musicality: ‘I noticed that my voice had no choice but to take on the ancient cadence of priestly lamentation … I began to chant my vowel sequences in a church style like recitative, and tried not only to look serious but to force myself to be serious.’ The performance ended with Ball having to be ‘carried down off the stage like a magic bishop.’ Similarly to how Kandinsky veiled Christian eschatology and spiritual meaning within his Compositions, Ball veiled a meaning within the nonsense of his words. That by destroying meaning, even in such a blunt and obvious fashion, one is able to create something else. This is one of Ball’s greatest takeaways from Nietzsche, the idea that destruction and creation go hand in hand (a theme also present in Futurism). It may seem paradoxical that to create meaning, meaning must also be destroyed, but the first mention of Nietzsche in Ball’s diaries comes in a passage about Nietzsche’s refutation of Kantian reason, in which he concludes ‘we must break with the system of reason, because a higher reason

‘confidently’ in the original German is glaübig which can also be used to mean that one is religious. For example, in the instance of saying ‘ich bin glaübig’ one would be saying ‘I am a believer’.

156 Ball (1974) p.70.
158 Ibid.
exists.'\textsuperscript{159} If Nietzsche's dictate that 'Only as creators can we destroy' (GS II, §58) holds true, then Ball's suggestion of a break with reason to reveal higher reason, is a destruction of the initial premise. Ball's Nietzscheanism here, seems to parallel Kandinsky's view that the importance of the material should be effaced for the benefit of the spiritual. What currently exists should be secondary to something of a greater, deeper meaning. In superseding the epoch of the material, the Epoch of the Great Spiritual will wash away materialist values and thinking, Kandinsky's will to creation is also a will to destruction. And like Kandinsky, Ball saw art as being a catalyst for this societal overhaul merging Kandinsky's and Nietzsche's ideas, writing in \textit{Nietzsche in Basel} that 'the ideal is: an age of art unfolded from the destruction of everything that stands in the way of this ideal; the liberation of all passions, instincts, of nature, and a correspondingly great taming through art.'\textsuperscript{160}

Nietzsche's name does not appear in Kandinsky's writings again after leaving Germany during World War I, and even though Ball abandoned his own Nietzscheanism, the Nietzschean current was carried through him and it affected his fellow Dadaists at the Cabaret Voltaire, notably the Romanian poet Tristan Tzara, and the German poet Richard Huelsenbeck. It was Huelsenbeck who then took the spores of Dada from Zurich back to Berlin. There in Berlin, Huelsenbeck's own Nietzscheanism informed the next stage of Dada's philosophical development which shall be discussed in the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid. p.11.
\textsuperscript{160} Ball. apud. Mann (1980) p.298. own translation.
II I Richard Huelsenbeck and Dadaist Morality Beyond Good and Evil

When Dada began in Zurich in 1916 it was already with the ethos that the creation of art in and of itself was not the end goal. Instead, the creation of Dadaist poems, artworks, and performances was viewed as ‘an opportunity for true perception and criticism of the times we live in’.¹ At least this was the view held by two of the movement’s central figures: Hugo Ball and Richard Huelsenbeck, and it is largely the latter of these two whose ideas will be discussed in this chapter. Huelsenbeck stayed in Zurich participating in the initial iteration of Dada at the Cabaret Voltaire only briefly before returning to Germany in 1917; the Berlin chapter of Dada soon sprang up the following year. Jed Rasula, a cultural historian, credits Huelsenbeck with bringing the ‘spores’ of Dada with him from Zurich to a Berlin which was ripe and ready for the new movement.² Rasula goes on to describe the torrid sociopolitical climate in late-wartime Germany in great detail: the Kaiser’s propaganda machine was struggling to cover-up its military failings on the front while the country endured the strife of a legendarily cold winter and poor crop yields; it is little wonder that the poets and artists of Germany were so well-poised for the appearance of a radical, and revolutionary new movement such as Dada.³ As former Dadaist Hans Richter put it ‘The Berlin Dadaists might well look down on their Zurich colleagues, who had admittedly insulted the citizenry in all the approved ways, but had no real collapse of the Established so-called Order, no revolution to their credit. In Berlin they had a real revolution, and they decided to join in.’⁴

In this chapter I want to explore Huelsenbeck’s contribution in a different light, looking into the moral philosophy underpinning his Dadaist output, especially how it

---
³ Ibid, pp.48-49.
draws on Nietzschean ideas of a morality beyond good and evil. To do this in the coming chapter I will seek to answer how the idea of a Dadaist morality is even possible, which ideas and philosophies contributed to this morality, and how these ideas worked (or failed to work) in conjunction with one another. Along with Huelsenbeck I shall also analyse several works by George Grosz, providing a balance between the two factions (Anarchist and Marxist) of Berlin Dada. Grosz is further used because his illustrations to the 1920 edition of Huelsenbeck’s *Phantastische Gebete* [Fantastic Prayers] provide an excellent waypoint to discussing Dadaist anti-clericalism. Through this examination I intend to formulate an understanding of what a Dadaist morality entails. To do so I will compare Huelsenbeck’s notions of the Dadaist and the neue Mensch to Nietzschean ideas regarding morality and the Übermensch, and show how it is in distinction to other movements, most of all Expressionism, that the Berlin Dadaists were able to define their moral character. I will also discuss how socio-political ideas, especially from the likes of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, affected the construction of Dada’s moral ideas, and how the interplay between the philosophical and the political informed this morality.

Huelsenbeck’s part in Berlin Dada is difficult to pin down as he divided his time between Dada and his medical studies. He wrote and delivered the First Manifesto of Berlin Dada at the Berlin Secession on 12 April 1918, setting the tone for the literary side of the Berlin chapter, but his most famous work of Dadaist poetry, *Phantastische Gebete*, was first published in Zurich in 1916 (though he republished it in Germany in 1920 with Malik-Verlag, the publishing house run by his friend and fellow Dadaist Wieland Herzfelde, and featuring illustrations by Grosz). Some of Huelsenbeck’s greatest contributions to the movement, especially in Berlin, actually came in his role as its chronicler and theorist, writing a brief history of the movement titled *En Avant Dada*, and also editing the *Dada Almanac*, both in 1920. Later in his life Huelsenbeck also published his memoirs of these events under the title *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer* (1969), as well as several essays theorising the movement.

Huelsenbeck has been described as one of the more aggressive performers in the Cabaret Voltaire by Ball, who wrote of him that ‘He would prefer to drum literature
into the ground.\textsuperscript{5} While this was an apt physical description—Huelsenbeck would accompany his poetry readings at the Cabaret Voltaire by pounding on bass drum—this descriptor falls short if used metaphorically. Examining Huelsenbeck’s writings from the Berlin period and his later memoirs, far from drumming literature into the ground, he uses literature as a tool to explore the human implications arising from a turbulent era full of complexities and contradictions.

From the outset, the kernel at Dada’s centre was a philosophical one. Ball, who was much admired by Huelsenbeck, had been a scholar of Nietzsche; though he never finished his doctoral thesis, ‘Nietzsche in Basel’, the philosopher’s thought remained a touchstone for Ball throughout his life. In Ball’s collected diaries \textit{Flight out of Time: A Dada Diary} Nietzsche is mentioned frequently from the beginning pages of 1911, to the end of these diaries in 1921. Other influential thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Rousseau, and Bakunin are also mentioned frequently by Ball, but it is Nietzsche who is referenced the most, and whose thought is reflected upon in the sharpest relief. Nietzsche’s ideas are also the most evident in Dada itself, apart from perhaps those of Bakunin, but where Bakuninian and Nietzschean thought end and begin is sometimes difficult to distinguish. This Nietzschean trend continued into Berlin Dada too, and this relationship has been discussed by others, for example Hanne Bergius concerns herself a great deal with the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of Dada and the cunning use of these Nietzschean ideas in the creation of artworks in her volume of \textit{Crisis and the Arts: A History of Dada}.\textsuperscript{6} In this chapter, however, I seek to establish how Nietzsche’s moral philosophy is entwined within Berlin Dada’s aesthetics, and outlook. There is relatively little scholarship on morality within Dada. Bergius—while mostly an excellent reader of Nietzsche—glosses over it with a single sentence: ‘The Dadaists recreated Nietzsche’s concept of artistry as an anti-moral, anti-metaphysical, and anti-Christian countermovement to established culture’.\textsuperscript{7} But, this statement hides many complexities

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{5} Ball (1977) p.51.
\textsuperscript{7} ibid p.20.
and problems that need to be untangled. The most prominent writings on the topic come from Sascha Bru’s 2012 book *Democracy, Law and the Modernist Avant-Gardes: Writing in the State of Exception*, in a chapter concerning the more political aspects of Huelsenbeck’s Dada writings both in Zurich and Berlin. While there is great merit in Bru’s work, morality is only a secondary focus in this chapter, and he mostly references Huelsenbeck’s assertions regarding morality as a reaction to a perceived Bourgeoisie morality and does not draw out their fuller philosophical context and implications.

One of the reasons Dada has not been discussed in relation to morality in any great depth is most likely because of the way it has come to be viewed as a nihilistic and destructive movement. For if Dada were truly nihilistic then how could it formulate its own kind of morality? But this reputation is an unfair one. Several scholars including Hubert van den Berg and Hans Kleinschmidt have attempted to revise this impression of a destructive Dada that still persists in the popular imagination. Van den Berg goes so far as to say that this image of Dada is actually a revision in and of itself, perpetuated by former Dadaists, including Huelsenbeck. He writes that ‘in the 1950s and 1960s, when they [the former Dadaists] started to raise the market value of dada (and discredit new, so-called “neo-dada” initiatives), that an image of dada was created as the most radical ism of the historical avant-garde, as an avant-garde formation exclusively excelling in the destruction and annihilation of all art.’ He points out that most of the former Dadaists were still alive at this point, and hence the history of the movement was beholden to their authority, allowing them to play into this image of ‘the most radical ism’. Huelsenbeck even re-wrote some of his texts to make them appear more destructive in retrospect. Despite these revisions, in *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, Huelsenbeck changes tack once again and paints a much more positive picture of the movement. For instance, he contrasts Dada’s revolutionary qualities with those of Futurism: ‘He [Marinetti] was a revolutionary of grammar, whereas from the outset we

---

wanted to be revolutionaries of humanity.'\textsuperscript{10} Later on he even goes as far as to describe Dada as ‘a revolt against imminent levelling, stupidity, destruction.’\textsuperscript{11}

Dada, certainly as Huelsenbeek attempted to define it, was more than just an artistic movement, it was a state of being. This conflation of art and life falls squarely into Peter Bürger’s theorisation of the avant-garde when he writes: ‘the historical avant-garde movements negate those determinations that are essential in autonomous art: the disjunction of art and the praxis of life… The avant-garde intends the abolition of autonomous art by which it means that art is to be integrated into the praxis of life’,\textsuperscript{12} The question remains though, in what ways did they seek to achieve this integration?

In a 1966 essay titled ‘The Case of Dada’, Huelsenbeek contrasts Dada with other artistic movements from around the same time to support Dada’s claim to being something greater than art. For example, Huelsenbeek says of the Cubists that they ‘were not morally concerned, about the disintegration of the world; they knew the laws of painting but were indifferent to whatever laws obtain in our world. Politics didn't interest them, sociology was a closed book to them. The dadaists were different.’\textsuperscript{13} That the Berlin Dadaists were political is no secret: Wieland Herzfelde, his brother John Heartfield, and George Grosz were all members of the KPD (the German Communist Party), Huelsenbeck had become enamoured with the anarchists during his time in Paris, and Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch were similarly inclined, and politics was certainly a part of this integration of art life. But why the emphasis on morality? There are, of course, obvious links between politics and morality (or a lack thereof), and sociology and morality, yet it is only morality which Huelsenbeck decides to emphasise here, setting it apart. Morality, politics, and sociology are clearly delineated by Huelsenbeck, so how is a Dadaist conception of morality meant to be imagined?

\textsuperscript{11} ibid p.52.
To answer such a question, the delineation of the sociological, political, and moral must be considered in its historical context. What reason could Huelsenbeck have for attempting to extract morality from its entanglement with social institutions? It is to the works of George Grosz that I will first turn in order to frame the Dadaist creation of a new morality as they demonstrate a concern for the spiritual health of society that is a corollary to the erosion of the Church’s moral authority in First World War-era Germany.

Against Ascetics, Anticlericalism in Berlin Dada

The horrors of the First World War provide much of the backdrop for the arrival of Dada: the Cabaret Voltaire was founded in neutral Switzerland, a haven for those trying to escape the war; some of the Dadaists such as Hans Richter served in the military, others like Raoul Haussmann produced anti-war/anti-military art. George Grosz did both. Grosz is probably the best exemplar of Dadaist anti-militarism, his brief active service between 13 November 1914 and 11 May 1915 (ending in honourable discharge for medical reasons) was more than enough experience to enforce his anti-militarist stance and inspire numerous works such as the 1916-17 drawing, *Fit for Active Service*, which depicts an army medic examining a rotting corpse and declaring it, as the title suggests, fit to serve. But, as anti-militaristic as much of his work is, Grosz did not spare his ire solely for the army. It is unsurprising given the involvement of both the German Catholic and Protestant clergy in the First World War that they too would come under his scrutiny. The Church’s fervent support for the war served to diminish their moral authority, and nowhere is this seen better than in Grosz’s work.

In Grosz’s 1917/18 painting *The Funeral* (fig. 9) a priest is depicted at the head of a frenzied funeral procession. Behind him a harsh diagonal line divides the two main aspects of the work: the towering buildings, and the chaotic crowds. The scene is doubtless a hell-scape with its dark red and black tones providing the majority of colour. A skeleton, representing death, sits atop the coffin swigging from a flask, it is the one

---

calm point of the canvas. Compositionally it is reminiscent of the Futurist Luigi Russolo’s 1911 work The Revolt, in which an angry red mass of people slice through an off-kilter city in which the buildings fall diagonally around them (others have said it is more like Carlo Carrà’s work of the same year, Funeral of the Anarchist Galli15). But where The Revolt and Funeral of the Anarchist Galli are charged with a revolutionary zeal, their subjects full of an emphatic power, The Funeral is a more pessimistic affair. The homogeneity of the crowd is evinced through a shared debauchery, rather than any desire for radical change.

As with many of Grosz’s paintings from this period, The Funeral reflects an intense societal discord. The people of Berlin become deranged and violent, the buildings are unsteady, ready to either crush the masses or crumble against their force, and all this is happening in the wake of a priest. The priest who is supposed to be a central stabilising figure, a moral authority in the community, but instead he appears to be leading its darkened revelry. This is highly evocative of the Dadaist theme of the carnivalesque, conjuring up the way in which traditional power structures are inverted during Carnival. However, as Bergius writes this was not solely a power inversion, but also a moral one: ‘It seemed as if the Berlin Dadaists, were orienting themselves to the antithetical plebeian spirit of Saturnalia and medieval carnivals, during which the world and its hierarchies were turned topsy-turvy. During these festivities the people ridiculed the authority of the official worldview and especially the power and morals of the church.’16 Yet these supposed moral inversions in Grosz’s dark portrayal of the clergy and the Church were more akin to a reflection than a reversal, and were intended to show the ruinous state of the Church’s moral leadership. In large part this was down to the way in which German clergymen of all denominations actively incited and supported the war, using their sermons to define it as a holy war.17

Interestingly, the historian Philip Jenkins describes the language the clergy used to propagate war as being an advocation for a moral revolution. Jenkins claims that they

were of the opinion that ‘War was a cure for individualism and selfishness; it presented the highest moral test; it gave abundant opportunities to practice Christian virtues; it taught holy zeal; it led believers from death to life.’ The irony of this final clause is hard to stomach. With the benefit of hindsight, Grosz had seen that far from confirming the clergy’s perspective the war led from life to death. Whether or not the priest of The Funeral is leading his congregation to their graves unwittingly is irrelevant, as the fact is his sermons would have wrought destruction, and corrupted the people he was supposed to protect, and shepherd to a higher moral plane. Grosz said of the painting that it was ‘done in protest at a humanity gone insane.’ He dedicated the work to Oskar Panizza, a polymath known for his controversial plays, who was raised in strict religious conditions, but turned his back on the Church becoming an ardent anti-clericalist, and a conscientious objector. This adds an extra anti-Christian as well as an anti-militarist implication to the work.

Other examples of Grosz’s distaste for the Church have been observed by Christian Weikop who cites the cartoon The German Papal States that Grosz drew for the magazine Jedermann sein eigner Fussball [Everyman His Own Football] for its portrayal of Pope Benedict XV as the puppet-master behind Matthias Erzberger, who would go on to be the Vice Chancellor of Germany, and the Minister of Finance. The implication is clear, but further to the undue power wielded by the Church over the German state, there is also an anti-revolutionary aspect which as Weikop indicates is exposed by Wieland Herzfelde’s article ‘The Triangular Relationship’ printed beneath the Grosz’s cartoon creating a ‘theme of papal control of anti-Bolshevist propaganda’. The Church was not only guilty of perverting the course of the state, but of preventing the revolution that Grosz, Herzfelde and Heartfield, all members of the German Communist Party, desired. This critique of the Church is once again on display in a

18 ibid p.77.
20 Ibid.
22 ibid p.821.
drawing featured in Grosz’s 1921 book Das Gesicht der herrschenden Klasse: 57 Politische Zeichnungen [The Face of the Ruling Class: 57 Political Drawings]. The drawing (fig. 10) captioned ‘Wir schieben vereint! Wir prassen vereint! Wir haben alle nur einen Feind: RUSSLAND!’ [We push together! We are united! We all have only one enemy: RUSSIA!], is a reproduction of the lower section of Grosz’s lost work Germany: A Winter’s Tale. It portrays a member of the clergy together with a general and a teacher, all united, as the text says, by a common foe: the Bolshevist state of Russia. Various aspects of the image were reused in several other publications produced by the Herzfelde brothers’ Malik Verlag publishing house including Huelsenbeck’s 1920 book Deutschland Muss Untergehen! [Germany must go under!] which portrays the stern looking general on its cover with the other two figures appearing separately, later in the text.23

Grosz was not the only Berlin Dadaist to take aim at the Church, Huelsenbeck similarly conflated the clergy with a morality counter to the traditional virtues of Christianity in some of his poems. The art historian Michael White interprets Huelsenbeck’s fusing of the liturgical and the sexual in his 1916 book of poems, Phantastische Gebete, as being ‘an assault on the authority of the Church.’24 White uses an example from the poem ‘Plane’, in which Huelsenbeck repeatedly uses the refrain ‘the priest closeth his trou-ouserfly rataplan’.25 It is not just the conjunction of the priest, with the base object of his trouserfly with its sexual implications that indicates Huelsenbeck is writing a joke at the expense of the clergy, but also the way trouserfly is lengthened out to trou-ouserfly, which in the German is written as ‘ho-osenplatz’ White argues that this is a mimicking of Hosanna. This conflation of the sexual and religious is made manifest in Grosz’s illustration for the poem Don Inigo of Loyola: Final Song in the 1920 edition of Phantastische Gebete, printed in Germany, in which Don Inigo (more

commonly known as Saint Ignatius of Loyola), the founder of the Jesuit order, is shown in the same stance as the priest from The Funeral: hands held high above his head, brandishing the cross, only here Don Inigo has his pubic hair spilling over the top of his trousers (fig. 11). Johannes Baader, the self-styled Oberdada of Berlin Dada, also deserves a mention for his ridiculing of the Church on many an occasion. Baader’s creation of the Jesus Christ Club with Franz Jung in 1917 through which he sold certificates declaring the owner to be Jesus Christ, and as a result exempt from military service, for fifty marks is a notable example. Given the clergy’s role in promoting the war, it takes on a greater satirical significance which may otherwise be lost in the grand blasphemic gesture.

The fractured rendering of a Berlin in the grips of crisis found in The Funeral is not unique in Grosz’s oeuvre, it is repeated time and again, especially in the period of 1917-20. Many of these works juxtapose society’s undesirables, such as prostitutes, with those in power, a powerful connotation working similarly to the conflation of the clergy with sexual imagery in Huelsenbeck’s poetry. Grosz portrayed the powerful as degenerates, morally corrupted, and depraved. The analogy shines through not only in the scenarios in which he places these figures, but also how they are often physically depicted as decaying and grotesque (see fig. 12). While obviously anti-clerical, Grosz was coming from more of a political standpoint than a spiritual one, criticising all those who held authority. Despite one of his collections of artworks sharing a title with Nietzsche’s Ecce Homo, Grosz’s work is less philosophically versed than Huelsenbeck’s, and instead his satirical paintings and illustrations serve as a testament to the need for some kind of morality to lead Berlin and Germany out of its wartime and post-war malaise, rather than as an actual attempt to build this new morality.

With the social fabric of Germany decaying around them, falling foul of a decadent existence it was Huelsenbeck who began to imagine Dada as a moral project and craft his works towards the creation of a Dadaist morality. In ‘Der Neue Mensch’, and various other manifestos that I will discuss below Huelsenbeck makes it clear that

---

the world order, as it is, is not enough for Dadaism. In the *Dada Almanac* Huelsenbeck described Dada as the ‘dancing spirit atop of the world’s morals’, but what, precisely, does this entail? It is a complex idea, full of Nietzschean allusions, and these shall be discussed in due course, but first it is necessary to understand where Huelsenbeck and Nietzsche’s ideas about morality intersect. In the following section I will begin establishing this intersection by working towards a definition of a Dadaist morality and mapping it to Nietzschean ideas.

**Towards a Dadaist Morality**

As mentioned above, the Nietzschean foundation of Huelsenbeck’s moral vision for Berlin Dada is one of the main discussions in this chapter, but in order to enable this discussion, there must be an examination of what these terms mean exactly, and of the context in which they are used. It may seem simple enough to say that morality is a set of values distinguishing actions into the categories of good and bad, or good and evil, but this is also somewhat reductive. Morality can be used descriptively, or normatively. The descriptive sense is like that above, a normative sense would presume a larger idea of morality related to rationality. The *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (2016) summarises normative morality as one that ‘refer[s] to a code of conduct that, given specified conditions, would be put forward by all rational persons.’ In Nietzschean terminology how the word is used can become even more complicated. In his comprehensive work *Nietzsche on Morality* (2015) Brian Leiter identifies that Nietzsche mostly discussed morality in a pejorative sense, and to further complicate this, there are four main approaches of dealing with it among Nietzsche scholars. Leiter summarises them as follows:

---

the Catalog Approach characterizes MPS [morality in the pejorative sense] in terms of a catalog of its distinctive normative contents; the Origins Approach, in terms of its genesis out of *ressentiment*; the Universality Approach, in terms of its commitment to the universal applicability of one moral code; and the Presuppositions Approach, in terms of its (untenable) empirical and metaphysical presuppositions.29

As for how Nietzsche himself uses the term, the philosopher Andrew Huddleston writes the following:

Nietzsche uses the term “morality” in a way that is less than precise, as was his wont. At a few points in his work, he uses it quite broadly to mean any system of non-prudential normative guidance about how one should conduct one’s life and one’s relations with others. But more often, he uses the term “morality” more narrowly as the name for a particular family of views that rise in social prominence during the long span of time between the birth of Christianity and the fall of the Roman Empire.30

The former, broader, definition Huddleston describes, which is more in-line with a generic understanding of the term, is not wholly accurate when referring to a Dadaist or Nietzschean morality. This is because in critiquing existing values, i.e., the “family of views” cited in Huddleston’s second definition, and attempting to create new values any normative, or non-prudential, aspect of the definition would be lost. If morality is received wisdom from a wider community regarding the accepted norms of behaviour, (essentially a learned habit, as Aristotle described it31) any deliberate attempt to create a new morality outside of this while still part of that community would by definition

immediately be considered perverse, immoral, or even amoral. Take for example the polarising effect of introducing equal rights legislation, and the way many conservative religious communities consider gay marriage to be amoral. This is perhaps why Nietzsche referred to himself as an immoralist (*EH*, The Untimlies, §20), as he chose not to accept the dominant, largely Christian morality of his times, but he was concerned with questions regarding morality as a whole. Dada, too, was an outsider to the morality of its time. But unlike Nietzsche's specific critique of a dominant descriptive morality based on Christianity, Dada takes a non-specific approach. It recognises that there is not a singular descriptive morality, but a plurality of moral credos. In the words of Huelsenbeck: ‘Dada lets creeds run through its fingers; Dada is the dancing spirit atop of the world’s morals. Dada is the great parallel to the relativistic philosophies of our times; Dada is not an axiom; Dada is a state of mind independent of all schools and theories, one that addresses individuality itself without doing violence to it. One cannot reduce Dada to principles.’

In these lines Huelsenbeck is firmly establishing Dada’s irrationalist credentials and placing it outside any functioning definition of morality. It is a statement of radical intent. To be atop of the world’s morals, and dancing no less, is to be unconstrained by the standards already extant. Of course, like any manifesto, Huelsenbeck’s writing is hyperbolic, but it contains an essence of the idea of Dada. As has already been established, the Dadaists were not rabid nihilists; they did have beliefs and values, especially in the political sense. But Huelsenbeck in particular defined these values as beyond anything that had been imagined before; Dada was presented as a new force of creativity, not just artistically, but in many forms, including morally. Supporting this, in his text for the *Dada Almanac*, ‘Towards a Theory of Dada’, Daimonides (real name Dr. Karl Döhmann) states that ‘a proper understanding of Dada presupposes an absolutely serious engagement with almost all realms of life, metaphysics, psychology, art, etc.’ It is the sheer scope of Huelsenbeck’s assessment of Dada that renders the movement unable to be, in Huelsenbeck’s own words, ‘reduced to principles’, not an inherent lack.

---
of principles, as otherwise might be asserted. Behind the posturing and obfuscatory statements, there is a complex, sometimes paradoxical, Dadaist Weltanschauung being formulated, containing a vision of what it means to be a Dadaist, and indeed how to be one, therefore a kind of Dadaist morality must come into being. Turning now to some of Huelsenbeck’s writings it will become possible to see some of the building blocks of this morality being laid through his philosophical references, and through his vociferous attacks regarding the failings of other movements.

Der Neue Mensch—Berlin Dada Becoming What it Was

In 1917 Huelsenbeck returned to Berlin from Zurich, where he had been a prominent member of the original iteration of Dada at the Cabaret Voltaire. Prior to the first Dada evening in Berlin he wrote an article titled ‘Der neue Mensch’ [The New Man] for the magazine Neue Jugend [New Youth], edited by the Herzfelde brothers. The name ‘Der Neue Mensch’ is immediately redolent of two things: first it invokes an Expressionist idea of the same name promulgated by the likes of Kurt Hiller and other Expressionist activists, but it also conjures connections to Nietzsche's Übermensch, the higher form of human being who evolves to live after the moral incertitude caused by the death of God through creating his own values.

‘Der neue Mensch’ is a much debated article, occasionally being cited as pure poetry—as Hans Kleinschmidt does in his introduction to Memoirs of a Dada Drummer—sometimes, as in Richard Sheppard’s article ‘Dada and Politics’ it is said that it ‘represents a return to Expressionist modes.’ 34 Conversely, it has also been interpreted as anti-Expressionist, for example in his essay ‘Transitions from Expressionism to Dada’ Christian Weikop argues that ‘Der neue Mensch’ was a continuation of the anti-Expressionist sentiments held in the Cabaret Voltaire. 35 While these last two claims may seem contradictory, as with much of Dada, they both contain

---

an element of truth. The idea that this work was a return to Expressionism is most likely a reference to the lyrical poetic style of the prose compared to Hulesenbeck’s Dadaist poems, as well as the title’s use of an Expressionist theme. However, Sheppard does not clarify his reasoning in the article mentioned. As for the anti-Expressionist elements, these are much more clearly evident. In the text Hulesenbeck takes aim at one particular Expressionist: Kurt Hiller, the activist playwright, stating “the new man is not new because it has been Hillered” making a verb of his name, and by extension smearing his alternative idea of a new man. I will discuss this aggression towards the Expressionists further on, as it is also prevalent in several other texts by Hulesenbeck, but first I shall draw out the distinctly Nietzschean threads in Hulesenbeck’s conception of the neue mensch and discuss its implications for Dadaist morality.

There are several instances in ‘Der Neue Mensch’ in which Hulesenbeck invokes Nietzschean ideas. The death of God, the Übermensch (of course), and the transvaluation of values all simmer under the surface, but the overarching Nietzschean theme is overcoming—an idea which handily ties together the previous three. As a philosopher who criticised philosophical systems so often it is unsurprising that it is sometimes said of Nietzsche himself that he has no system. While this can be construed as true by conventional philosophical standards, Nietzsche’s ideas, though seemingly disparate, are often reactions to one another or to the challenges his other ideas pose. In particular, the challenge of the death of God. Far from being the soundbite that it is often reduced to, uttering the words ‘God is dead’ poses monumental difficulties for human existence, as Walter Kaufmann writes: ‘to have lost God means madness; and when mankind will discover that it has lost God, universal madness will

---

37 Nietzsche’s ‘system’ here (for want of a more accurate word) reflects a core idea within his work of the inter-connectedness of being and beings. For example, the idea that if one aspect of someone’s character were to be different, they themselves, and indeed the world, would have to be entirely different as it would mean that every decision and action they might have taken in their life would also change as a result. Therefore, it is little surprise when his ideas formulate in this fashion, e.g. why would Nietzsche need to have envisioned something as radical as the eternal recurrence if he had not declared the death of God? If one idea were different, much of his thought would also have to be. For more on this idea Alexander Nehamas has written about it at some length in chapter five of his book Nietzsche: Life as Literature (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: 1985).
break out ... We have destroyed our own faith in God. There remains only the void.’38

Nietzsche proposes philosophical mechanisms to overcome this moment such as the eternal recurrence, and it is with a similar sense of meeting this challenge that Huelsenbeck writes near the beginning of ‘Der Neue Mensch’:

Days and nights come and go, Gods fall from their thrones, but what makes us grow and makes us human, stays. We have to look deep into ourselves to understand what can be made from the human and where the synthesis of all mankind’s skills and things is to be found. We have to become reverent towards the force of our soul; if we want to reach the experience which tells us that the imponderable of a sublime moment is a better answer to the most complicated questions than the most precise calculation.39

The most immediately striking thing in this quote is how it reminds the reader that an event such as the death of God is not monumental for its cosmological value, but rather, for very human reasons. It shows that ultimately the death of God is not about a deity, but about humanity. It is about how humans can deal with the idea that there is no divine authority, nothing to strive for, no fiction to make this sordid life bearable: ‘what makes us grown and makes us human, stays.’ Just like his philosophical forebear, Huelsenbeck says that the power to overcome such a moment is within humanity already. Humans must look to their will, ‘the force of our soul’, and become something greater than the current incarnation of man to guide them into the next stage of their development. Nietzsche’s Übermensch is often mischaracterised, largely thanks to the misappropriation of his writings by his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, to support her own antisemitic ideology. This led to thinkers such as Georg Lukács writing vehemently anti-Nietzsche works throughout his career e.g The Destruction of Reason (1952).

39 Huelsenbeck (1917).
Unfortunately, this perverted reading has also been perpetuated through popular culture, but, putting these misconceptions aside the Übermensch can be seen for what it really is: a moralistic evolution in human beings capable of the self-overcoming necessary to deal with the profound chaos left in the wake of the death of God. Elaborating on this Gilles Deleuze states that ‘The overman is defined by a new way of feeling: he is a different subject from man, something other than the human type. A new way of thinking, predicates other than divine ones; for the divine is still a way of preserving man and preserving the essential characteristic of God, God as attribute.’ Both the neue mensch and the Übermensch commit to this new way of feeling, they are no longer all-too human, but instead live by different values not predicated on the divine, but rather on themselves, and their own values which are given authority through nothing more than their own will.

This rejection of the need for a divinity to provide meaning in life is found in Thus Spoke Zarathustra when the eponymous hero laments: ‘Strange indeed is human existence and still without meaning: a jester can become its fatality. I want to teach humans the meaning of their being: that is the Overhuman, the lightning from the dark cloud of the human.’ (Z, Prologue, §7) This analogy comparing the Übermensch to lightning is found at several junctures in Zarathustra (c.f. Z, prologue, §3, §4), but the typical Nietzschean flourish at the end of the sentence obscures what is most important in this section, that is the statement that the Übermensch is the meaning of being. It is

---

40 For example, there have been numerous poor interpretations of Nietzsche represented on screen and page. One of the best is found in Alfred Hitchcock’s 1948 film Rope (Universal Studios) in which John Dall’s character, Brandon, attempts to justify the act of murder so long as it is committed by men who are ‘of such intellectual and cultural superiority they are above the traditional moral concepts…’, men such as himself. When he finishes his pontification he is asked by Cedric Hardwicke’s Mr. Kentley if he agrees with Nietzsche’s theory of the superman, Brandon responds in the affirmative, to which Mr. Kentley disparagingly remarks ‘So did Hitler.’ More recent unfavourable representations of Nietzsche in popular culture tend to focus on how his philosophy speaks to isolated and misunderstood teenage boys. Paul Dano’s Dwayne in Little Miss Sunshine (Dir. Michael Arndt, Fox Searchlight, Big Beach, and Bona Fide Productions: 2006) indicates that he has stopped talking because of Nietzsche; the character of Dakin in Alan Bennet’s The History Boys (Faber and Faber, London: 2004) is also a good example, he mispronounces Nietzsche as ‘kneedaw’ while vaguely discussing the idea of literature as consolation in an attempt to appear intellectually superior to his classmate before being shown-up for his inability to pronounce the philosopher’s name correctly.

the process of self-overcoming that gives meaning; the attempt to bring about/become Übermenschen. This is not, as it could be read, a replacement scheme for asceticism that simply replaces the divine for a different unattainable goal, but rather a mechanism by which nihilism can be combated. Both the innate, passive, nihilism of ascetic religious practice, and the nihilism to which humans are at risk once the foundation of their value system has been lost. Instead, it places the onus on individuals to provide their own meaning by striving to overcome the lack of a cosmological basis for reason, through the force of their own will. Doubly, as the Übermensch is ‘the sense of the earth’ (Z, Prologue, §3) it suggests that meaning cannot be found through any form of otherworldly means, but must instead come from something more tangible, from earth-bound values.

Huelsenbeck is proposing that a similar process of internal value creation is necessary for the neue mensch. But Huelsenbeck believed that if ‘new values are to be created old ones have to be cleared away’.\(^{42,43}\) So, what are these old values? For Nietzsche it was the values of Christianity, which he sometimes refers to as ‘the morality of custom’ (c.f. Untimely Meditations, The Genealogy of Morals). The problem he saw with religion is that belief in a deity leads to ascetic religious practice, in which experiencing life as we have it is denied in favour of the promise of life after death. Nietzsche describes this as a decadent form of existence. Decadence (which Nietzsche usually wrote in the French form as décadence) is intrinsically linked in Nietzsche’s thinking to the Church and Christian morality. In Ecce Homo he writes ‘Definition of Morality: morality—the idiosyncrasy of décadents, with the ulterior motive of avenging themselves on life—and succeeding.’ (EH, Destiny, §8) Decadence is a corollary to this morality: it is usually thought of as a cultural decay due to asceticism, a mode of being that denies instinct. One of the more illuminating passages to be found regarding decadence comes in one of Nietzsche’s polemics against Kant in which he writes ‘What

\(^{42}\) Huelsenbeck (1969) p.52.
\(^{43}\) Again, this idea is very much within the Nietzschean tradition, in The Gay Science, Nietzsche makes the combative claim that ‘Only as creators can we destroy!’ (GS, II §58), an idea that he shares with Bakunin ‘The urge to destroy is also a creative urge’ (c.f Peter Marshall, Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism (Harper Perennial, New York; London; Toronto; Sydney: 2008) p.261.
destroys more quickly than to work, to think, to feel without inner necessity, without a deep personal choice, without joy? as [sic] an automaton of ‘duty’? It is virtually a recipe for décadence’ (AC §11). Nietzsche described this denial of inner necessity as a sickness, saying he could smell its decay in the works of Wagner and Baudelaire, evidently believing they created works for an ulterior ascetic motive—this is certainly his accusation against Wagner, especially with Parsifal. Ultimately, by Nietzschean standards, while decadence is related to what is seen as conventional morality, it is really best described as a form of moral corruption. A sin against life.

Decadence is to be disparaged because it is a turning away from life, a retreat into an abstracted, intellectualised version of the world, which denies the power of instinct and negates the power of one’s will, much the same way as ascetic religious practice does. This is dangerous because turning away from life and putting all faith in the mere possibility of a better life after this one has ended, is essentially a passive form of nihilism. Andrew Huddleston describes the predicament of decadents thus: ‘decadents, as a result of their condition, come to crave what is worst for them.’44 He describes the condition of decadence as one of ‘chaotic disunity in the self’.45 It is a feeling of inadequacy in the composite being that forces a drive to rectify this inadequacy through a singular dominant (and decadent) means; i.e. the way that religious ascetics seek to cleanse their spirit of sin in an urge to achieve a perfect vision of themselves.

Contrary to this decadent asceticism and nihilism, Huelsenbeck’s neue mensch ‘converts the Polyhysteria of time into an honest knowledge of all things and a healthy sensuality.’46 In fact he is often found to be distinct from Nietzsche’s view of the ascetic religious type. In Beyond Good and Evil (1886), Nietzsche gives one of his most acerbic descriptions of Christianity, illustrating the contortions it demands from its followers: ‘From the beginning, Christian faith has meant a sacrifice: the sacrifice of freedom, pride, spiritual self-confidence; it has meant subjugation and self-derision, self-

45 ibid p.56.
46 Huelsenbeck, (1917).
mutilation.’ (*BGE*, §46) The sacrifices Nietzsche describes are diametrically opposite to the character traits of the neue mensch that Huelsenbeck describes. How is it possible to be reverent towards the force of one’s soul, if one has sacrificed spiritual self-confidence? Self-sacrifice in any form, especially in the passively nihilistic Christian sense Nietzsche describes, would have been anathema to a Dadaist.

But it is not only in railings against the Church that the Dadaist disdain for inwardness, passivity, and the denial of an outward-looking expressive life is on display, but also in their attacks on Expressionism (however unjustifiable the basis for these may be). In a brief polemic from 1920’s *Dada Almanac*, Huelsenbeck writes: ‘Expressionism is not spontaneous action. It is the gesture of a tired people who wish to forget themselves and forget the present, the war and the misery.’ And in the 1918 Dada Manifesto he also writes: ‘Has Expressionism fulfilled our expectations of such an art, which should measure our most vital concerns? **No! No! No!** Have the Expressionists fulfilled our expectations of an art that burns the essence of life into our flesh **No! No! No!**’ As Rose-Carol Washton Long indicates, this is mostly aimed at literary Expressionists, such as Hiller, Theodor Däubler, and Kasimir Edschmied, rather than say the Expressionists of Die Brücke, from whom it would be difficult to infer anything but a love of healthy sensuality. But regarding Hiller et al., as Washton Long writes: ‘Huelsenbeck sought to separate Dada from Expressionism by attacking the Expressionists for their lack of involvement in the critical issues of their day and for retreating into the “pathetic gesture” of abstraction.’ In contrast, Dada advocated that ‘to be a Dadaist means to let oneself be moved by things, to oppose all sedimentation; to sit in a chair for a single moment is to risk one’s life’. Dada being opposed to Expressionism was then naturally the opposite. It was the gesture of those with a rapacious appetite for life, who would not forget themselves for an instant. It was an affirmative rather than negative. Huelsenbeck’s creation of a Dadaist neue mensch only

---

confirms this. For the neue mensch does away with weary inaction and with ascetic practice.

This provocative stance towards the Expressionists does contain some ironic overtones, as the Expressionists themselves were also seeking to combat the decadence they diagnosed in society with their own iteration of the neue mensch. For the Expressionists the neue mensch was a man distinguished by his canny mix of cold rationalism and passionate emotion—the new pathos (*Das Neue Pathos*) as Stefan Zweig labelled it in 1909—‘he who speaks to the crowd must be inspired by the new pathos. And this new pathos, this “pathos which most of all accepts the world as it is” (in Nietzsche’s sense), is, above all, zest, is the strength and the will to create ecstasy.’

This more subtle and balanced idea, which is more in line with Nietzsche’s own writings on the problems of decadence lies somewhere between the true decadent and the Dadaist. As Zweig would have it this new pathos, which he mostly describes as a poetic form, was in contradistinction to the self-indulgent, and introspective poems that developed during the era of print. In other words: poems of a singular purpose and drive. Due to this singular purpose these introspective poems could indeed be called decadent as Nietzschean decadence only becomes a problem when it becomes the controlling force of a culture or an individual. For Nietzsche recognised the usefulness of sickness for creativity, admitting that Homer would not have created Achilles, nor would Goethe have created Faust if they had indeed been like the heroes (*GM*, III, §4). Nietzsche even admitted his own decadence in his autobiography, *Ecce Homo*, and further, in the notes that later became *The Will to Power*, declared: ‘Decadence itself is nothing to be fought: it is absolutely necessary and belongs to every age and every people. What should be fought vigorously is the contagion of healthy parts of the organism. (*WP* §41)

But rather than try to find a Nietzschean balance like the Expressionists with their new pathos, Huelsenbeck and his iteration of the neue mensch tipped the scale in favour of sensuality, instinct, and action, over rationalism and intellectualism. He

---

proclaims: ‘The new man says: the modern people don’t know anything about things, they don’t long for the curves of objects, the sensuality of forms does not touch their retinas, but the poets are the most idle. You can’t conquer the world with verses.’\textsuperscript{53} In his works it is evident that he interpreted Germany as being overly corrupted, and too fully in the sway of an intellectualised decadence, as the Expressionists, even in their attempts to combat the same corruption were found to be decadents, unable to conquer the world with their verses. Likewise, the inability to comprehend ‘things’ smacks of an attack on German philosophy in the Kantian tradition—a sedentary practice in which all is transposed into a noumenal realm. Instead, Huelsenbeck’s neue mensch is advocating for a philosophy of tangibility, of understanding things as they are through direct sensory experience.

For Huelsenbeck, it is clear that passivity was one of the most sinful aspects of decadence. In the final paragraph of ‘Der Neue Mensch’ Huelsenbeck blasts those he labels ‘the fatties’ or ‘the fat ones’:

The new man knows to fear death for eternal life’s sake; because he wants to build a monument for his spirituality, he has honour in his flesh, he thinks more nobly than you. He thinks: Malo libertatem quam otium servitium [I prefer liberty to the quiet of slavery]. He thinks: everything shall live—but one thing has to stop: the burgher, the fat guy, the glutton, the fattened pig of intellectuality, the shepherd of distressfulness.\textsuperscript{54}

Again, in the first few words, Huelsenbeck’s disdain for asceticism is evident, before he goes on to denounce a different form of decadence, that of ‘the fattened pig of intellectuality’. Though there is some descriptive difference between this character and the ascetic priests that Nietzsche decries, there is an obvious link between them in the way that both abstract real life in favour of an intellectual/imaginary realm. The correlation is made evident in \textit{Twilight of the Idols} when Nietzsche writes “We’ve got it,”

\textsuperscript{53} Huelsenbeck (1917).
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
they [the philosophers] cry in delight, “it is the senses! These senses, which are so immoral as well, it is they which deceive us about the real world.’ (Tl, Reason, §1). Even artistic abstraction came under fire from Huelsenbeck; in his account of the first Dada lecture in Germany he writes: ‘We were fed up with Cubism; mere abstraction was beginning to bore us. One arrives automatically at the real, as soon as one stirs oneself and comes alive.’ Both Huelsenbeck and Nietzsche are advocating for a tangible experience over one that is abstracted. Liberty is evidently an important part of this unabstracted vitality. Huelsenbeck juxtaposes it with the quiet “slavery” observed by the burghers he criticises. But what can be understood by Huelsenbeck’s use of ‘liberty’ and of this particular Latin phrase?

**Between Rousseau and Nietzsche**

The words ‘Malo libertatem quam otium servitium’ that Huelsenbeck uses in the closing passage of ‘Der Neue Mensch’ bear an uncanny resemblance to a phrase found in book III of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* (1762): ‘Malo periculosam libertatem quam quietum servitutem [I prefer dangerous liberty to peaceful slavery].’ There are all manner of sources through which Huelsenbeck could have learned this phrase. Rousseau himself attributes it to a Palatine of Posen (though, which particular Palatine is not specified). The words were similarly quoted by Thomas Jefferson in a letter to James Maddison 25 years after *The Social Contract* in 1787. Given the fetishisation of America in the *Neue Jugend* circle especially from John Heartfield and George Grosz (both of whom it should be noted chose to anglicize their own names) it

---

56 Huelsenbeck (1917).
58 A kind of feudal lord.
is possible he may have read the phrase from Jefferson’s letter, but logically speaking Rousseau is the more likely source. The Dadaists already had significant engagement with Enlightenment thinkers, naming their first cabaret after Rousseau’s contemporary, Voltaire. Ball was certainly familiar with Rousseau’s writings mentioning him eight times in his diaries between 1914 and 1917, and considering the mentoring role Ball had in Huelsenbeck’s life it is likely that Rousseau is the point of reference.

The differences between the two phrasings of this sentiment are incredibly superficial. There is one more adjective in Rousseau’s version, ‘pericolosam’, and where Rousseau uses the adjective ‘quietum’ to describe the character of slavery, Huelsenbeck instead uses a noun, ‘otium’, giving the largest change in meaning between the two statements, as his version is more readily translatable as ‘the peace/quiet of slavery’, rather than Rousseau’s ‘peaceful slavery’. The other difference is in the final word. Where Rousseau uses the feminine third declension noun ‘servitutem’, the accusative case of servitus, which can be translated as either slavery or servitude, Huelsenbeck uses the less ambiguous, ‘servitium’ (neuter noun, second declension), which is only translatable as slavery or slaves. Ultimately though, the sentiment remains almost the same, and for someone as highly educated and with such an intense interest in literature and philosophy, it is unlikely that Huelsenbeck used these words without knowing exactly to what they alluded. Any difference could be something as simple as a misremembering. Taking the invocation of Rousseau as intentional though, poses the problem of how these lines are to be interpreted within the context of ‘Der Neue Mensch’, and Huelsenbeck’s Dadaist philosophy.

Rousseau uses this phrase in chapter IV, of book III in The Social Contract, in which he warns of the dangers of democracy, stating that no other form of government carries as much risk of ‘civil war and internecine strife’, and as such, citizens of

---

60 c.f Huelsenbeck (1969) pp.2-5 for Huelsenbeck’s characterisation of his relationship with Ball in the early years. Huelsenbeck goes as far as to say that he left Berlin to join Ball in Zurich because he ‘felt that I would never be able to exist without Ball. Or rather, that my literary and personal development would be disastrously interrupted without Ball’s help.’ Ball’s account of their relationship corroborates this portrayal of a high-minded and intellectual friendship based on discussions of art and literature. c.f Ball, (1974) p.58.

61 Ibid.
democracies must steel themselves with these words, and the conviction that it is better to live with these dangers than be submissive to a corrupt form of governance. Rousseau then concludes this section on democracy directly after he uses the Palatine’s words by saying ‘If there were a nation of Gods it would govern itself democratically. A government so perfect is not suited to men.’\(^{62}\) It is worth remembering that at the outset of Berlin Dada the Kaiser appointed the government, Germany was not yet a democracy, and writing in the left-wing magazine of \textit{Neue Jugend}, it becomes all the more likely that Huelsenbeck was attempting to quote one of the most famous treatises on political philosophy to have been written. Considering how anti-monarchist Rousseau’s argument is, claiming it is the people that should be sovereign only further enforces this likelihood.\(^{63}\) And what is the neue mensch if not sovereign? Could this new man also be one that is able to deal with ‘a government so perfect’?

The position that a new man would be capable at operating, or even deserving of, a democratic government highlights a cyclical irony, for Rousseau actually argues that it is the governing of society that causes a change in man. This is because there are two distinct types of liberty that Rousseau identifies: natural liberty, and civil liberty, and the transition from natural to civil affects a similar transition in those under their governance.\(^{64}\) Interestingly, the way that Rousseau frames this is in language similar to the language of decadence:

\textit{The passing from the state of nature to the civil society produces a remarkable change in man; it puts justice as a rule of conduct in the place of instinct, and gives his actions the moral quality they previously lacked. It is only then, when the voice of duty has taken the place of physical impulse, and right that desire, that man, who has hitherto thought only of himself,}


\(^{63}\) Chris Bertram supports this interpretation but finds it surprising as the popular sovereignty Rousseau argues for, is consistent with monarchical rule. c.f. Chris Bertram, \textit{Rousseau and The Social Contract} (Routledge, Abingdon, New York: 2004) pp.159-161.

finds himself compelled to act on other principles, and to consult his reason rather than study his inclinations.65

This leaves Huelsenbeck’s use of Rousseau in a complicated position. He is simultaneously for and against Rousseau’s ideas. A truly Dadaist paradox. Democracy aids liberty, but also seemingly causes an anti-instinctual form of Nietzschean decadence in its citizens. How can Huelsenbeck be advocating for a new system of government when that system of government also creates exactly the kind of people he despises?

Ball similarly had a difficult time with Rousseau’s ideas. In his 1915 diaries Ball writes that “A fat slave is better than a thin prole” could be the motto on many party pamphlets nowadays. All socialist systems are haunted by Rousseau’s dubious notion that the only thing preventing an earthly paradise is corrupt society.66 Obviously the idea that the fat slave is better than the thin prole is antonymic to a preference for (dangerous) liberty over easy or quiet slavery, showing Ball to be supportive of a more democratic social vision. But there is a disconnect between the Dadaists and Rousseau, other thinkers come between them, Nietzsche of course is one of them, but also Bakunin. Ball’s reading of Rousseau seems to have been heavily influenced by Bakunin as one of the entries concerning Rousseau in his diaries is mediated through the words of the Russian anarchist. Ball quotes Bakunin from his 1871 pamphlet ‘The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State’ in which Bakunin criticises the modes of liberty (translated as ‘freedom’ in the English edition of Ball’s diaries, but the translation as ‘liberty’ provided in the Sam Dolgoff edited 1973 collection of Bakunin’s texts seems a better interpretation67) offered by the State and other means in which Bakunin labels the kind of liberty offered by Rousseau’s school of thought as ‘individualistic-egoistic, petty, and fictitious’.68 In contrast to Rousseau’s belief that entering into the social contract,

65 Ibid.
and being governed by the general will does not impinge on man’s liberty, merely changes it from natural to civil liberty, as seen in the extended quotation above, Bakunin believes that ‘The liberty of man consists in this: that he obeys natural laws because he has himself recognized them as such, and not because they have been externally imposed upon him by any extrinsic will’. But Ball also sees a similarity between Rousseau and Bakunin, believing that in order to be an anarchist in the vein of a Bakunin or a Peter Kropotkin, one needs to have a Rousseauean faith in the goodness of man. This could be taken as a criticism of the anarchists as Ball goes on to claim that he himself could not be an anarchist. The criticism extends in the suggestion of a certain correspondence between Rousseau and Bakunin’s political philosophies; Bakunin’s idea of liberty is not, in fact, as separate from Rousseau’s as it first appears. Entering into the social contract is, in a sense, also preserving man’s natural liberty as Rousseau is arguing that submitting to the general will is a recognition of a higher form of liberty, what the political theorist Zev Trachtenberg describes as ‘a more truly human form of freedom than the natural liberty with which all men are born.’ There are five further mentions of Rousseau in Ball’s diaries, mostly using his name in passing as a reference to illustrate a Rousseauean type when discussing his own thinking on a subject. The only other notable mention is Ball’s claim that Rousseau’s thought is constrained by sentiments and illusions, compared to the freedom of the Marquis de Sade.

The Dadaist relationship with Rousseau’s political thought in the cases of Ball and Huelsenbeck is however more complicated than a vacillation between Bakunin and Rousseau’s notions of liberty, for the moral aspect is mostly mediated by Nietzsche. While Rousseau argues that civilisation provides man with a moral quality that was lacking in his natural liberty, Nietzsche would have it that ‘The European disguises himself with morality because he has become a sick, sickly, crippled animal that has

---

good reasons for being “tame”; for he is almost an abortion, scarce half made up, weak, awkward. It is not the ferocity of the beast of prey that requires a moral disguise but the herd animal with its profound mediocrity, timidity, and boredom with itself.’ (GS, V, §352) This is not to suggest that Nietzsche valued beasts of prey over herd animals, but rather as Walter Kaufmann puts it: ‘Nietzsche, instead of wanting man to “return” to nature thought that we must “cultivate” and “improve,” “transfigure” and remake our nature.’ What Kaufmann is describing here is the process of self-overcoming that an individual must go through in order to go beyond good and evil, and become an Übermensch.

Yet there is a good deal of equivalence between Rousseau and Nietzsche, the process of becoming who or what one is, that is the process of perpetual self-overcoming that Nietzsche calls for, that transfigures man into Übermensch, is not so dissimilar to the process of becoming a citizen in Rousseau’s thought. Indeed, the philosopher Keith Ansell-Pearson argues that Nietzsche has a lot more in common with Rousseau than his polemical writings—including one aphorism titled ‘Contra Rousseau’ (D, III §163)—would suggest, and much of his antagonism towards Rousseau is founded on a poor reading of his works. But as Ansell-Pearson also rightly recognises, there are simultaneously important issues which divide them. Notably, their engagement with the idea of decadence is one of these issues. Both envision the condition differently and thus also have different ideas with regards to facing the problem, Rousseau suggesting that man’s natural goodness can provide the answer, while Nietzsche bears no such faith in traditional moral ideas, making his response the complex notion of self-overcoming. Their approach to pity and whether societal institutions or a morality of pity is to blame for society’s decadence is also naturally contentious. It is worth quoting the above-mentioned aphorism in full to illustrate this difference between the two:

Contra Rousseau. If it is true that our civilisation has something pitiable about it, you have the choice of concluding with Rousseau that 'this pitiable civilisation is to blame for our bad morality', or against Rousseau that 'our good morality is to blame for this pitiableness of our civilisation. Our weak, unmanly, social concepts of good and evil and their tremendous ascendancy over body and soul have finally weakened all bodies and souls and snapped the self-reliant, independent, unprejudiced men, the pillars of a strong civilisation: where one still encounters bad morality one beholds the last ruins of these pillars.' Thus paradox stands against paradox! The truth cannot possibly be on both sides: and is it on either of them? Test them and see. (D, III §163)

Since Huelsenbeck’s interpretation of decadence falls into a more Nietzschean formulation (as argued in the previous section), it seems logical that Nietzsche’s critique of Rousseau is also shared. But as there are similarities between the process of becoming an Übermensch and becoming a Rousseauean citizen it must also be asked: is there some kind of equivalence between Rousseau’s citizen and Huelsenbeck’s neue mensch too? Unsurprisingly, some scholars have questioned just how political ‘Der Neue Mensch’ is as a piece of writing. For example Hans Kleinschmidt asserts that ‘In truth, the dadaists in the years 1916-18 had no political program, offered no political alternatives to the oppression by the military-industrial establishment, nor did they join ranks with the workers and sailors who had begun to rebel openly.’ Yet, a lack of physical involvement in political rebellion is hardly evidence of a lack of revolutionary sentiment. When the Herzfelde brothers took over the publication of Neue Jugend in 1916 it was to ‘more emphatically articulate their pacifist position.’ While the magazine may have been politically ineffectual, it was certainly still political. The magazine’s censorship should be evidence enough of this. Kleinschmidt himself makes the

---

concession that the Dadaist’s ‘weapon was the pen’, so it is curious that he would take such a narrow view of their politics in this instance. The political here is founded on the personal. As Chris Bertram describes, Rousseau would have it that ‘the path to this possibility of becoming moral and rational creatures does not lie through moral argument: it lies through the construction of new social and political environments through which we can become citizens.’ Yet, the Nietzschean current is the stronger in ‘Der Neue Mensch’. Despite his Rousseauean calls to alter society at large, Huelsenbeck advocates this change through a Nietzschean-style internal struggle that addresses the moral character of humanity. Any larger political aspirations are first predicated on this change, on this self-overcoming. This is because, like Nietzsche, through its explicit irrationalism, Dada’s new moral aesthetics were ones that disregarded the dualistic notion of morality as being about good and evil, but instead had to go beyond these terms.

To be beyond good and evil means to be in a state where the concept of these two labels has been made redundant, i.e. in a state where they have lost their truth value. This would be a state induced by the death of God. Once the death of God is accepted one is no longer beholden to the morality of custom—that is the morality dictated by (specifically Christian) religion—which forces this dualistic notion of good and evil. The destruction of God now allows for the creation of new values, and those that are able to come to terms with this and create these values become sovereign individuals and Übermenschen. The reason that this should not be seen as immorality is because Nietzsche argues that the fixity of the morality of custom is only so because an inversion of values has already taken place. We no longer abide by the Greek values that Nietzsche characterises in their Dionysian and Apollonian sense, now we have what he calls herd morality, or slave morality. This inversion is discussed extensively in the first essay of Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in which he gives many examples of these reversals and the way that traits that were previously considered poor are manipulated into being thought of as virtuous ideals, such as: ‘craven fear into...”

---

78 Kleinschmidt, (1979) p.152.
“humility”; submission to those one hates into “obedience” (GM, I, §14) and so on. This slave morality is a system of values perpetuated by those Nietzsche would classify as weak and ignoble, and above all by the Church. These are the values that Nietzsche claims deny an affirmative way of life. This is where Nietzsche’s philosophy often suffers a perversion, if one only reads the first essay of The Genealogy of Morals, it could be misconstrued as an advocacy for master morality over slave morality. However, rather than suggesting we revert to master morality, what Nietzsche is really arguing is that both these systems should be transcended in favour of a more authentic form of life in which we create new, more individual, values.

Herein lies the similarity to the moral aesthetics of Berlin Dada. First, in their understanding of the ability to create one’s own values. In a 1957 essay titled Dada and Existentialism, Huelsenbeck, invokes Jean Paul-Sartre’s statement that ‘man wants to be God’ to help us understand what he intended for readers to glean from ‘Der Neue Mensch’, back in 1917. He asks the reader to consider what kind of man the Dadaists wished to shape, then gives the answer through an explanation of Sartre’s statement, writing that when Sartre claims ‘man wants to be God’ he means that man has ‘realized that the creative force within him is identical with the universal creative force. In other words man is no longer the product of some conventional morality … he is what he is because he has become aware of his own value.’

80 This is the essence of the neue mensch, it even stems back as far as Zurich Dada, in 1916 Ball wrote that ‘As dadaists, we demanded that we had to seek out and prepare the young man with all his virtues and defects, with all his good and evil, with all his cynical and ecstatic aspects; we had to be independent of morality and yet proceed from the one moral premise that the whole man could be elevated.’

Furthermore, if we look at some of Huelsenbeck’s earlier proclamations, during the time of Dada about what a Dadaist is, and also of what Dada itself is, these similarities to Nietzschean ideas become even more evident. For instance in 1920, also in the Dada Almanac, Huelsenbeck writes: ‘The Dadaist is the freest man on earth,
human beings are simply ideologues if they fall for the swindle perpetrated by their own intellects: that an idea, symbol of a momentarily perceived fact has any absolute reality.82 These words are a challenge to how we form definitions, we are swindling ourselves if we are a slave to received wisdom, and we can only be free if we, like the Dadaists, reject absolute notions. But the greatest evidence of this Nietzschean bent in Dada’s moral aesthetics comes in a brief article by Huelsenbeck from 1956, simply titled Dada, in which he writes:

The division of human life into good and evil was rejected as a dangerous psychosis characteristic of the commercialised middle class in the nineteenth century. The “new man,” whom I talk about in one of my manifestoes, is a man of transcendence, by whom good and evil are no longer viewed from different stand points. The moral and the immoral are the rationalised components of a total personality.83

While these lines do not acknowledge Nietzsche, the lineage of Huelsenbeck’s thinking is evident; both reject the division of life into good and evil, and label it as dangerous. Both describe a new form of human being who has transcended the need for these definitions, and Huelsenbeck’s justification that the moral and immoral are rationalised components of a total personality is striking in its parity to Nietzsche’s own beliefs.

Dada, especially Berlin Dada, had a deeply Nietzschean tone, especially in the case of Huelsenbeck, who in his role as the theorist of Berlin Dada displayed a great affinity for Nietzsche’s paradoxical positions and perspectivist approach. As a whole, Dada represents what happens when a group of artists attempts to overcome their cultural-historic moment with Nietzschean solutions. The Berlin Dadaists share with Marinetti’s Futurists Nietzsche’s anticlericalism (which is discussed in the following chapter), but arguably for much more noble and less egoistic reasons. Whereas Futurism’s project was more a product of its material climate of technological

82 Huelsenbeck (1993) p.11.
advancement, Dadaism as read through Huelsenbeck and Ball was based on spiritual concerns, which considering it was born out of Expressionism, should not be surprising. Given the international character of Dada, having various chapters across the globe and different aesthetic connotations with each one, it is a difficult avant-garde to get a full sense of, but certainly when it comes to Zurich and Berlin Dada, it seems that a foundation in Nietzschean philosophy can help act as a frame of reference for some of the most challenging ideas that these groups put forward. For his part Huelsenbeck was a canny interpreter of Nietzsche, and the synthesis of other political thinkers with Nietzsche’s philosophy of overcoming allowed him to create a much more nuanced and positive view of morality than one might expect from a Dadaist.
Part II

Introduction

In the previous part we have seen the passage of Nietzschean thought through three avant-gardists in successive traditions that grew out of one another. This section contains discussion of Nietzscheanism in two parallel avant-gardists, the originator of Futurism, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944), and the Vorticist author/artist Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957). With these two men, the concerns for Nietzschean philosophy contain far less nuance and consideration than in the previously, or indeed successively discussed examples in this thesis. As these chapters move on from Nietzsche’s home country, where his books in the original German were more widely available, I have spent some time discussing the dissemination of Nietzsche’s translations in Italy and the United Kingdom respectively to provide a sense of the access these two figures had to his works, and the culture in which they were being discussed. This dissemination plays an important part in the inherent understanding both Marinetti and Lewis would have had of Nietzsche and is useful foregrounding for what follows.

As mentioned briefly in the general introduction the pairing of Marinetti and Lewis is largely to do with the way Vorticism can be considered a reaction to Futurism, which I expand upon in the Lewis chapter. In terms of the overall themes, there is no evolution of Nietzschean thought between these two in the same way we see Huelsenbeck superseding the concerns of Kandinsky and Ball. Having touched on Nietzsche’s anticlericalism in the chapter regarding Huelsenbeck, below I go into Nietzsche’s anticlericalism in much greater depth in a parallel with the anticlericalism of Marinetti. Given a relative lack of scholarship that discusses Marinetti in tandem with Nietzsche (certainly when compared to the other case studies in this thesis), I have taken the task of a sustained analysis of the ways in which a number of Marinetti’s manifestoes are founded in a syncretic Nietzscheanism, even, for example, the 1915 manifesto *Against Teachers*, in which Marinetti lambasts Nietzsche and those that would declare the
Futurists to be Nietzscheans. The other manifesto under close scrutiny is *Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine*, I place this into the context of the pan-European idea of the new man, rooted in the concept of the Übermensch.

The chapter on Lewis takes as its primary source material the Vorticist play *Enemy of the Stars*, written by Lewis for the first issue of the magazine *Blast* (1914), and Lewis’s debut novel *Tarr* (1918), and the Nietzschean aspects of the characters in these works. Again, I argue for a syncretic interpretation of Nietzsche being expressed in these works, particularly *Enemy of the Stars*, which seems to make heavy use of Hegel’s Master-Slave Dialectic. I also discuss several visual works by Lewis in my interpretation of his literary Vorticist aesthetics and consider how closely the two are related. Notably this includes some of the pictures placed in *Enemy of the Stars*, and a drawing that curiously pre-dates Vorticism as a movement but is still titled *The Vorticist* (1912).
From its inception in 1909 until the late 1920s, Italian Futurism was set on a vehemently anticlerical path, denouncing the papacy and the Church, and warning Italy of the two-fold threat of priests and politicians. The Futurists called for direct action that would work towards the expulsion of the Church from Italy, with the Manifesto of the Italian Futurist Party (1918) proclaiming: ‘replace current rhetorical and passive anticlericalism with an anticlericalism of action, violent and resolute, in order to clear out the theocratic middle ages from both Italy and Rome.’ However, while F.T. Marinetti and his fellow Futurists called for this violent rejection of the Church and its values, they themselves were wont to use overtly religious and spiritual imagery and wordplay in their works—particularly in their many manifestos. While the Futurist association with fascism provides some context for this anticlericalism (at the initial meeting of the Fasci di Combattimento, the first fascist party formed by Benito Mussolini, they agreed on the principle that Church property should be seized), the way in which the Futurists defined their aims, and glorified the relentless pace of the modern age and mechanisation through religious terminology raises suspicion of some subtler need for the dissolution of the dominant mode of religious worship that surrounded them.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was also staunchly anticlerical in his outlook, yet he saw some purpose in spiritual belief. Nietzsche recognised that it is religion that has provided the foundations for the construction of society, both morally and culturally. To use more Nietzschean terminology: belief in God and an afterlife is what has provided and defined the value of almost all human practice. With the creation of a God and an afterlife comes the creation of a prescribed set of religious codes which if followed allow access to this afterlife, and these are the codes on which human

---


practices are founded. The Futurists however, had new ideas about how society should function, on how to think of and value our culture and morals, and they sought to put these ideas forward in as many spheres as possible, including the religious. The authority of the Catholic Church in Italy at the turn of the century was abhorrent to the Futurists for many reasons: it was backward looking, a part of the old world order, and it placed restrictions on its followers the likes of which could not be tolerated in a Futurist vision of the age to come. The opposition of Catholic and Futurist values made the Church a threat to the promulgation of Futurist ideology—therefore it had to be destroyed.

Many scholars of Futurism, including Christine Poggi, Gunther Berghaus, and Cinzia Sartini Blum, have noted the similarities between Futurist and Nietzschean thinking, and written of Nietzsche’s influence on the movement and its members, particularly on Marinetti, but aside from Berghaus’ work comparing Marinetti’s pre-Futurist writings to Nietzschean philosophy, detailed analysis of the relationship is scant. Through close readings of works written by the Futurists, and by Nietzsche, and through a historical inspection of the philosopher’s reception in Italy at the turn of the century I seek to establish just where Futurist and Nietzschean ideas meet to better understand how Nietzsche’s views on the Church and religion can inform our grasp of the Futurist attitude towards the same. I shall then use Nietzsche’s theory of the inversion of values and the slave revolt in morals to show how and why the Futurists’ initial anticlericalism sought to destabilise the values which the Church had set in order to aid in the establishment of a new, Futurist, social order.

Nietzschean thought in Italy

The first step in establishing any link between Futurist and Nietzschean thinking is to investigate how well Nietzsche’s ideas had been disseminated in early twentieth century Italy, and the availability of his works to the Futurists. By assessing how well his ideas had been assimilated into the cultural milieu which gave rise to Futurism, one can begin to understand how Nietzsche influenced the movement.
By the time Marinetti had completed his legal studies in 1899 Nietzsche’s books *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* had been translated into both French and Italian.³ Marinetti had been educated at a French school in Alexandria, had lived in Paris, and been educated at the Sorbonne before moving on to study law, first at Pavia then Genoa, so either of these translations would have been accessible to him.⁴ By 1910 three further books by Nietzsche had made their way into Italian, these were: *The Gay Science* (1901), *The Birth of Tragedy* (1907), and *Ecce Homo* (1910) and almost all of his works by this time had been translated into French.⁵ Günter Berghaus claims these translations were ‘widely read and discussed in [Italy’s] literary and intellectual circles’⁶ giving the impression that Nietzsche was at least coffee shop conversation amongst Italy’s intelligentsia, but the first academic interpretations came almost as soon as the translations. In his diaries, the Futurist artist Gino Severini recalls being recommended to read Nietzsche around the year 1900.⁷ Carol Diethé notes that the Italian scholar Ettore Zoccoli, who wrote widely on Nietzsche, published his first study of Nietzsche in 1898.⁸ In all, between 1893 and the end of 1910 there had been a little over 100 scholarly interpretations and translations of Nietzsche’s works into Italian.⁹ While by today’s standards 100 articles on a major philosopher over 17 years may seem relatively few, it shows that Nietzsche’s writings were gaining some traction in Italy. However, contradictory to Berghaus, M.A. Stefani asserts in her bibliography of these works, that while Nietzsche was widely discussed in Italy at this time, he was seldom actually read.¹⁰ Bearing this in mind, it is easy to see how the person who is credited with having the biggest influence on the dissemination of Nietzschean thought in Italy at this time was not a philosopher or scholar, but the poet Gabriele d’Annunzio.

---

⁵ Ibid, p.42.
⁸ Diethé (2014) p.46.
¹⁰ Ibid, pp.54-55.
Though not a Futurist himself, d'Annunzio was, at least in his pro-war stance, a precursor to their thinking, and later both a subject of their vitriol, and an ally in calling Italy to arms in the First World War. D'Annunzio's Nietzscheanism is interesting for several reasons, first as d'Annunzio was not a scholar many are quick to say that he had a naïve understanding of Nietzsche, claiming he is responsible for a simplification of the philosopher's ideas in Italy. Second, some claim that d'Annunzio thought himself to be an Übermensch; ‘Infatuated by the theories of Nietzsche, he [d'Annunzio] is convinced he is a superman at an infinite distance from all his fellow mortals on whom (in his generosity!) he condescends to bestow from time to time a few crumbs that have fallen from his table’,11 wrote a contemporary critic. This is a position which, in her biography of d'Annunzio, *The Pike: Gabriele d'Annunzio, Poet, Seducer and Preacher of War*, Lucy Hughes-Hallett also adopts, though in a much less derogatory fashion.

Now we reach the third curiosity. Hughes-Hallett also asserts that d'Annunzio came to his own Nietzschean theories before even reading the philosopher. She notes that d’Annunzio had read and understood Charles Darwin while still in school, was fascinated with Napoleon, and influenced by Fyodor Dostoevsky, all three of whom had some influence on Nietzsche as well.12 This may be the cause of the perceived simplification of Nietzsche’s ideas by d’Annunzio, Hughes-Hallett goes on to mention how d'Annunzio wrote about the Übermensch before he had even read *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, not getting his hands on a French translation of extracts from Nietzsche’s writing until 1893.13 While no doubt influenced by Nietzsche later on in his career, what is now thought of as d’Annunzio’s simplified Nietzschean thinking, might have instead simply been d’Annunzian thinking. There is also some debate to be had over just how much in Nietzsche’s thrall the poet really was. For instance, Paolo Valesio asserts that d’Annunzio’s novel from 1900, *Il Fuoco* [translated to English as *The Flame of Life*], was actually a critique of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Valesio’s argument however is built upon sandy foundations, claiming that it is the way in which Stelio, the lead, and semi-

13 Ibid.
autobiographical character from *Il Fuoco*, is guided by eros that makes the novel a penetrating critique of Nietzschean ideology.\(^\text{14}\) In his discussion on this Valesio seems not only to be reading *Zarathustra* in a very literal sense, but he also seems to be imbuing the titular character of the work with Nietzsche’s own biographical foibles—that is to say, his perceived chastity. He claims that *Zarathustra* lacks sensuousness, and that the erotic themes addressed in d’Annunzio’s work enable it to transcend Nietzsche’s philosophy by making it appear that *Zarathustra* is really just as staid as the philosophy it seeks to attack.

It would appear that Valesio is using the section from *Zarathustra* on chastity as his main basis for this critique, comparing the views expounded by Nietzsche to how the infamous lothario, d’Annunzio, lived his life. Given how descriptive of his erotic encounters d’Annunzio was it is difficult to imagine him agreeing with Nietzsche when in *Zarathustra* he asks: ‘Is it not better to fall into the hands of a murderer than into the dreams of a lustful woman?’ (Z, I §13) This line of Zarathustra’s runs contrary to what Stelio claims pleases him the most—‘the sincere and powerful expression of desire.’\(^\text{15}\)

Yet the erotic element found in d’Annunzio’s writing does not provide a strong enough basis for it to be interpreted as a critique of Nietzsche, at least certainly not at large. When reading *The Flame of Life* it is possible to see where d’Annunzio draws from, and how he understands, Nietzsche. ‘We can only obey the laws written in our own substance, and by them we must remain complete in a fullness and unity that fill us with joy among so many dissolutions. There is no discord between my art and life.’\(^\text{16}\) In these two sentences, and the other quoted above, d’Annunzio denies the morals of asceticism, placing a positive value on seeking one’s own pleasure through one’s own innate character and desires. Instinct occupies a peculiar place in Nietzsche’s thought, he simultaneously believed that exerting self-control over our natural instincts could lead to greatness, but also to what he terms ‘bad conscience’, he also believed that we can learn from our instincts. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche writes:


\(^{16}\) Ibid, p.38.
Those moralists who command man first and above all to gain control over himself thereby afflict him with a peculiar disease, namely a constant irritability at all natural stirrings and inclinations and as it were a kind of itch. Whatever may henceforth push, pull, beckon, impel him from within or without will always strike this irritable one as endangering his self-control: no longer may he entrust himself to any instinct or free wing-beat; instead he stands rigidly with a defensive posture, armed against himself, with sharp and suspicious eyes, the eternal guardian of his fortress, since he has turned himself into a fortress. Indeed he can become great this way! But how insufferable he has become to others; how impoverished and cut off from the most beautiful fortuities of the soul! And indeed from all further instruction!

For one must be able at times to lose oneself if one wants to learn something from things that we ourselves are not. (GS, 4 §305)

Here the emotive language Nietzsche uses when discussing the virtues of trusting our instincts exhibits the importance he believes our instincts to hold. We can become ‘impoverished’ through repeated self-denial, we can flounder and remain ignorant of ourselves thanks to a myopic perspective of our own existence in which what we desire is ignored. For d’Annunzio sex was a great, and instinctual desire, contradicting Zarathustra’s belief that giving in to the earthly pleasure of sex serves to make man indistinguishable from beast; ‘just look at these men: their eye reveals it — they know of nothing better on earth that to lie with a woman. There is filth at the bottom of their souls’ (Z, I ‘Of Chastity’) he writes. Yet d’Annunzio is still practising a core Nietzschean value by accepting his erotic instinct, finding beauty through it, and perhaps even learning from it, and not letting it be diminished by the troublesome place of women and sex on the periphery of Nietzsche’s thinking.

Considering d’Annunzio’s understanding of Nietzsche combined with his belief that he was an Übermensch and instilling it with his own qualities, d’Annunzio is altering Nietzsche’s original meaning of the term and thus, as the foremost proponent of
Nietzschean thinking in Italy at the time, how the term was thought of in Italy in the early twentieth century. This d'Annunzian brand of Nietzscheanism, which lacks the subtlety and the perspectivism the philosopher intended, has to be taken into account when contemplating the place of Nietzsche in early twentieth century Italy, and his influence on Marinetti and his concurrent thinkers. It may even call into question how we consider Marinetti’s Nietzscheanism at a fundamental level. As Hughes-Hallett asserts with regards to d’Annunzio, what is to say that Marinetti did not come to hold similar views to Nietzsche through a mixture of other influences?

Marinetti was an intensely political thinker, he had a doctorate in law, and was deeply affected by the writings of both John Stuart Mill and Georges Sorel, especially the more potently anarchist writings of the latter.17 When first published, Sorel’s works found their greatest audience in Italy. For while he had some following in his native France, it was his popularity in Italy that led to the establishment of the term ‘Sorelismo’. As Sorel’s thinking incorporated and reacted to so many thinkers who were also influential to the Futurists, including Nietzsche and Henri Bergson, it is necessary to explore his thinking here.

Sorel’s most famous work, Reflections on Violence, published in 1908 (the year before the Founding and Manifesto of Futurism), is a treatise on the role of heroic proletarian violence through the general strike and the power of myth in revolution. Sorel’s ideas are focused on the incitement of a syndicalist revolution. After starting out as a Marxist, Sorel came to believe that socialism is no better than capitalism; he constantly criticises Jean Jaurès’ leadership of the French socialists throughout the book, claiming his, or indeed any, antimitalist stance will in no way lead to the betterment of conditions for the proletariat. The syndicalist system which Sorel advocates fuses the egalitarian ideals of socialism with the inventive, enterprising spirit of capitalism. However, in order for this revolution to be successful Sorel saw the need for great heroes of the proletarian revolution; he casts these characters from the same mould as Nietzsche’s Übermensch—these heroes are of indomitable will, full of

creativity, vessels of a Bergsonian élan. These figureheads of the revolution are the personification of Sorel's idea of myth. Sorel observed that social movements succeed when they contain a mythic core, some idealised vision or image of a struggle. He gives several examples, including the Catholic Church, claiming that ‘Catholics have never been discouraged even in the hardest trials, because they have pictured the history of the Church as a series of battles between Satan and the hierarchy supported by Christ: every new difficulty that arises is an episode in this war which must finally end in the victory of Catholicism.’ This imagery of struggle spurs the followers of a movement on in their cause and can inspire them to dedicate their life to it in the belief that they are contributing to something larger than themselves. But such a myth still needs some way to reach the masses and inculcate them with a revolutionary desire: they need their Napoleon, or their Giuseppe Mazzini.19

The art historian Mark Antliff dubs these leaders ‘mythmakers’, he writes: ‘mythmakers drew a strong contrast between a decadent present, rife with political and ethical corruption, and their vision of a regenerated future society, premised, in no small part, on the spiritual transformation of each individual within the body politic.’20 It is evident by the way Antliff describes these mythmakers that they are imbued with the characteristics of Nietzsche’s Übermensch. They go beyond humanity by incorporating myth into their being; they exert their will in order to create new earthly values, but instead of combating nihilism as the Übermensch does, they are battling against a different, and more tangible order of pre-existing values. This kind of revolutionary leader occupies the same position the Futurists saw for themselves in their own revolution. They will stand with the working classes, yet due to the distinction of their character, be at the forefront, directing their revolution from a privileged and creative position. As Christine Poggi notes, ‘Marinetti’s embrace of the masses was always paradoxical, mediated by a Nietzschean cult of the superman, and filtered through an

---

19 Giuseppe Mazzini, Italian Nationalist and leader of the Risorgimento movement.
ideology that both celebrated and derided the “crowd” as a force of the future and a regression to a primitive past.21 She goes on to say that “Futurists desired integration with this mass [the crowd] in order to experience the exhilarating tumult at its explosive centre. But they also desired to stand above or beyond it in order to make the crowd an instrument of their will.”22 The Futurists, and Marinetti in particular, united Sorelian and Nietzschean ideas to advance their own revolution. This opinion is shared by Cinzia Sartini Blum who writes that “[Futurism] was programmatically attuned to modernity and sought to bridge the gap between currents of irrational thought—in particular, Nietzschean anarchist irrationalism and Sorelian theories on the function of myth and violence in modern society—and what appears to be a positivistic faith in progress.”23 This mediation of Sorel’s theories through Nietzsche’s philosophy by the Futurists cuts both ways, we must also consider how due to his popularity in Italy at the time Sorelian thinking mediated the reception of Nietzsche.

When reading Sorel, it is possible to see where his theories have been shaped in reaction to or by Nietzsche; however, his only extended engagement with a Nietzschean text is in Reflections on Violence. In this he predominantly uses the anarchist thinker Pierre-Joseph Proudhon to critique Nietzsche. Sorel writes that ‘any group of ideas in the history of thought is best understood if all the contradictions are brought into sharp relief’24 and this is what he attempts to do with Nietzsche’s thought on the development of morality by opposing social groups in On the Genealogy of Morals. Sorel breaks down his discussion of Nietzsche into three sections: the first critiques Nietzsche’s praise for the values constructed by masters; in the second he counters Nietzsche’s proposal that modern concepts of morality have been developed through ascetic ideals and instead posits familial relations as being the bedrock of modern conceptions of morality; and in the third Sorel analyses the values dealing with

22 ibid p.36.
civil relations which he believes Nietzsche overlooks. Sorel’s main argument is that Nietzsche is too concerned with the past. Nietzsche’s background as a philologist causes him to be myopic when searching for examples of a master type, looking predominantly to the Homeric Achaen type, and disregarding any contemporary examples. To this end Sorel finds Nietzsche backward-looking, and hence in contradiction with himself when urging for the advancement of humankind. Marinetti would make a similar, if less nuanced, critique of Nietzsche himself in a short manifesto titled *Contro i Professori* [*Against Teachers*] written in 1915 (and which I shall discuss in greater detail further on). Sorel believes Nietzsche was wrong to think that Homer’s Achaen type will disappear in the future, stating ‘if this has often been believed it is because the Homeric values were imagined to be irreconcilable with other values which spring from an entirely different principle; Nietzsche committed this error, which all those who believe in the necessity of unity in thought are bound to make.’ Sorel finds a modern comparison to the sailors of ancient Greece in his present day United States, and argues that the spirit of the classical master type is still very much alive.

Looking at the larger picture it is clear that there is a complex web of thinkers and writers acting on Marinetti and the Futurists which encompasses Nietzsche, Bergson, Sorel, Mill, and d’Annunzio, and which also has at its peripheries Proudhon, Dostoevsky, Darwin, and Marx among several others. Thus, the way in which Nietzsche’s ideas have informed the Futurists cannot be considered within a vacuum, but instead his philosophy should be taken as a component of the cultural and intellectual milieu from which Futurism sprung. There is an interconnected assimilation and synthesis of the ideas of these various thinkers, but Nietzsche seems to flow through most of them, and his theories provide firm footing from which to analyse the development of Futurist thought.

**Multiplied Man and Übermensch**

---

Above I mentioned how Marinetti once critiqued Nietzsche for being backward-looking, and this critique must be addressed before I continue my discussion of how Nietzschean philosophy can inform our understanding of Futurist ideals. Indeed, I believe Marinetti’s challenge to Nietzsche is important for understanding the development of Futurism itself, for this vitriolic attack embodies the logic of Marinetti’s apparent disdain for history and bears a remarkable similarity to the way he envisioned the Futurists’ own demise.

In Contro i Professori Marinetti sets out to show that the critics of the Futurist movement are wrong when they have described them as new Nietzscheans. In the course of the text Marinetti describes Nietzsche as ‘one of the most ardent defenders of the grandeur and beauty of the ancient’, before going on to say that the Futurists ‘abandoned Nietzsche, one December night, on the threshold of a library that swallowed the philosopher.’ The language used invokes the Futurist disdain for all things ancient, making it difficult to dismiss Marinetti’s comments lightly. After all, what greater affront to a Futurist is there than the ancient? When in Umberto Boccioni’s Manifesto of Futurist Painters (1910) it is written that they wish to ‘destroy the cult of the past, the obsession with antiquity, pedantry and academic formalism,’ and when Marinetti writes: ‘We intend to destroy museums, libraries, academies of every sort’ it gives us an idea of just how polemical this text is. Indeed, Rosalind McKeever comments that this text may well have dissuaded some from connecting Marinetti, or Futurism in general, with Nietzsche.

As established above, Marinetti’s assimilation of myriad thinkers including d’Annunzio, Sorel and Mill combined with his own Futurist innovations all affected his use and opinion of Nietzsche’s thinking. But while Futurism was never purely Nietzschean, it did owe him a debt. And while it is difficult to prove that Marinetti was

directly influenced by Nietzsche, (we can only speculate as to what books he may have read deducing from his own writings and ideas) it is safe to say the development of Futurist ideas occurred in a milieu which was synthesising Nietzschean thought. Therefore, when Marinetti refuses to acknowledge, or even absolutely refutes Nietzsche’s sway over Futurism, readers must see through this shroud he has cast and recognise the wider synthesis at work. But more than this, readers must also recognise the Futurist logic behind such a polemic.

It is easy to offer a simplistic reading of Marinetti’s text divorcing Futurist and Nietzschean ideas, seeing it as a churlish attempt to distinguish the movement as being distinct from, and even surpassing the philosopher. Marinetti’s writing is, after all, often a call to arms, violent, and blunt. While this exists on the surface of Marinetti’s attack on Nietzsche, it is also imbued with much more subtlety than one might expect from him. A closer look at the language elucidates Marinetti’s logic. He states that Nietzsche was abandoned by the Futurists on a December evening; this is redolent of the passage towards the end of the *Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* in which Marinetti describes their inevitable demise at the hands of a younger generation who will ‘find [the Futurists], at last—one wintry night…’

Marinetti goes on to describe his would-be murderers in the act:

> Panting with contempt and anxiety, they will storm around us, and all of them, exasperated by our lofty daring, will attempt to kill us, driven by hatred all the more implacable because their hearts will be intoxicated with love and admiration for us.\(^{32}\)

Could it be that through this act of denunciation Marinetti is actually acknowledging Nietzsche’s influence, and he is writing this polemic with a heart ‘intoxicated with love and admiration’? Nietzsche was a fellow iconoclast, another figure whose intent was to shape modern and future thought through radical ideas about how we should live. Even

---


\(^{31}\) Ibid.

123
if Marinetti would not cede that his ideas were indebted to Nietzsche, it would be impossible for him to deny the philosopher’s wider influence, and perhaps this is where his admiration lay. In essence *Contro i Professori* is Marinetti providing a blueprint for his successors, the ones who will replace him with such violent action.

Taking on Nietzsche was an essential act for Marinetti to commit. When he writes that Nietzsche is a defender of the ancient, he is not solely referencing the ancient in a classical sense; for the Futurists a mere ten years were considered enough to slide into irrelevance. For Marinetti at least, Nietzsche’s ideas though not even half a century old, were becoming ancient. And this is where the problem with Marinetti’s polemic against Nietzsche lies. Rather than attempt to distinguish Futurism from Nietzscheanism in arguments based on the reasons for their theories and delving into what it is that both of them are trying to accomplish, in an echo of Sorel, Marinetti’s criticism is solely levelled against Nietzsche’s use of Hellenistic ideals as the inspiration of his thought. For instance, Marinetti states:

His [Nietzsche’s] Übermensch is a product of Hellenic imagination, built with the three great rotting corpses of Apollo, Mars, and Bacchus. And a mixture of elegant beauty, strength and warlike Dionysian intoxication, which are revealed to us by great classical art. - We oppose this Greek Superman, born in the dust of libraries.\(^3^3\)

Marinetti’s writing is presumptuous to the extreme, assuming that purely due to its origin in antiquity Nietzsche’s Übermensch exists in opposition to the Futurist project and cites the Futurist multiplied man as superior for being born out of modern existence. But with greater inspection it is possible to see how these two beings are more closely aligned than Marinetti would care to admit.

There are three ways in which it is possible to see the Übermensch reflected in the Futurist multiplied man: (1) through the rhetoric with which their creators refer to

them, (2) their birth in opposition to conventional societal values, (3) their evolutionary aspects. The first mention of multiplied man comes in the manifesto *Contempt for Woman* (1911), in which Marinetti writes: ‘We feel contempt for horrible and staid Love that encumbers the march of man and prevents him from transcending his own humanity, from redoubling himself, from going beyond himself and becoming what we call *multiplied man*.’ Marinetti then expounds on the multiplied man in another manifesto titled *Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine* (1911); he describes it as being ‘an inhuman type, one in which moral suffering, generosity, affect, and love will be abolished’. Immediately it is possible to see in the language of the multiplied man a clear parallel to Nietzsche’s descriptions of the Übermensch: ‘*I teach you of the Overhuman. Man is something that should be overcome*’ (*Z*, I §3) announces Zarathustra. While it is clear that for the Futurists this stripping away of ‘moral suffering, generosity, affect and love’ is necessary for man to go beyond himself, there remains the question: why do they think the abolition of these emotions is necessary? Cosmetically speaking, if one is to become devoid of these emotions it would appear to be a removal of what the Futurists considered to be man’s weaknesses. Marinetti does after all go on to describe them as ‘poisonous corrosives that sap the inexhaustible supply of vital energy, interrupters of our powerful physiological electricity.’ But the logic goes further, and like the Übermensch concerns an opposition to conventional values.

In the same section of *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche goes on to decry human emotions in a manner very similar to the one which the Futurists later used; ‘What is the greatest thing you could experience?’ Zarathustra asks, before responding: ‘It is the hour of great contempt. The hour in which even your happiness grows loathsome to you, and your reason and your virtue also.’ (*Z*, I §3) But why should our happiness, reason, and virtue become loathsome to us? It is not that these faculties are loathsome in themselves, and it is not that they make man weak, but the system of values on which they are founded.

---

36 Ibid.
must be questioned, because in Nietzsche's eyes this system of values diminishes man's capacity for greatness. This is because this system of values stems from ascetic religious practice, belief in God, and life after death. Zarathustra warns us not to ‘believe in those who speak to you of superterrestrial hopes! … They are despisers of life, atrophying and self-poisoned men’ (Z, I §3). Elaborating on this, Giles Deleuze writes that:

The idea of another world, of a supersensible world in all its forms (God, essence, the good, truth), the idea of values superior to life, is not one example among many but the constitutive element in all fiction. Values superior to life are inseparable from their effect: the depreciation of life, the negation of this world. And if they are inseparable from this effect it is because their principle is a will to deny, to deprecate … It is not the will that denies life itself in higher values, it is higher values that are related to a will to deny, to annihilate life.37

So, in turn man must be critical of what it is that makes him happy, why he reasons the way he does, and what makes him believe himself and others to be virtuous. By blindly accepting these value judgements he is denying himself his own life affirming will, and instead conforming to beliefs which degrade life. In recognising the flaw at the heart of society’s moral values one can either fall into nihilism—a will to nothingness, which is arguably what any ascetic religious belief is—or build new, noble, values founded on the will to power. The second of these paths is how man is overcome. While Nietzschean overcoming is considerably more nuanced than the Futurists’ concept of man going beyond himself, this moralistic element is also to be found in multiplied man. Futurism was a movement with political and sociocultural aims that ran counter to accepted traditional values, and the multiplied man was Marinetti’s envisioned physical incarnation of man resulting from these aims being accomplished. This is much in the

same way that the Übermensch was a champion of a new form of life once man has learned to live according to his own will, free from ascetic values. While the intended new values may be different, both the Übermensch and multiplied man are related to a revolt against practised norms either through a philosophical moment or a sociocultural one in which the existing values have been recognised as flawed and subsequently overcome.

The multiplied man is designed for a future in which machinery is so dominant that man too becomes machine-like, and having radically altered his emotional values man is now ready to take this a step a farther, his physiognomy too is ready to be radically altered, to evolve:

This inhuman and mechanical type constructed for omnipresent velocity, will be naturally cruel, omniscient, and combative. He will be endowed with unexpected organs: organs adapted to the exigencies of an environment made of continuous shocks. Already we can foresee an organ that will resemble a prow developing from the outward swelling of the sternum, which will be the more pronounced the better an aviator the man of the future becomes … Future man will reduce his heart to its purely distributive function. The heart has to become in some way, a sort of stomach for the brain, which will methodically empty and fill so that the mind can go into action.\(^{38}\)

These improbable physical evolutions which Marinetti hopes for derive from the environment his ideology creates. Marinetti believed in the existence of what he called ‘metallic touch’, an intuitive connection that people, specifically men, were developing for machines just through everyday exposure to them. Even the uneducated could develop this gift because they had ‘experienced the education of the machine’.\(^{39}\) When


\(^{39}\) ibid p.91.
the Übermensch is introduced by Zarathustra, evolutionary rhetoric once again comes to the fore:

All creatures have hitherto created something beyond themselves: and do you want to be the ebb of this great tide, and return to animals rather than overcome man? What is the ape to man? A laughing-stock or a painful embarrassment and just so shall be man to the Superman: a laughing-stock or a painful embarrassment. You have made your way from worm to man, and much in you is still worm. Once you were apes, and even now man is more of an ape than any ape. (Z, I §3)

These lines, however, should not be mistaken for a prediction of genuine biological evolution, but are instead purely metaphorical. Indeed, in Ecce Homo Nietzsche admonishes any Darwinistic reading of Zarathustra (EH, III §1). An overcoming of man is an internal struggle—it is not an evolution based on adaptation to a physical environment, but rather a philosophical evolution. But even if this environmental adaptation is evident in the multiplied man, the environment itself is a product of Futurist will and ideology and has undergone a fundamental change which will in turn give expedience to the creation of multiplied man. This is not a natural Darwinian evolution; if anything, it bears a greater resemblance to eugenics. This gives rise to a further comparison within Nietzsche’s thought: in The Anti-Christ Nietzsche attempts to elucidate how this evolution is possible and he writes about how a man that is beyond man can be bred into existence (AC §3).

Marinetti claimed that thanks to the differing origins of the Übermensch and multiplied man in Hellenistic ideals and a machine-dominated future full of ‘omnipresent velocity’ they are irreconcilable ideas. However, the similarities in their purpose and their existence beyond traditional morality display just how much the idea of multiplied man is indebted to Nietzsche’s creation, and his philosophy as a whole. It could be that due to Italian Nietzsche scholarship being in its infancy, and becoming obfuscated through the inflections of other prominent figures such as d’Annunzio and Sorel, that
Marinetti simply did not have that strong a grasp of Nietzsche. More likely though, this was a calculated attempt to disassociate the radical new ideology of Futurism from anything that could taint it with ‘the grandeur and beauty of the ancient’. Regardless of this, Nietzschean thought serves as an excellent initial point from which to examine the development of Marinetti’s Futurist ideals as the theory behind both is so similar.

**Futurist Anticlericalism**

Having already compared the similarities between the Übermensch and multiplied man and finding their origins in an opposition to the values created by religious beliefs and an afterlife, this discussion can now be extended into a comparison of Nietzschean and Futurist anticlericalism and critique of religion.

As many scholars have noted reading Nietzsche is fraught with difficulties; his work is rife with internal contradictions which sometimes seemingly undermine the entirety of his argument. It can be difficult to tell when he is attempting to expound a point through sarcasm or being serious. Nietzsche’s critique of religion, however, is something that we can be sure of. It is sustained throughout several books, notably: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Genealogy of Morals*, and of course, *The Anti-Christ*. All these books contain writings against religion, especially in the Christian tradition. But what is it that Nietzsche so abhors within religion, specifically, Christianity? Nietzsche is at his most fervently anti-Christian in *The Anti-Christ*, asking ‘What is more harmful than any vice? — Active sympathy for the ill-constituted and weak — Christianity …’ (*AC §2*). The reason Christianity is so reviled here is that it is posited as the main culprit in restraining mankind from overcoming itself and bringing forth the Übermenschen:

This more valuable type has existed often enough already: but as a lucky accident, as an exception, never as *willed*. *He* has rather been the most feared, he has hitherto been virtually *the* thing to be feared — and out of fear
the reverse type has been willed, bred, achieved: the domestic animal, the herd animal, the sick man — the Christian … (AC §3)

The implication that Christianity exists in opposition to a higher type of being such as the Übermensch is clear, and this rhetoric of the sick man, and the herd animal as being synonymous with the religious masses appears throughout Nietzsche’s work from *Zarathustra* on. This stems from Nietzsche’s concept of slave-morality, first introduced in *Beyond Good and Evil* §195, a concept central to his critique of religion. In this aphorism Nietzsche writes of how the weak (in this instance he uses the Jewish people as the example and proclaims them the originators of this mentality) have contrived to bring about an inversion of values which instils the weaker masses of society with the virtue of piety, and turns negative traits into positive ones. ‘Their prophets fused “rich”, “godless”, “evil”, “violent”, “sensual”, into one … It is this inversion of values (with which is involved the employment of the word “poor” as a synonym for “holy” and “friend”) … there begins the slave revolt in morals’ (*BGE* §195). While this section talks of the Jewish people, Nietzsche’s later writings in *The Anti-Christ* display that he believes Christianity has perpetuated this inversion and taken it to its ultimate stage. The reason that he considers the Jewish people to have invented slave-morality is their cultural history. The aphorism begins by stating: ‘The Jews - a people “born for slavery” as Tacitus and the whole ancient world says’ (*BGE* §195). Christianity, being born out of Judaism, continues this tradition to such an extent that despite its later dominance on the world stage its veneration of weakness thanks to the inversion of values at its origin perpetuates this trait. The Christian compassion that is a central tenet of the Church’s societal function acts to preserve weakness, both through charity empowering the weaker masses in a more material sense, and through its message that venerates the meek and mild, making traits (formerly) associated with weakness something to aspire to. Corollary to this preservation of weakness, the coming of the Übermensch is inhibited. Nietzsche’s follow up book to *Beyond Good and Evil, On the Genealogy of Morals*, contains his greatest exegesis on the concept of slave-morality and the inversion of values.
If slave-morality inverted values, then the implication is that at some point the way societies defined what is good and bad was different, indeed, even the opposite of how they are defined now in Christian rhetoric. This is the subject under examination in the first essay of On the Genealogy of Morals. Here Nietzsche describes how the attribution of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ stem from the opposition of high and low of society: ‘the pathos of nobility and distance, the enduring, dominating, and fundamental overall feeling of a higher ruling kind in relation to a “below”—that is the origin of the opposition between “good” and “bad”.’ (GM, I §2) Slave-morality, through the installation of piety in the enfeebled masses, is addressing this imbalance where all that is good is etymologically linked with the higher classes, and all that is bad with the lower ones. Nietzsche goes on to explain how originally concepts of purity were superficial stating that ‘The “pure” man is from the outset merely a man who washes, who denies himself certain types of food which cause skin complaints, who refrains from sleeping with the unclean women of the lower classes, who abhors blood—and no more, not a great deal more than that!’ (GM, I §6) But through the inversion of morals, purity becomes associated with the spirit, and it is possible to be ugly, poor, and unwashed, yet still be pure, and this is reason enough in the religious mind to preserve the weak. In §14 of The Genealogy’s first essay Nietzsche further explains this inversion of values:

the impotent failure to retaliate is transformed into “goodness”; craven fear into “humility”; submission to those one hates into “obedience” (obedience, that is, towards the authority who, so they claim, ordered their submission—they call him God). The inoffensive appearance of the weak man, even the cowardice which he possesses in abundance, his hesitation on the threshold, the inevitability of being made to wait—all assume a good name here as “patience”, that is, as virtue as such; the inability to take revenge is called the refusal to take revenge, perhaps even forgiveness (“for they know not what they do—we alone know what they do!”). There is also talk of “loving one’s enemies”—accompanied by much perspiration. (GM I, §14)
This goes on until finally Nietzsche asks: ‘And what do they call the hope which serves to console them for all the suffering of their life[?]… They call it “the Last Judgement”, the coming of their kingdom, the “Kingdom of God”—but meanwhile they live “in faith”, “in love”, “in hope”.’ (GM, I §14) This is essentially how religious teaching enables the promulgation of the inversion of values. Nietzsche’s task here is to make his readers realise that through its rhetoric the Church perpetuates the denial of our instincts and of our nature, it keeps the strong from asserting their strength and fulfilling their potential, and serves to keep society in a state of mediocrity. This is because those who assert the inversion of values are limited in themselves. They cannot assert strength which they do not possess, and in their resentment (Ressentiment, in Nietzsche’s expression) of the strong their recourse is to bring the strong to their level. To do this they turn their weakness into a virtue and subvert the original natural order. In the course of this subversion the strong conform to the ideals of the weak, much to the detriment of humankind. As Nietzsche says: ‘To demand of strength that it should not express itself as strength, that it should not be a will to overcome, overthrow, dominate, a thirst for enemies and resistance and triumph, makes as little sense as to demand of weakness that it express itself as strength.’ (GM, I §13) For this will inhibit the progression of the human race.

Nietzsche’s critique of religion is multifaceted; religion’s requirement of an unquestioning acceptance is a further cause for its admonishment. Nietzsche himself wanted his writings to be questioned; it was Nietzsche’s view that ‘Convictions are prisons’ (AC §54), he believed scepticism was essential, and one had to be inquisitive. In Zarathustra Nietzsche warns against the idolisation of one’s teachers: ‘One repays a teacher badly if one always remains only a pupil. And why, then, should you not pluck at my laurels? You respect me; but how if one day your respect should tumble? Take care that a falling statue does not strike you dead!’ (Z ‘Of the Bestowing of Virtue’ §3). Any form of veneration is considered a danger, because any system of value can be founded in fiction or on a false belief. Then when this fiction is finally uncovered it leads to the fall of the ideal at the core of these values. Zarathustra’s warning to his followers is both an advocation of perspectivism and an allegory for the nihilism that can occur as
a result of the death of God. This is why Walter Kaufmann asserts that ‘Nietzsche’s atheism is thus a corollary of his basic commitment to question all premises and to reject them unless they are for some reason inescapable.’\textsuperscript{40} God is not an inescapable premise, merely a convenient one, perhaps even a lazy one. The concept of God stymies free thought and the will to truth that Nietzsche holds so dear.

These blatant critiques of religiosity are not the only way Nietzsche attacks the Church and religious values, even the genealogical approach to language Nietzsche takes is a way in which he seeks to redress this imbalance that lies in favour of the weak. His writings relating to how definitions originate and are subsequently inverted diminish the reader’s faith in language’s capacity to relate a truthful experience of the world. As theologian Jan-Olav Henriksen notes ‘every kind of religion is linked to a symbolism and rites that depend on language in order to make sense. As Nietzsche seems to criticize the very basis for any truth in such communication, he offers reasons for sustaining mistrust in religion as a container for truth or stable meaning.’\textsuperscript{41} This is typical of Nietzsche’s perspectivist approach, attempting to force his readers to question received wisdom and approach what knowledge they have from different angles. Thus, the Church and religious doctrine in general, has two forms of fallibility at its core which it is possible to critique. Not only are its teachings founded on what Nietzsche perceives as fiction, but the method it uses to disseminate its message is also flawed, the language it uses is itself also a fiction as it does not relate to a truthful interpretation of the earth. Even as early as Zarathustra Nietzsche endorses this view: ‘I entreat you my brothers,\textit{ remain true to the earth}, and do not believe those who speak to you of superterrestrial hopes! They are poisoners whether they know it or not.’ (\textit{Z}, Prologue, §3)

To Nietzsche, Christianity is the perfect storm to quash what it is that makes humans noble. It induces guilt, obfuscates man’s will to truth, and their fidelity to the earth, and not only does it preserve but it elevates the weak in society through


perpetuating the inversion of values, stymying the progression of humankind. Hence, the place of religion and the Church in society must be radically reconsidered. Again, as in the case of the Übermensch and multiplied man there are clear parallels to Nietzsche’s thinking in Marinetti.

In the manifesto *The New Religion-Morality of Speed* (1916), Marinetti wrote that ‘Christian morality protected man’s physiological structure against the excesses of sensuality. It blunted and counterbalanced his instincts’\(^{42}\) (emphasis my own). While the instincts that Marinetti and Nietzsche are referring to differ, the rationale is the same. For Nietzsche this instinct was an innate will, the will to power, and the ability of self-overcoming that would lead to the eradication of what he considered ignoble traits such as pity. For the Futurists these instincts were less metaphysical and more physical, and it is this enhanced physicality that will lead man to better express his will. After the above quote Marinetti goes on to say ‘Futurist morality will protect man against the inevitable decay produced by slowness, memory, analysis, rest and habit. Human energy, multiplied a hundredfold by velocity, will dominate Space and Time.’\(^{43}\) Despite their belief that life had ‘been completely emptied of the Divine’,\(^{44}\) the Futurists here are expressing their vision for the advancement of humankind through a combination of scientific and religious terminology, another example from the same manifesto being: ‘Velocity has finally given human life one of the attributes of divinity: the straight line.’\(^{45}\) Through this cooptation of the Church’s rhetoric the Futurists are pitting themselves in a battle with their Papal rivals for not just the future of morality expressed through physical dominance, but also spirituality, with the two being inextricably linked. Marinetti’s phrasing in this manifesto implies that Futurist morality will defend humanity against all that Christian morality cannot, which for the most part are physical failings, man’s ‘inevitable decay’. But Marinetti also states that Christian morality only ever protected man from the ‘excesses of sensuality’, it is clear that these excesses have not led to the


\(^{43}\) Ibid.

\(^{44}\) Ibid.

\(^{45}\) Ibid, p.225.
variety of decay which concerns the Futurists, leading the reader to ask, exactly what use has the Church been to mankind’s development?

Further on in this manifesto one infers that Futurist morality is based on the expediency granted to mankind by velocity:

Velocity, its essence being an intuitive synthesis of all forces in movement, is naturally pure. Slowness, its essence being the rational analysis of forms of exhaustion in repose, is naturally unclean. After destroying traditional good and evil, we are creating a new good, speed, and a new evil, slowness.46

This statement builds on Marinetti’s prior assertions regarding the superiority of Futurist morality over Christian morality. Throughout this manifesto Marinetti defines the morality of the Church through its opposite. The Church is to be recognised as synonymous with all that is opposite to Futurist morality—slowness, then, is to be read as a characteristic of Christian morality. This opposition is no more evident than when Marinetti writes: ‘Velocity = synthesis of all forms of courage in action. Aggressive and martial. Slowness = analysis of all forms of stagnant prudence. Passive and pacifist.’47 Slowness then is weakness, while velocity is strength.

Just like Nietzsche, Marinetti believed the Church to be an essential component in keeping humanity feeble and docile, and the only way to extirpate this weakness is to challenge the Church and its values and instil humanity with the agency to assert its own will rather than that of God. It is this eradication of weakness that drives both Futurist and Nietzschean anticlericalism. As discussed, both see the Church as preserving, or even elevating the weak above the strong in society. As Nietzsche wrote so many times, the religion the Church proselytises is poison, and the priestly caste who are responsible for further disseminating the inversion of values in Nietzsche’s philosophy also come under fire from the Futurists. In their manifesto for a Futurist political movement written in 1915, Marinetti et al. call for ‘all the young talents of Italy to

46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
struggle to the last gasp against candidates who have reached agreements with
traditionalists and priests' believing that a clerical victory would ‘bring ineradicable
shame to the country’.\textsuperscript{48} In this context the Futurist desire for the destruction of the
Church is a relative to their belief in war being hygienic. In declaring war the only
hygiene of the world the Futurists are essentially proposing a mass cull of society’s less
physically able, for only the fast and the strong would survive such an event. But for this
extermination to truly work, the world must also be cleansed of the Church. An
institution that acts out of compassion and kindness for the less fortunate, i.e. the weak,
has no place in the Futurist world. The Church favours lambs over lions, but to the
Futurists lambs deserve to be nothing more than meat for the lions of the earth.

This comparison to lions is not simply poetic licence, but it is an imagery evoked
both by Nietzsche and the Marinetti. While thanks to his misappropriation by the Nazis
some now believe that when Nietzsche uses the phrase ‘blond beast’ it is linked with
Aryan ideology, he was simply using it metaphorically. As Douglas Smith notes ‘the
image of the blond beast refers not to any literal ideal of racial purity but to the
metaphorical opposition between the predatory animal of aristocratic morality and the
domesticated or caged animal of slave morality.’\textsuperscript{49} The most likely representation of the
blond beast then is a lion: blond, predatory, and majestic, and also an animal which the
Futurists frequently identified themselves with, including in one of Marinetti’s most anti-
religious and anti-clerical passages from the \textit{Founding and Manifesto of Futurism}:

\begin{quote}
And like young lions we ran after Death, its black hide stained with pale
crosses, running across the vast livid sky, alive and throbbing. And yet we did
not have an ideal Beloved who raised her form all the way to the clouds, nor
a cruel Queen to whom we could offer our corpses, twisted in the shape of
Byzantine rings! Nothing to make us wish to die except our desire to free
ourselves finally from the burden of our own courage!\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

This refusal of an ‘ideal Beloved’ and stating that Futurists have no reason to wish for death is redolent of an above quoted passage from *On the Genealogy of Morals* in which Nietzsche states that the inventors of slave-morality use the idea of the ‘Kingdom of God’ to make life bearable. Why should one need the reward of an afterlife when one has lived according to nature and instinct? When one has acted strongly and wilfully?

Further, it refutes the idea of an afterlife. That Death’s hide is ‘stained with pale crosses’ is symbolically important. The Death which the Futurists are chasing after like lions is endowed with Christian eschatological implications: by making it their prey and hunting it down the Futurists are ridiculing the Church’s teachings on death and the afterlife. This acts as a cornerstone of so much of Christian tradition and is the belief which grants Christian values their weight; if one lives as a good Christian, following the moral code set by the Church, they will be rewarded in the next life with a place in God’s kingdom. This is perhaps the greatest incentive to live a good Christian life. This is why Christianity’s ascetic values are often considered a form of nihilism, because they can be considered a will to non-existence. By taking aim at this notion of an afterlife Marinetti and his cohort are attacking the very foundations of Christian values and challenging the reasoning behind living in a Christian manner. In turn, this paves the way for a Futurist ideology based on new principles.

Marinetti’s anticlericalism sought to undermine the authority of the Church regarding the moral direction of society. The views of the Church were anathema to Futurism, instead of fostering a life built for modernity its teachings were found to be supine. Every manifesto was a chance to further denounce any groaning dogmatism with ties to the past, including that of the Church:

We want to fight implacably against the mindless, snobbish and fanatical religion of the past, religion nurtured by the pernicious existence of museums … Comrades! We declare that the triumphant progress of science has brought about changes in humanity so profound as to dig an abyss between
the slaves of the past and us who are free, us who are confident in the shining splendour of the future.  

In this manifesto in which Boccioni and his fellow pre-war Futurist painters announced their affiliation to the Futurist group, they proclaim their intention to use their art to rouse Italy from its past-oriented malaise fuelled by religious devotion and devotional art. Their exaltation of science over religion places the Church’s values firmly in the past and in contradistinction to the ideology of Futurism. But more than this it recognises a cultural moment in which the fundamental values in society are being brought into question. With scientific advancements and theories religious doctrine now faces opposition, making its entire basis fallible. As this doctrine has served as the moral and cultural basis of society, especially in Italy where the Catholic Church was situated and held so much power, its moral and cultural values too become questionable, indeed, everything becomes questionable. This is the conundrum that Nietzsche predicted would occur with the death of God in the parable of the madman from *The Gay Science*. Preaching of the death of God, the madman enters into a frenzied sermon of questions, questions that seemingly make no sense, but are in fact relative to how we perceive everything on earth and in life.

What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and down? Aren’t we straying as though through an infinite nothing? Isn’t empty space breathing us? Hasn’t it got colder? Isn’t night and more night coming again and again? Don’t lanterns have to be lit in the morning? Do we still hear the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we still smell nothing of the divine decomposition? (GS III §125)

---

These questions, though seemingly absurd, indicate the importance Nietzsche believed faith in God to have—a faith that provided society with an assured structure. How can we be sure of anything, even of what is up and what is down, when the most fundamental belief in civilisation has been shaken? The science and technology lauded by the Futurists further shook this belief, and their exaltation of it combined with their declared anticlericalism elevated the machine, and the man who could control it towards a divine level. Marinetti’s entire Futurist project was constructed on a new way of life dominated by speed and machines, and by imbuing them with the characteristics of the divine (‘Velocity has finally given human life one of the attributes of divinity: the straight line.’

52) Marinetti is also giving this project a morality, though not in any conventional sense of the word, in the same way that religion had previously done.

**Naïve Nietzscheans**

Nietzschean thought found its way into Italy through various interpretations. Its interpretation by the Futurists was naïve at best, thanks to a whole array of other writers and thinkers such as d’Annunzio and Sorel either perverting or critiquing Nietzsche’s works, and wilfully misinterpreted at worst, due to Marinetti’s need to distinguish the Futurist project from its association with Nietzschean ideals based in the Hellenic imagination. As d’Annunzio was the main proponent in disseminating Nietzsche’s ideas, the idea most attractive to him, that of the Übermensch, was the one that gained the most traction in Italy at the time, and this Nietzschean vision had a clear parallel in the Futurist multiplied man. This shows that despite Marinetti’s attempts to distance Futurism from Nietzsche, his ideas were pervasive enough in the intellectual and cultural milieu of pre-war Italy to manifest in the ideology of a movement that purported, albeit unconvincingly, to harbour disdain for his philosophy.

The similarities continue in the anticlerical strains of Nietzschean and Futurist thinking. While Marinetti and Nietzsche no doubt had different visions for the future,

their shared view that the Church was a hindrance to humankind’s progression was predicated on the same thing: the idea that the Church’s teachings acted to elevate weakness above strength giving society’s basis false values that were in contradistinction to the true instincts of humanity which, if followed instead, would serve to bring about a better future and a better type of human.

As a consequence of this belief, both Nietzsche and the Futurists attacked the Church and its teachings through polemical texts critiquing its place in society, and in the case of the Futurists calling for its expulsion from Italy. While for Nietzsche this issue was largely existential, bringing into question the very way in which we live our lives, offering no real alternative other than the vague concept of being true to the earth, the Futurists used it to bolster their own, more tangible, project. This critique allowed the Futurists to attempt to replace the Church’s values with their own endowing the Futurist project with a moralistic basis that could function as the values for a Futurist society.

This Futurist project exemplifies the most extreme aspects of the avant-garde. But it also demonstrates just how these excesses are tied to a cultural moment in which a spiritual uncertainty pervades. Nietzsche’s promulgation of a questioning mindset based on his perspectivist approach, and his philosophical dismantling of religious practice fed into this uncertainty a great deal. By being vague in his prescriptions to remedy this concerning lack of faith it left the door open for others to proselytise their own views while also leaving traditional customs of coping with existential questions weaker. This combination of anticlericalism and the need to find a new system of values was the perfect opportunity for someone such as Marinetti, who regardless of the often abhorrent content of his vision, was certainly a visionary, to bend the moment to their own will to try and build the future they wanted. I believe this true of all avant-gardes, but by virtue of its sheer excess and violence Futurism provides perhaps the strongest example of why Nietzschean thinking and its consequences were so pivotal to the avant-garde.
IV I Nietzsche and the Vortex: Nietzscheanism in the works of Wyndham Lewis

In 1914, just weeks before the start of the First World War, a group of artists and writers led by Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957) published a lengthy ‘little magazine’ with the combative title, *Blast*. This was the initial publication of the short-lived Vorticist group. In this chapter I discuss the works of Lewis in the early stage of his career within a Nietzschean context and the way his writings, particularly his 1918 novel *Tarr*, and the vorticist play *Enemy of the Stars* (1914), reflect and react not only to his philosophy, but his reception in the UK at the time. While based in London, the Vorticist movement had an international character, with two of its most important proponents alongside Lewis being the U.S. American poet, Ezra Pound, and the French sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. Lewis himself had also spent a good deal of time in Munich, as well as with the artist Augustus John in Paris.¹ It was during this stay in Paris that Lewis encountered the philosophy of two of the most important thinkers of the modern era, Henri Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche.² In one of his memoirs, *Rude Assignment: An Intellectual Autobiography* (1950), Lewis recalls the importance of Nietzsche to the intellectual set in Paris while he was there, labelling him the ‘paramount influence.’³ He cites the art historian Herbert Read’s veneration of Nietzsche as well to support this notion, but then undercuts his own assertion as he admits that the Germans he knew in Paris were less than impressed with Nietzsche, and thought of him only as a ‘salon philosopher.’⁴ Simultaneously Nietzsche was slowly being introduced to the British public via discussion in several other magazines, as will be discussed below.

⁴ Ibid.
Lewis was artistically, and politically contrarian; the critic Alan Munton described his political thinking traversing militarily: ‘left-right-left’, though perhaps thanks to the depiction written of him by W.H Auden as ‘that lonely old volcano of the right’, his popular image is a more conservative one. Lewis flirted with fascism, writing a book in praise of Adolf Hitler in 1931, though after the pernicious reality of the ideology became clear to him, he turned critical of the project of fascism and wrote a retraction of this previous work.

Many books regarding Lewis or Vorticism mention a Nietzschean influence at some point or another, the most notable exception being Richard Cork’s double volume history of Vorticism which merely notes early on that Lewis’s first encounter with Nietzsche’s writings occurred during his time in France. Frederic Jameson’s influential *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, The Modernist as Fascist* (1979) dedicates most of a chapter to a Nietzschean interpretation of Lewis’s polemical writings of the 20s and 30s, arguing that the villains of Lewis’s works were like those of Nietzsche, those who denied life-affirming forces and drained mankind of its will. The most significant of Lewis scholars, Paul Edwards, often discusses Lewis in conjunction with Nietzsche, notably in his monumental *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (2000a), as well as his edited volume *Blast: Vorticism 1914-18* (2000b), specifically his essay ‘You Must Speak with Two Tongues’, as well as in several other essays which contain some highly nuanced discussion on this topic which will be considered in further detail later in this chapter. There has also been coverage of Lewis’s Nietzscheanism in journal articles in *Modernism/Modernity*, and *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies*. In particular, it is worth noting Shane Weller’s essay in the former, ‘Nietzsche among the Modernists: The Case of Wyndham Lewis’, and the Michael Nath essay, “By Curious Sovereignty of Art”: Wyndham Lewis and Nihilism’ in *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies*.  

---

8 Cork (1979) pp.4-5.
Studies, which largely seeks to refute Weller's efforts to create the narrative of a nihilistic Lewis in the prior article.\textsuperscript{10} Despite the amount of scholarship mentioning this conjunction, as the differing perspectives between Weller and Nath would indicate, the Nietzschean Lewis is difficult to pin down. As is so often the case across the different Avant-Gardes, Nietzsche’s influence came into the British Avant-Garde by a circuitous route, with alterations to his thought effected by the influence of other thinkers and interpreters. In the first part of this chapter I discuss how Nietzsche’s thought filtered into the British Avant-Garde, before moving on to how Nietzscheanism is presented in the works of Lewis. Given Lewis’ fickle political nature, and the fluctuations in Nietzsche’s reception around the time of the First World War, there is often a disconnect between what Lewis says on the topic of Nietzsche in his own exegesis of his works compared to how Nietzschean ideas are presented in the work itself. The key works under analysis are the magazine Blast, especially Lewis’s play Enemy of the Stars published in the first issue, along with its accompanying illustrations, and Lewis’s novel Tarr. These works are indicative of Lewis’s interest in philosophy in general and show his interest in Nietzschean archetypes such as the ascetic priest, as well as his view of the artist and the intellectual in society.

\textbf{The British Avant-Garde and Nietzsche}

The British contribution to the numerous European avant-garde groups of the early Twentieth Century is much more limited than other countries such as France and Germany. While Germany for instance produced movements such as Expressionism, Dada, and Neue Sachlichkeit, the short-lived movement of Vorticism is the closest thing to a programmatic avant-garde to have come out of the U.K. There were other art groups based in London, such as the Whitechapel Boys, and the Bloomsbury Group at the same time, but it is only Vorticism that really compares the iconoclastic avant-

gardes that were seen in mainland Europe with a manifesto and an aesthetic agenda that sought to upheave previous artistic traditions. In the case of the Whitechapel Boys, despite the association of artists such as David Bomberg, who could certainly be described as an avant-garde artist (and has also been associated with Vorticism), it is debatable whether the Whitechapel Boys were even a cohesive group, let alone an avant-garde in the sense of the other artistic groups discussed in this thesis.¹¹ In the case of the Bloomsbury Group, despite being replete with avant-garde figures such as Virginia Woolf, even Victoria Rosner shies away from describing them as an avant-garde in the Cambridge Companion to the Bloomsbury Group, instead describing them as an ‘intellectual and social coterie’.¹² And as indicated by Regina Marler, some members of the group were even resistant to the idea of them being considered a group, with Clive Bell denying it had existed at all.¹³

After its founding event in 1914 with the publication of Blast, Vorticism burned out incredibly quickly. The magazine only lasted for two issues, with the second issue, labelled ‘War Number’ published in July 1915, the second year of the First World War. Ultimately it was the war which caused Vorticism’s demise, with several of Blast’s contributors being killed in the trenches. Perhaps the most significant loss was that of Gaudier-Brzeska in June 1915. The war number contained a note on page 34 detailing Gaudier-Brzeska’s death, printed after his sole contribution in writing to the issue, a letter from the trenches declaring that war has not changed his vorticist outlook on sculpture.¹⁴ Compared to the other avant-gardes considered in this thesis it is a peculiar case. Where other groups of artists formed around ideals such as the machine age, or an anti-war malaise, Vorticism is a belligerent contrivance formed to shield the ego of one man: Lewis. To think about it in Nietzschean terms, it was not created out of

¹¹ In his recent PhD thesis, The Whitechapel Renaissance and its Legacies: Rosenberg to Rodker (UCL: 2020), Alex Grafen has traced the lineage of the term ‘Whitechapel Boys’ and its retrospective application and is equivocal regarding the use value of the term. He also concurs that it would be difficult to define the Whitechapel Boys as an avant-garde in the traditional sense. N.B This thesis is currently unpublished, and this information is from a draft sent to me by the author prior to his submission.
¹⁴ Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. ‘Vortex Gaudier-Brzeska,’ In Blast War Number, ed. Lewis (1915) pp.33-4.
internal affirmation, but rather through defining itself against an outside force, that of Futurism. To think of Vorticism this way is to consider it a movement of ressentiment. As Nietzsche says, ‘The reversal of the evaluating gaze—this necessary orientation outwards rather than inwards to the self—belongs characteristically to ressentiment.’ (GM, I, §10) The other avant-gardes considered in this thesis were attempting to influence the world with their art because of an innate belief that where they differ from the crowd sets them apart, and that difference is noble, justified by their will. But Vorticism was a hastily thrown together concept, created almost as if to prove a point, that Lewis and his compatriots were just as capable, if not more so of creating a movement that could upend artistic traditions as their Italian counterparts. Even so, in its brief and bombastic time, the vorticists, and Lewis in particular did manage to create some genuinely innovative artworks.

The contributors of Blast may have ended up being thought of in very different terms, as only a vague collection of artists rather than an avant-garde, or as an international branch of Italian Futurism, were it not (ironically) for F.T. Marinetti’s and Christopher Nevinson’s 1914 manifesto ‘Futurism and the English Art’ published in The Observer dated 7 June 1914. In the manifesto Marinetti and Nevinson name several British artists who ended up in the pages of Blast as being Futurists. Notable inclusions on their list were Lewis, Edward Wadsworth, Frederick Etchells, Jacob Epstein, and William Roberts. All were signatories of the Vorticist manifesto in the first issue of Blast. As Andrzej Gasiorek explains, ‘Lewis might have been sympathetic to Marinetti’s avant-garde provocations, but he was not a Futurist, and he was far too ambitious to settle for recruitment under another man’s aesthetic banner.’ In response Lewis put an advert in The Spectator just days after Marinetti and Nevinson’s manifesto was published announcing that the first issue of Blast would also contain the manifesto for

the new movement of Vorticism. Furthermore, even though *Blast* had largely already been type-set, the manifesto ‘Long Live the Vortex’ was added, along with Pound’s and Gaudier-Brzeska’s contributions at the end of the magazine both titled ‘Vortex’, just prior to publication. However, Lewis’s article ‘Futurism, Magic and Life’ was seemingly already a planned inclusion, and did not speak unfavourably of Marinetti and his cohort. This conscious uncoupling from Futurism, however, did not deter Clement Greenberg from criticising Lewis’s talent as a writer many years later with language which strongly encodes Lewis within Futurist stylings. Greenberg writes that ‘The metallic bounce and mechanical rapidity of his [Lewis’s] prose are made possible by the evasion of any and every challenge to sustained thought or sustained feeling. Nothing, whether on the plane of reason, or that of imagination gets developed in his writing.’ It is worth noting that Greenberg’s criticism of Lewis arises in a brief article responding to the former Vorticist’s negative views of abstraction, and Abstract Expressionism, the art that Greenberg championed. Further, as David Wragg states, ‘a Greenbergian version of Lewis would be far too one-sided, not least because Lewis’s aesthetic—despite being heavily committed to a visual priority—can never be reduced to the kind of painterly purity which Greenberg maintains is the defining characteristic of modernism.’

With this history in mind, we can turn to questions of Lewis’s Nietzscheanism, and indeed Nietzscheanism in Britain in the pre-war period. Nietzsche’s writings and Nietzschean ideas had already slowly begun to be introduced in Britain well before the publication of *Blast* in magazines and by authors that Lewis had a close association with, in the following section I will discuss these initial forays into Nietzschean publications in Britain, as his reception by the British public seemed to have a significant impact on Lewis’s writings regarding the philosopher.

**Reading Nietzsche in Britain**

---

The dissemination of Nietzsche to the British public had already begun by the time Wyndham Lewis first encountered the philosopher’s ideas while on an extended trip to France.\textsuperscript{21} The publishers Henry and Company printed the first English translations of Nietzsche’s works in 1896 with Alexander Tille’s translation of \textit{Thus Spake Zarathustra}, and Thomas Common’s translations of \textit{The Case of Wagner}, \textit{Nietzsche Contra Wagner}, \textit{Twilight of the Idols}, and \textit{The Anti-Christ}.\textsuperscript{22} Further to this there were at least two magazines which had a Nietzschean outlook, and even paid homage to the philosopher in their titles: \textit{The Eagle and the Serpent} (1898-1902), edited by Erwin McCall and named for the two animals that feature heavily in \textit{Zarathustra}, and \textit{Notes for Good Europeans} (1903-1909), edited by Common and named after the concept of the good European that Nietzsche discusses in \textit{Beyond Good and Evil} §241.\textsuperscript{23} But his ideas were more abundantly present than is suggested by just these two magazines. In November 1898, for their fifth issue, \textit{The Eagle and the Serpent} published a special edition dedicated to Nietzsche. In this edition contributions regarding Nietzsche in several other publications such as \textit{The Savoy}, \textit{Quarterly Review}, \textit{The Academy}, and several others were reproduced. One text went as far as to suggest that ‘now after a decade [since Danish scholar Georg Brandes’ first essays on Nietzsche], the genial significance of Nietzsche’s work is recognised everywhere.’\textsuperscript{24}

Of those directly linked to Lewis one man in particular had significant engagement with Nietzsche’s works. A.R. Orage, editor of \textit{The New Age} (another little magazine that pre-dated \textit{Blast} and for which Lewis wrote several articles), first encountered Nietzsche in 1900 when his friend and future co-editor at \textit{The New Age}, Holbrook Jackson, introduced him to the philosopher.\textsuperscript{25} Orage and Jackson began \textit{The

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Cork (1976) pp.4-5.
\item Ibid. p.xxxvi.
\item John G. Robertson. apud. ‘Leading Opinions Concerning Nietzsche,’ \textit{The Eagle and The Serpent}, No.5, (1898) p.78.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
New Age in 1907; Nietzsche’s first appearance in the magazine was the 5 September edition (vol.1 n.19) of that year, when a poem of his, ‘Among Enemies’, was translated by someone attributed only as E.M. (possibly Erwin McCall). Issues 1:20 and 1:22 contained more of his poems, again translated by E.M, and Nietzsche’s name cropped up in some of the other pieces such as R.L. Grainger’s ‘Suggestions Toward a New Morality’ in issue 1:23, until in the issue dated 17 October 1907 (1:25) they published the first substantial engagement with Nietzsche, a review of Helen Zimmern’s translation of Beyond Good and Evil, as well as another poem translated by E.M.

Despite Nietzsche’s evident growth in popularity among a British readership during the first years of the twentieth century, according to Edwards it was French translations of Nietzsche which Lewis first read. Aside from the fact that translations of all Nietzsche’s works were available in French by 1907, this may well have been for economic reasons, as noted in the review Zimmern’s translation of Beyond Good and Evil, found in The New Age:

> Nothing vexes our patriotic soul more than the reflection in France, which is only a few hours’ distant from London, one can buy a cheap and complete translated edition of Nietzsche, while in all the British Empire a man, unless he reads French or German, must content himself with expensive translations of only five of the sixteen or so books written by the greatest humanistic philosopher of Modern Europe.26

In his detailed account of the history of Nietzsche’s translation in English, David Thatcher notes that the Henry & Co. published works were indeed overpriced, with Thus Spake Zarathustra costing 17 shillings (adjusted for inflation 17s in 1896 would be approximately £115 in 2020), and The Case of Wagner, 10 shillings and 6d (approximately £70 in 2020).27 At the time this review was published Lewis would have

---

just returned from Paris, where he had spent a good amount of time in debt, particularly to the artist Augustus John. Interestingly, at the time, Lewis’s impression of Nietzsche may have been more informed by the type of person reading him than by Lewis’s own reading. In a letter to his mother from Paris around this time, complaining about the company John was keeping, he described his friend’s new associates by saying, with a certain tone of disparagement: ‘John has a very disagreeable set of people round him now, and the average morality, taste, sensibility or whatever one calls it of the average English medical student who has read Nietzsche prevails among these persons.’ But this negative attitude to this ‘disagreeable set’ that John and Lewis were associating with, belies the fact that Lewis admits that in this formative time, he was himself a keen reader of Nietzsche, or at least certain works of Nietzsche. In *Rude Assignment* he writes:

A majority of people, I daresay, found in the author of ‘Zarathustra’ a sort of titanic nourishment for the ego: treating in fact this great hysterical as a powerhouse. At present that is what I like least about Nietzsche: and I was reasonably immune to Superman. The impulse to titanism and supernatural afflatus pervading German romanticism never had any interest for me. On the other hand the side of his genius which expressed itself in ‘La Gaya Scienza’ [*The Gay Science*], or those other admirable maxims, rather resembling Butler’s ‘Notebooks’, [*30*] which he wrote after the breakdown in his health, were among my favourite reading of those years. [*31*]

---


*30* Lewis here is referring to author Samuel Butler (1835-1902), whose most significant work was the novel *Erewhon*, who was a prodigious notetaker, and whose notebooks were published posthumously by his friend and eventual biographer Henry Festing Jones. These notebooks collected Butler’s thoughts on many topics, from the nature of memory to the work of Charles Darwin. Much like *The Gay Science*, these vary in length from single aphoristic sentences to lengthier pontifications. C.F Samuel Butler. *The Note-Books of Samuel Butler*, ed. Henry Festing Jones (William Brendon and Son, London: 1919).

It cannot then be said that Lewis was an uncritical reader of Nietzsche, and when his cultural references are considered, having been able to synthesize Nietzsche in multiple countries with differing approaches to his canon, it is likely he had a more nuanced approach to the material than many others.

Lewis’s assertion in the above quotation provides a good starting point when attempting to approach the relation between Lewis and Nietzsche. If it is for influence that one is looking, then *The Gay Science* is the place to begin. Indeed, it has already been shown by Alistair Davies that this book plays an important role in the themes of Lewis’s first novel, *Tarr*. Davies’s analysis will be discussed at further length below, as I shall now turn my attention to this novel and the Nietzschean characteristics of its two main protagonists.

**Nietzschean Presence in Lewis’s Literary Work**

*Tarr* was initially serialised in the magazine *The Egoist* between April 1916 and November 1917 before being fully published in 1918. Even though according to Lewis *Tarr* was mostly finished during a period of convalescence at the start of the war before he signed up, and finished in a rush out of a will to complete some great artistic work and leave an impression in case he were to fall in battle. However, Lewis started writing it much earlier, around 1907/8. This is important to remember when considering the novel within a Nietzschean framework. When Lewis began working on this book, as noted above, only some of Nietzsche’s writings had been translated into English, but by the time *Tarr* was published they all had been. More pertinent though is that while Nietzsche was slowly gaining popularity in Britain’s intellectual circles when Lewis was writing this book: with the advent of the war in 1914 Nietzsche became a less favourable figure. Carol Diethe notes that the likes of Thomas Hardy and Robert

---

Bridges actually went as far as to blame the war on Nietzsche, and to the general populace who were largely unfamiliar with the German this had a detrimental effect on his reception.\textsuperscript{36} Interestingly, according to Lewis, this negative reception seemed to be beneficial in terms of people actually buying his books, although I have not been able to locate any evidence to support this increase in readership with regards to Britain that Lewis mentions. Even in Germany, the anecdote that soldiers were given a copy of \textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra} as standard issue is, as Diethe notes, untrue, but perhaps founded in the wide availability of cheap copies.\textsuperscript{37} Lewis addresses this in the war number of \textit{Blast}, almost looking to defend Nietzsche, he writes in the editorial ‘Nietzsche has had an English sale such as he could hardly have anticipated in his most ecstatic and morose moments, and in company he would not have expressly chosen.’\textsuperscript{38} Further on in the same issue Lewis comes to Nietzsche’s defence yet again writing:

This contempt of law, regulation and “humanity” is popularly supposed to be the outcome of the teachings of the execrable “Neech,” and to be a portion of aristocratic “haughtiness.” Nietzsche was much too explicit a gentleman to be a very typical one. And his “aristocratism,” so gushing and desperate athwart his innumerable prefaces, raises doubts in the mind of the most enthusiastic student: for he did not merely set himself up as the philosopher of it, but discovered simultaneously the great antiquity of his Slav lineage (although Russia, we learn, swarms with “Neeches”).\textsuperscript{39}

The use of ‘Neech’ may well be a reference to the French pronunciation of Nietzsche, it is notable that he was declining in popularity in France at the same time as England, also thanks to a view that his Germanic philosophy did something to inspire the war.\textsuperscript{40}

Considering that later on Lewis shows a certain criticality toward Nietzsche, especially toward the notion of the Übermensch and the more vitalistic elements of his work, one

\textsuperscript{36} Diethe (2007) p.xxxix.  
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, p.xxvii.  
\textsuperscript{38} Lewis, ‘Editorial,’ in \textit{Blast, War Number} (1915) p.5.  
\textsuperscript{39} Lewis, ‘The God of Sport and Blood,’ ibid, p.10.  
\textsuperscript{40} Diethe (2007) p.xxxii.
might well wonder why Lewis decided to defend him in this way. It is possible that it is out of some innate sense of honour, or an academic desire to alter the discourse surrounding Nietzsche. But the more cynical proposal is that with *Tarr* forthcoming, he wanted to ensure it received a good reception free from negative connotations when it could quite likely be associated with Nietzsche, as Tarr is steeped in Nietzschean elements. Briefly, the basic plot of *Tarr* concerns the semi-autobiographical English artist Frederick Tarr and his life in Paris contrasted against the life of his German associate, and fellow artist, Otto Kreisler. Tarr and Kreisler both have affairs with the same women, and they talk about art and ideas, at one point they even discuss Nietzsche quoting his famous misogynistic quip that one should bring a whip when dealing with women.\(^{41}\) As Tarr’s fortunes rise, Kreisler’s fall, until at his lowest ebb Kreisler dies by suicide in a police cell after a botched attempt at a duel led him to murder Soltyk, the new companion of his and Tarr’s mistress, Anastasya.\(^{42}\)

As it stands, in the review of *Tarr* in the *Times Literary Supplement* their art critic, the essayist Arthur Clutton-Brock (known for his books on William Morris and Percy Shelley) took Fyodor Dostoevsky, a writer much admired by Nietzsche, as the canonical frame of reference to Lewis’s style.\(^{43}\) Though in one of his autobiographies, Lewis responds to this review, denying that he had taken Dostoevsky as a model for the book.\(^{44}\) Remarkably, this review touched on the Nietzschean themes within the novel, particularly its description of Kreisler, without any mention of the philosopher. This section of the review bears reproducing here merely to drive home the point that the thorough Nietzscheanism of this novel is identifiable even when his name is not used:

> The secret of Kreisler is the desire for material power and his quarrel with the world because it will not take him seriously. He is utterly absurd and ugly and, at

---


\(^{42}\) Ibid, pp.271-83.


bottom, incompetent. He is without values except for himself; and he knows unconsciously that there is nothing in himself to value. Therefore he clowns solemnly, clowns even his disgusting offences, so that men, and women, may acknowledge his power, so that they may not laugh at him. He rapes and murders like a clown so they laugh on the wrong side of their faces. There is nothing in him but the desire to turn men’s laughter to tears and even in his bestiality he remains unreal; even when he hangs himself he is still a clown.45

The reviewer here, perhaps unwittingly, demonstrates perfectly the Nietzschean type of Kreisler: he is the kind of man who acts in bad faith, he is the kind of man who benefits from a slave morality, he is pitiable and weak. In the novel, Kreisler acts as a foil for Tarr, in a way which has led Alistair Davies to describe it as a Nietzschean novella in the tradition of the German authors Thomas Mann and Rainer Maria Rilke.46 Davies describes this style of novel as being concerned with ‘Nietzsche’s analysis of creative and destructive forces of culture and society that operate upon the individual [and] the nature and possibility of autonomous life, particularly in a bourgeois environment.’47 Davies continues:

What was unusual about the Nietzschean novella, as a form depicting the forces operating upon the individual and society, was that it was not concerned with the analysis of character, or of relationship or of human action. It reduced characters to social, psychological and sexual types, and distinguished between the sick and the healthy, the weak and the strong. Those who are weak were unable to transcend the destructive social and psychological forces impinging upon them, while the strong did so through successive acts of rebellion and creative rebirth.48

45 Clutton-Brock, (1918).
48 Ibid.
Tarr aligns almost a little too well with this categorisation. Kreisler, the sick type who could not escape the way others perceived him: a louche, talentless artist, with little honour or sense of self-determination, who relied on a stipend from his disapproving father. Tarr, meanwhile has a modicum of success, he is unsentimental, and where for Kreisler art is almost a bourgeois distraction, merely something to do, for Tarr art is vitally important. However, a reading of Tarr through the lens of the Nietzschean novella does encounter one significant problem. In the prologue published with the full 1918 edition Lewis placed Tarr into its cultural context, and wrote disparagingly of the effects of Nietzsche’s philosophy:

In Europe Nietzsche’s gospel of desperation, the beyond-law-man, etc., has deeply influenced the Paris apache, the Italian Futurist littérature, the Russian revolutionary. Nietzsche’s books are full of seductions and sugar-plums. They have made “aristocrats” of people who would otherwise have been only mild snobs or meddlesome prigs; as much as, if not more than, other writings, they have made “expropriators” of what would otherwise merely have been Arsène Lupins: and they have made an Over-man of every vulgarly energetic grocer in Europe. The commercial and military success of Prussia has deeply influenced the French, as it is gradually winning the imagination of the English. The fascination of material power is, for the irreligious modern man, almost impossible to resist.49

Again though, one should consider Lewis’s biographic foibles—his ego and determination for success, as supported by anecdotes regarding the forming of Vorticism out of protest at being labelled Futurist—along with the way he formed the Rebel Art Centre after he made his dramatic break from Roger Fry and the Omega Workshop.50 Add to this litany his paltry attempt at defending Nietzsche in the war number of Blast; it could be that failing to rehabilitate Nietzsche’s name he has chosen

49 Lewis (1918) p.x.
here to disassociate himself from a philosopher whose image had been so tarnished by
the war. Further, Edwards believes that as Lewis was finishing the book in 1915, he
took the prevailing anti-German sentiment of the time to bolster ‘the already implicit
critique of German Romantic culture.’\textsuperscript{51} This anti-romantic streak was perhaps an effect
of his friendship with the philosopher T.E Hulme, who even before the war was not
uncritical of Nietzsche, particularly for his perceived romanticism.\textsuperscript{52}

For all Lewis’s bluster about Tarr, and its significance in the modernist literary
canon, it was not his most innovative piece of writing in this period. Lewis’s most
significant literary accomplishment came in the first issue of \textit{Blast}. In the middle of the
magazine is an intensely difficult piece of writing labelled by Lewis as a play though it is
not a play by any conventional sense, titled \textit{Enemy of the Stars}. \textit{Enemy of the Stars} and
\textit{Tarr}, while stylistically very different, both contain Nietzschean archetypes within their
characters. Where \textit{Tarr} is a distinctly modernist novel, \textit{Enemy of the Stars} is an unusual
and striking enterprise and is the best example of a specifically Vorticist piece of writing.
In this next section I focus specifically on \textit{Enemy of the Stars} and its peculiar use of
myriad philosophical influences in an attempt to illuminate the Nietzschean aspects of
Lewis’s idea of Vorticism in particular, and their synthesis with myriad other thinkers.
Given the abstruse nature of \textit{Enemy of the Stars} I will begin with a more formalist
analysis of the content of the play, before examining its philosophical underpinnings,
and contextualising it through an analysis of its accompanying illustrations in relation to
Lewis’s developing visual style.

\textbf{Enemy of the Stars}

\textit{Enemy of the Stars} spans from page 51 to page 85 in the first issue of \textit{Blast}, though the
writing itself does not begin until page 61. Prior to this there is a title page, a second title
page that indicates ‘synopsis in program’, an advertisement for the play, and a series of

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, p.36.
\item\textsuperscript{52} T.E Hulme, \textit{Speculations}. Second Edition (Routledge & Keegan Paul, London and New York: 1936)
pp.17-18.
\end{footnotes}
six images: *Plan of War, Timon of Athens, Slow Attack, Decoration for the Countess of Drogedha’s House, Portrait of an Englishwoman*, and finally one also titled *The Enemy of the Stars* (fig. 13)—all reproductions of works by Lewis. After these images is the aforementioned synopsis, and then a description of the stage arrangements before the play commences. Despite Lewis’s wink to the reader that this play is ‘very well acted by you and me’, the thing that makes this play not a play is that it would be almost impossible to perform, though it has been attempted, most notably at the symposium *Blast at 100*, held in July 2014 at Trinity College Dublin. Describing the process of staging this production the directors, Nicholas E. Johnson and Colm Summers, said they chose to ‘create a site-specific and semi-immersive experience of the play,’ going on to say that ‘Rather than a theatrical performance in the conventional sense, this was practice-as-research, presenting the experimental outcomes that emerged from theatre artists grappling with Lewis’s 1914 text.’

So, what is this not-play, and why is it so difficult to conceptualize in a conventional sense? In his essay that attempts to find a better description for the work, Martin Puchner suggests it could either be a closet play, a manifesto, a drama of ideas, or a piece of world construction. It does read more as the experience of a play, which likens the piece to a closet play, with the title page being the name up on the exterior of the theatre, the reproductions of Lewis’s works acting as the posters for past or forthcoming performances. This is something that Christopher Lewis has also indicated in his essay regarding *Enemy of the Stars*, he even suggests that the page which only bears the words ‘THE PLAY.’ is suggestive of being called into the auditorium by an announcer for the start of the show. A second version of *Enemy of the Stars* was also published in 1932 with numerous additions to the text, and an accompanying essay by

---

55 Ibid, p.147.
Lewis, titled ‘Physics of the Not-Self’, which was meant to act as a kind of theoretical guide to the play, but is often equally baffling. Lewis’s revisions dramatically increase the length of the play. In *Wyndham Lewis: Collected Poems and Plays* (1979) which reproduces both the 1914 and 1932 versions in a similar format (and without the illustrations featured in *Blast*) the page length is nearly doubled from 1914 version being 26 pages while the latter publication is 50 pages.⁵⁸ Given the 18-year gap between the two editions in which the vorticist project dissolved my discussion here largely deals with the initial version published in *Blast*. On occasion the 1932 text provides some insight into the 1914 text, but since this chapter is focused on the overtly vorticist years, the first version is the preliminary source used.

In summary, the content of the play centres on the characters of Arghol (initially spelled Argol) and Hanp, with peripheral figures of The Super (Arghol’s uncle), an unnamed boy, the philosopher Max Stirner, and Arghol’s friends from Berlin also making brief appearances. The first impression given of Arghol is almost pitiable, we are told his voice is ‘raucous and disfigured with a catarrh of lies in the fetid atmosphere of life’s swamp.’⁵⁹ No sooner than he is introduced, Arghol is attacked by a figure we later learn to be his uncle, to such an extent that he loses consciousness. He is later awoken by Hanp, the relationship between the two is initially unclear, but further on in the text Arghol is referred to as Hanp’s master: ‘The more Arghol made him [Hanp] realise his congenital fatuity and cheapness, the more a contemptible matter appeared accumulated in the image of his Master’.⁶⁰ Through their dialogue and the abstract narrations of their inner workings, much is learned of Arghol, he is educated, has lived away from the desolate wheelwright’s yard that he inhabits having been a student in Berlin, that he suffers regular beatings at the hands of his uncle, yet he still chooses to stay, and even chooses to do nothing about his abuse. Hanp suggests to Arghol that he

---

⁵⁹ Lewis, ‘Enemy of the Stars,’ (1914) p.63. Unless otherwise indicated the quotations I have used are from the original version published in *Blast*.
⁶⁰ Ibid. p.71.
murder his uncle, and Arghol's reply at last suggests there is indeed some philosophical content in this work; its subject is the self, and perceptions thereof:

That is absurd. I have explained to you. Here I get routine, the will of the universe manifested with directness and persistence. Figures of persecution are accidents or adventures for some. […]

Self, sacred act of violence, is like murder on my face and hands. The stain won't come out. It is the one piece of property all communities have agreed it is illegal to possess. The sweetest-tempered person, once he discovers you are that sort of criminal, changes any opinion of you, and is on his guard. When mankind cannot overcome a personality, it has an immemorial way out of the difficulty. It becomes it. It imitates and assimilates that Ego until it is no longer one. …This is success. 61

Despite voicing this opinion Arghol does seem to heed Hanp's words and readies himself for his uncle's next visit by hiding a knife up his sleeve. However, when his uncle arrives, Arghol does not need to defend himself as his uncle does not attack him, leading Arghol to the thought that 'he must have palpable reasons for my being alive.' 62 But this is not the end of the violence. Arghol and Hanp continue their discourse, which largely concerns the theme of destiny, and Arghol tells Hanp stories (which the audience/reader is not privy to) of life beyond the yard. Their discussion comes to a pitch with Arghol asking why he even bothers to speak with Hanp, and shouts at him to leave, Hanp attacks Arghol and the two fight until Arghol is victorious, and then he falls asleep. Arghol dreams about his time in Berlin, in his small room described as an 'appalling tabernacle of Self and Unbelief.' 63 In the most significant passage of this dream, Arghol throws an open copy of Stirner's The Ego and its Own from the window

---

61 Ibid, p.66.
63 Ibid, p.76.
of his room, but it is then returned to him by a boy from the city. This boy then transforms into Hanp, eliciting a violent reaction from Arghol who once again yells at him to leave; then Hanp transforms again this time into Stirner, Arghol continues to ask him to leave, even offering him money to go before Stirner throws a book at Arghol’s head and calls him a ‘glib-tongued cow’, an insult that Hanp had used in their earlier fight. The two men fight once more and Stirner is forced out of the apartment. After the fight, Arghol turns his excess of violence onto the books in his apartment, ripping them to shreds and leaving them in a pile by the door ready to be swept out.

The dream then changes, returning to Arghol’s hometown where he has an unintelligible interaction with someone that is both an acquaintance and a stranger, this interaction leads to a moment of self-loss for Arghol, announcing that he is not Arghol, and leaving some of his self in the acquaintance as they part ways. The scene changes to a café in Berlin with Arghol sat alone while his former friends sit together at the far end of the café commenting that Arghol best be left alone as he has lost his mind. But suddenly Arghol’s selfhood is reasserted, and he once more realises who he is. The action then returns to Hanp who has awoken after the fight, Hanp is still angry about his altercation with Arghol, and he ultimately kills Arghol, by stabbing him in his sleep. This leads to a state of despair for Hanp, and the play concludes with him jumping to his death in a canal.

With the recurring themes of violent confrontation and notions of the self, it is possible that Enemy’s philosophical underpinning is to be found in Hegel’s Master-Slave dialectic, otherwise known as the Lordship and Bondage section, from The Phenomenology of Spirit (1807). This likeness has largely been ignored by Lewis scholars, though it is indicated in passing by Ashley Dawson in The Routledge Concise History of Twentieth-Century British Literature (2013). Without any evidence provided for the claim by Dawson, some analysis is due. In this dialectic two self-

---

consciousnesses meet and enter into a life and death struggle, it is in this struggle and
in the recognition of the other’s perception of themselves (either as lord or bondsman)
that these consciousnesses become self-aware. Arghol and Hanp stake their lives in
combat and in the dream which takes him in the aftermath of his victory Arghol
interrogates his notion of self-hood. Meanwhile, in his bitterness, Hanp subverts this
vital process of self-recognition by murdering Arghol in his sleep and loses out on his
own self-recognition as a result. As Hegel writes ‘The individual who has not risked his
life may well be recognized as a person, but he has not attained to the truth of this
recognition as an independent self-consciousness.’ In avoiding the life and death
struggle Hanp denies himself the ‘truth of recognition … as an independent self-
consciousness.’ Then, by his own hand, Hanp suffers the consequences of the death of
his quarry. Hegel illuminates the dangers of succumbing to murder as part of the
dialectic:

This trial by death, however, does away with the truth which was supposed to
issue from it, and so, too, with the certainty of self generally. …. so death is the
natural negation of consciousness, negation without independence, which thus
remains without the required significance of recognition. Death certainly shows
that each staked his life and held it of no account, both in himself and in the
other; but that is not for those who survived this struggle. They put an end to their
consciousness in its alien setting of natural existence, that is to say, they put an
end to themselves, and are done away with as extremes wanting to be for
themselves, or to have an existence of their own.

The analogy may not be perfect, and by Lewis’s own admission he struggled with
Hegel, stating in his autobiography Rude Assignment ‘Hegel, for instance, I could never
read.’ As his ‘barbarous jargon was a great barrier’ (this is the same passage in which

pp.111-119.
67 Ibid.
Lewis compliments the accessibility of Nietzsche, and claims he was immune to the idea of the Übermensch but enjoyed *The Gay Science*. However, even with Lewis claiming he lacks understanding, in the same book he displays both familiarity with and some contempt for Hegel, criticising his dedication to the power of the state, which would suggest at least a familiarity with Hegel’s *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* and later again describes Hegel’s philosophy as ‘political backwash’.

This apparent aversion to Hegel may be one reason that he is not cited by the prominent Lewis scholar Paul Edwards as being part of the intellectual background to *Enemy of the Stars*, instead Edwards only cites the presence of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Stirner. Likewise, Christopher Lewis favours an interpretation that ascribes the action of the play as being allegorical for a mythic ritual sacrifice steeped in Nietzschean aesthetics in which art is the instigator of cultural renewal. He even argues that Arghol may be modelled on Nietzsche himself, ‘a modern “cynic” philosopher [that] may have reminded him of Shakespeare’s Timon.’ Though to me this conjecture seems to overextend the metaphor. Contrary to this, rather than interpreting Arghol as Nietzsche himself, Edwards’s proposition that Arghol is representative of the Nietzschean idea of an ascetic priest is far more plausible based on much of what Arghol says in the play. At one point Arghol states ‘I do not feel clean enough to die, or to make it worthwhile killing myself.’ At multiple points Arghol shows disgust at his corporeality, and the state of being: ‘The process and condition of life, without any exception is a grotesque degradation.’ And later, ‘Men have a loathsome deformity called Self; affliction got through indiscriminate rubbing against their fellows: Social excrescence.’ It should be noted that in his influential work on Vorticism,

---

70 Ibid, p.219.
73 Ibid. p.145.
74 Lewis. ‘Enemy of the Stars’ P.70.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid. p.71.
William C. Wees asserts that the ‘self’ in *Enemy of the Stars* is not in the typical definition of the individual ego, but as these previous quotes suggest, the self is instead ‘the accumulated effects of the environment on the individual.’\(^{77}\) This makes being, or Being, loathsome to Arghol, and he is insistent that the routine violence committed against him be continued and he will not do anything about it, in fact it gives him a sense of purpose, even if he is unaware of what that purpose is (returning briefly to Hegel, this could be a secondary lordship-bondage relationship, but one in which Arghol’s usefulness is that his subservience to his uncle allows his uncle his own self-conscious recognition). When Hanp says to Arghol ‘you let yourself be kicked to death here out of spite.’\(^{78}\) He offers a succinct diagnosis of Nietzsche’s view of asceticism. Arghol wills to a state of non-existence, or ‘not-self’.

In an extension of this Toby Foshay’s essay on *Enemy of the Stars* makes for useful philosophical interpretation. Foshay describes the central agon of the play as not simply being between the two characters of Arghol and Hanp, but as being an internal conflict within Arghol himself, something that Arghol gradually comes to realise throughout the play. Foshay argues that this is ‘Lewis's attempt to point to the source of the modern agon as a dividedness of humans from themselves, within themselves, which reduces them to the bathos of a pure self-involvement, a state of confusion incapable of action either positive or negative.’\(^{79}\) To Foshay, this metaphor, along with the centrality of Stirner to Arghol’s dream, places Stirner as the most prominent philosophical reference to the play. Arghol being ‘an immense collapse of chronic philosophy’\(^{80}\) is the corollary of his study of Stirner, indicated by the open copy (and hence either being recently or currently read) of *The Ego and Its Own*, on Arghol’s bed.\(^{81}\) According to Wees, the undercurrent of conflict that runs through *The Ego and Its Own* between the ego and everything it comes into contact with foreground the tone of

---


\(^{78}\) Lewis, ‘Enemy of the Stars,’ p.70.


\(^{80}\) Lewis, ‘Enemy of the Stars’ (1914) p.52.

\(^{81}\) Foshay (1993) pp.52-4.
Arghol’s perpetual conflicts.\textsuperscript{82} It certainly seems to foreground Arghol’s conflict with Hanp, which is instigated after Arghol’s ascetic statement that ‘anything but yourself is dirt. Anybody that is. I do not feel clean enough to die, or to make it worth while killing myself.’\textsuperscript{83} Hanp’s response to this is ‘Sour Grapes!’\textsuperscript{84}, which as Edwards identifies is an accusation of \textit{ressentiment}.\textsuperscript{85} The beginning of their fight marks the passage out of a Stirnerian conflict in which the ego attempts to subordinate its surroundings to give itself identity, into a Nietzschean conflict of one’s internal values. Especially if the interpretation that Hanp is a semblance of Arghol’s self is accepted. And as Hanp seems to embody Arghol’s self-loathing: ‘I talk to you for an hour and get more disgusted with myself. I find I wanted to make a naif yapping Poodle-parasite of you.’\textsuperscript{86} It seem to me that it should be. But does Hanp have any importance outside of being an aspect of Arghol?

While much is learned of Arghol throughout the play, relatively little is learned of Hanp, yet their conflict is the essential part of the drama. Sascha Bru describes this as being ‘a parable of the Vorticist aesthetic and poetic, it performs the Vortex, or, rather, it places the reader at the center of the Vortex, the point where all dualities are held in balance and where one is free of the external world.’\textsuperscript{87} To think of Arghol and Hanp as a duality balanced in the vortex is useful, for then this enforces the idea that they are two parts of a whole. This being the case, Arghol, given his preoccupations is clearly the intellect, meaning Hanp is the instinct. This is further evidenced by Hanp’s actions, it is he who suggests the reflex reaction of killing Arghol’s uncle, he who first attacks Arghol in their fight, and who then in his state of resentment murders his counterpart. Overcome by despair his instinct is to then kill himself which he does without thought, ‘He sprang from the bridge clumsily, too unhappy for instinctive science, and sank like

\begin{thebibliography}{1}
\bibitem{82} Wees (1972) p.185.
\bibitem{83} Lewis, ‘Enemy of the Stars’ (1914) p.70.
\bibitem{84} Ibid.
\bibitem{85} Edwards (2000a) p.152.
\bibitem{86} Lewis, ‘Enemy of the Stars’ (1914) p.73.
\end{thebibliography}
lead, his heart a sagging weight of stagnant hatred.\textsuperscript{88} The duality is even laid out for the reader by Lewis while Hanp is stewing in his resentment of Arghol: ‘This humility and perverse asceticism opposed to vigorous animal glorification of self.’\textsuperscript{89}

Arghol is a tragic figure, not so much containing multitudes as containing contradictions, and this is partially the point: as Edwards indicates a central theme of \textit{Enemy} is ‘the impossibility of living a life that is not a self-contradiction.’\textsuperscript{90} Arghol is locked in struggle throughout the duration of the play, not only with his uncle, Hanp, and Stirner, but also with himself. In the 1932 edition, Lewis expands on Arghol’s character, while in the original he is described as a ‘condemned protagonist’, in the latter he becomes a ‘foredoomed Prometheus’.\textsuperscript{91} It is a curious analogy to make. The titan Prometheus was condemned for his transgression against the Gods by gifting fire to mankind, and while both he and Arghol are subject to interminable torture, the audience never becomes privy to the reason Arghol suffers the regular beatings of his uncle. The likeness might be suggested simply to reinforce this tragic interpretation of \textit{Enemy of the Stars} and be suggestive of Aeschylus’s tragedy \textit{Prometheus Bound} (c. 479-424 BCE). But aside from their protagonists’ daily torment there is scarcely any other link between the two works.

There are of course multiple other interpretations of \textit{Enemy of the Stars}, Joel Nickels believes it to be a political allegory that offers up a tool that promotes alternatives to the ‘pseudo-populist masquerades of fascism, and all forms of centralized political agency’.\textsuperscript{92} While Lewis’s personal politics, and their malleability, including that he often leaned toward fascism may make this a difficult claim to accept, Nickels does offer some elegant interpretation of the play in his attempts to argue this claim, including that ‘Arghol represents a central crisis of modernity: that all stable

\textsuperscript{88} Lewis, ‘Enemy of the Stars,’ (1914) p.85
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid, p.80.
foundations of individual subjectivity have become uncertain. Indeed, the first description of Arghol in the play is found in the first line of the programme section: is that he is ‘One is in immense collapse of chronic philosophy.’ We already know this chronic philosophy to be relating to matters of the self, but Nickel’s assertion that Arghol’s personal crisis is metaphorical for the crisis of modernity is an interesting assertion when considered against the problem of why this play exists in this form. From an artistic perspective, it has already been shown by Reed Way Dasenbrock, that Enemy of the Stars was Lewis’s attempt to introduce a real piece of vorticist literature to Blast in the face of what he saw as the overwhelming compromise that he had to make when including the other pieces of writing. According to Edwards, only Rebecca West’s story ‘Indissoluble Matrimony’ was included on merit by Lewis. Ford Maddox Hueffer’s (later, Ford Maddox Ford) contribution, ‘The Saddest Story’, was certainly not in keeping with the rest of the works, something the author reflected on himself, describing it as ‘no louder than a thrush in the pages of Blast’. Even the poems contributed by Ezra Pound were considered too ‘soft and highly impure’ by Lewis, who wanted ‘a battering ram that was all of one metal.’ Lewis claimed in the autobiographical Rude Assignment (first published 1950) that Enemy of the Stars, was his attempt to show his literary fellows the way in this respect. But the question of what this vorticist play is reacting to, and what it is trying to achieve remains open. Considering the aesthetic priorities of vorticism itself, and where they occur in Enemy of the Stars, may help to provide some illumination on this question.

Against Futurism: The Vorticist Aesthetic

---

93 Ibid, p.354.
99 Ibid, p.139.
In the manifesto ‘Our Vortex’ from *Blast 1*, it is declared that ‘The Vorticist is at his maximum point of energy when stillest. The Vorticist is not the Slave of Commotion but its master.’\(^{100}\) The vortex holds power in tension; this is where it differs from the other avant-garde it is so often associated with, Futurism. Futurists glorified speed and movement, their aesthetics concerned the release of energy, and the power of the machine,\(^{101}\) but the vortex draws energy into its centre. As noted above, Vorticism itself was already partially a reaction to Futurism, with Vorticist additions to *Blast* coming on the heels of Nevinson and Marinetti’s publication of ‘Futurism and English Art’ in *The Observer*. However, at least with regards to Lewis’s visual style around this time, as shown in a number of the works reproduced in *Blast*, there is still a distinct note of Futurism in the Vorticist aesthetic. Prior to the publication of *Blast*, the Futurist painters had caused a stir in London with the 1912 Exhibition of Futurist Painters at the Sackville Gallery. The exhibition contained 34 works, with Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, and Gino Severini all present. The catalogue for the exhibition also reproduced Marinetti’s Manifesto of Futurism (though not the poetic preamble of the founding which was first published alongside the manifesto in *Le Figaro*), a statement from the exhibitors to the public, and also the Manifesto of the Futurist Painters, both signed by the four exhibiting Futurists, with the addition of Giacamo Balla on the manifesto.\(^{102}\)

The exhibition contained what are now some of the most famous works of these artists, including Boccioni’s three *States of Mind* paintings: *Farewells, Those who Go*, and *Those who Stay* (though these are listed under different titles in the catalogue), Carrà’s *Funeral for the Anarchist Galli*, and Russolo’s *Revolution* (titled *Rebellion* in the catalogue). According to the research of Lisa Tickner however it was Severini’s *Blue Dancer*, and *The Pan-Pan Dance at the Monaco* which were the most lauded works of

---

\(^{100}\) Lewis, ‘Our Vortex,’ *Blast 1* (1914) p.148.

\(^{101}\) C.f my discussion in the previous chapter on the veneration of speed into a new religion, and also Claudia Salaris ‘The Invention of the Programmatic Avant-Garde,’ *Italian Futurism 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, ed. Vivien Greene (Guggenheim Museum Publications, New York: 2014) for a more general discussion of Futurist aesthetics.

\(^{102}\) *Exhibition of Works by the Italian Futurist Painters* (London, 1912).
the exhibition. The Sackville show was covered extensively by the British press, being the subject of over 350 articles, with many of the reviews being incredibly negative, Marinetti saw this public recognition as a great success.

As Richard Cork observes in his double volume history of Vorticism, the two years leading up to Blast also saw a stylistic evolution in Lewis’s visual works, and in 1912, this Futurist element becomes more ingrained into his style. This is shown in the likes of his pen and ink drawing The Centauress (1912) in which the centauress rears up in the middle of the page kicking forward a blur of matchstick-like legs, it is compositionally redolent of, though a little more restrained than, Severini’s Blue Dancer, who again occupies the centre of the canvas, and creates a whirl of limbs as the passage of her dance over time is shown all at once. There is some development of Lewis’s style from this point shown in the selection of pictures that precedes Enemy of the Stars. The pen and ink wash dated 1913 that is similarly titled The Enemy of the Stars is one such work. In the portrait a single slender figure/object is depicted to the right of the image against a blank background, standing on what appears to be a kind of stage, with what would be the feet planted atop the only other detail in the image, a few lines that could be stage markings. It is possible that this is meant to be Arghol, and it is likely that it is a figure rather than an abstract object when compared next to several works from the year before.

To be sure this is indeed a figure, we can look at it in conjunction with some of Lewis’s 1912 watercolours The Vorticist (fig.14), and The Dancers (Study for Kermesse) (fig.15), as well as the pen and ink drawing Figure (Spanish Woman) (fig.16). The shapes used to define the figures in these artworks against their backdrops are redolent of the later drawing The Enemy of the Stars, particularly in the case of The Vorticist. While the figure in The Vorticist is much more readily defined and recognisable as a figure, bearing (however abnormally presented) facial features and limbs, both the vorticist and the enemy figure, share a structure: a strong slope from right to left above

---

the head becomes a semi-circular shape beneath (something shared in both *The Dancers* and *Figure*), this semi-circle holds a contorted face in *The Vorticist*, but is empty barring a few lines in *The Enemy*. From this head a series of strong diagonal lines rounded out with more semi-circles build out the trunk of the body until there is a final leg that goes straight down, and in the case of *The Enemy* plants the figure firmly on the stage, while in the case of *The Vorticist*, ends up unravelling in a series of mechanical lines.

Aside from the addition of a face, *The Vorticist* differs in that it has an extra leg kicking forward from the body, it contains a great deal more motion that the monolithic and unnervingly still figure of the 1913 drawing. Despite its title, *The Vorticist* holds more visual associations with Futurism than other works by Lewis that came the year after. As Cork describes it, any part of the figure could be anatomical, mechanical, or a combination of the two.105 The immediate visual comparison would be the famous Boccioni sculpture *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* however that sculpture was not created, or even conceived of, until 1913. But it was Boccioni who the British artist David Bomberg accused Lewis of copying in 1912, claiming Lewis’ works in this period were adapted figures from the paintings Boccioni displayed at the Sackville Gallery.106 Edwards gives some credence to this claim with his analysis of Lewis’ series of works related to *Timon of Athens*, one of which is in the gallery of images preceding *Enemy of the Stars*, he compares them to Boccioni’s *States of Mind* triptych (figs. 17, 18, 19) which was displayed at the Sackville exhibition, and likewise the debt is acknowledged by Richard Humphries in his analysis of Lewis as a visual artist.107 Edwards specifically notes the way in which the illustration made for the Act III divider in the Timon series uses geometric shapes to suggest outlines of figures that are stuck in the arrangement but disappear when we turn our attention to other figures within the composition, a technique that Boccioni similarly used.108 Boccioni even describes this technique a little

105 Ibid, p.31.
106 Ibid, p.28.
in the catalogue to the exhibition, in the section titled 'Exhibitors to the Public', Boccioni states:

We thus arrive at what we call the painting of states of mind. In the pictural description of the various states of mind of a leave-taking, perpendicular lines, undulating and as it were worn out, clinging here and there to silhouettes of empty bodies may well express languidness and discouragement. Confused and trepidating lines, either straight or curved, mingled with the outlined hurried gestures of people calling one another, will express a sensation of chaotic excitement. On the other hand, horizontal lines, fleeting, rapid and jerky, brutally cutting into half lost profiles of faces or crumbling rebounding fragments of landscape will have the tumultuous feelings of the persons going away.¹⁰⁹

While the triptych was displayed at the Sackville Gallery, these works were, aesthetically speaking, some of the least Futurist on display. As Ester Coen has previously written, Boccioni’s fellow futurists, especially Carrà, were highly critical of the works. When the triptych was first displayed in France at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune Boccioni’s work was received not so much as Futurist but as being derivative of the Cubist works of Picasso and Braque by critics such as Guillaume Apollinaire, and Louis Vauxcelles.¹¹⁰ Despite this comparison, Boccioni went on to work and rework his aesthetic theories. Coen goes on to say that ‘The direct encounter with Cubism merely reinforced [Boccioni’s] convictions. He now laid greater emphasis on the essential difference between the volumetric construction the French practiced and the spiritualized construction of his own works, a point he insisted on in the prefaces to the Paris and London exhibition catalogues.’¹¹¹ So we see with The Vorticist a work arguably more Futurist than some of those presented by one of the most significant proponents of Futurist visual art, but with The Enemy of the Stars, these Futurist

¹¹¹ Ibid, pp.120-1.
elements fade from view, except perhaps for the spiritual construction that Boccioni strived for.

Considering the divergence of Vorticism from Futurism based on the opposition of stillness versus speed, *The Vorticist* in comparison to *The Enemy of the Stars* shows this development in Lewis’s artistic style. Accepting that the subject of *The Enemy of the Stars* is a figure it is logical to propose that it is the figure of Arghol. Held in tension, with his collapse (of chronic philosophy) imminent, telegraphed by the awkward top-heavy nature of the figure, who may crash forward at any point. The shape that could be his head might even be a depiction of the strange mask Lewis describes for Arghol, ‘Great mask, venustic and veridic’.\(^\text{112}\) Again, this section of the play highlights the contradictions of Arghol, he has that ‘type of feminine beauty called “mannish”’.\(^\text{113}\) Recognising the figure in the drawing *The Enemy of the Stars* as being Arghol, is indicative of the abstraction of humanity that the Arghol within the play represents, and the abstraction of language that Lewis was trying to achieve. Like the figures in the *Timon* sketches and Boccioni’s *States of Mind*, the Arghol of the play is given definition by those that surround him: Hanp, his uncle, Stirner, seeing him react to his confrontations with the rest of the cast allows the reader to understand him, perhaps this is why he is so determined to interrogate his own idea of self-hood, so that he may be independently and authentically himself. It is in this way that Arghol, and *Enemy of the Stars* epitomise the vorticist aesthetic. Whereas Bru argues that the reader/audience is placed at the centre of the vortex, in my view it is Arghol who draws to his being all the action within the play, who holds multiple dualities in balance, albeit precariously, who strives to resolve and unify endless contradiction. It is Arghol who is the vortex.

This complex portrait of Arghol is also the reason that the mapping of Hegel’s master/slave dialectic on to *Enemy of the Stars* is not entirely satisfactory. The multiple dualities sustained in Arghol’s character show that Hegel’s is not the only dialectic at

---

113 Ibid.
play. In *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis the Modernist as Fascist*, Frederic Jameson describes how Lewis’s cultural critique on both the left and right relate to the self, arguing that the aim of left-leaning critiques of culture are about changing the self, while for the right the object is not so much the transformation of the self, but of the other. Jameson maps this right-wing critique to Nietzsche’s theory of *ressentiment*: ‘Nietzsche’s concept of *ressentiment* is perhaps the archetypal embodiment of such a dialectic: *ressentiment* marks the Other as reactive and attributes the vengeance taken by the weak over the strong to the former’s envy.’

Thinking of Hanp, bitter, defeated, resentful, he is clearly not just Hegel’s slave, but Nietzsche’s as well. Simultaneously, Arghol is also embittered with *ressentiment*, as Jameson writes: ‘since the cultural critique has been conceived as the diagnosis of pernicious attitudes and toxic ideas, the agents of cultural decay are specified in advance to be the guardians of culture, the intellectuals themselves, by definition disgruntled and embittered, failed artists would-be unsuccessful politicians—in short, the very archetype of *ressentiment* at its purest.’

Arghol had clear intellectual ambitions, but returned to a world in which they are of little value where he becomes an object of self-disgust.

The entire work seeks to unify binaries and so finds itself in the Nietzschean ideal of tragedy: self and other, mind and body, even audience and performer (‘very well acted by you and me’) are caught up in the violent maelstrom of *Enemy of the Stars*. Arghol himself, is a duality, both Arghol and Hanp, mannish but feminine, and there is even one theory that the etymology of Arghol is from the double star Algol. This is of course not out of place in a magazine in which the most prominent piece is the manifesto-like list of Blasts and Blesses with the same things being both blasted and blessed, and which also contains the distinctly Nietzschean quip: ‘We only want Tragedy if it can clench its side muscles like hands on its belly and bring to the surface a laugh like a bomb.’

*Enemy of the Stars* is indicative, as other scholars have pointed

---

out, of the fragmentary nature of modernism. But the vortex finds a way to embroil these fragments and pit them against one another, it holds up a mirror to the contradictions that they contain even in their singular nature, and from this vortex comes art. This is similar to how Philip Pothen understands the reconciliation of Apollo and Dionysus to create tragedy in Nietzsche:

For Nietzsche this drama in which Dionysus becomes dismembered corresponds to the catastrophie of individuation, “the origin and primal cause of all suffering” (BT §10) which tragedy and art must heal, a healing that once again corresponds to the Dionysian drama of the god’s rebirth conceived of “as the end of individuation”.

Through the expression of his contrarian nature, creating an aesthetic based on, but still distinct from Futurism, Lewis created an avant-garde project steeped in Nietzschean symbolism. In his most significant literary works produced during his Vorticist period Lewis breathes life into characters like Kreisler and Arghol that can be recognised as Nietzschean archetypes, but where most avant-gardists concerned with Nietzschean types tended to look to the Übermensch for inspiration (as argued elsewhere in this thesis), Lewis instead concentrates on the figures despised by Nietzsche, such as the ascetic priest. This gives credence to his above quoted claim that he was ‘relatively immune’ to the idea of Übermensch. This makes Lewis something of an idiosyncratic case in the avant-gardist use of Nietzsche, the prevalence of a doctrine of a ‘new man’, found in so many other cases, is conspicuous by its absence, but he did have faith in the artist as a figure of cultural renewal.

Conclusions

Considering Lewis’s engagement with Nietzsche in *Blast*, in the preface to *Tarr*, and then in his later autobiographical works, it is evident that anything Lewis states must be treated with some suspicion. This is only enforced when comparing his work compared to the Futurists who he sought to distinguish himself from. Lewis went with the prevailing winds, altering his positions accordingly, and was certainly not averse to self-mythologising. But, as shown by his books on Hitler we also see a man who was not always too proud to admit when he is wrong. This makes evaluating his use of Nietzsche an interesting task. Relying on specific textual references to Nietzsche often proves unfruitful in attempting to discern what value Nietzsche had to Lewis’s Vorticism. It is only through an analysis of the philosophy at play in his fictional and artistic works where the relation starts to become apparent, mostly in the Nietzschean characters that work to display the archetypes that Nietzsche thought of as the worst of society, such as the ascetic priest. But, in works like *Tarr*, this character is overcome by the figure of the artist, as symbolised by Kreisler’s suicide in comparison to Tarr’s success as an artist. In *Enemy of the Stars*, it is more difficult to get to the bottom of this Nietzschean value. The synthesis of Nietzsche’s philosophy with that of Hegel and Stirner makes for a muddied intellectual background, there are glimpses of all of them, but their purpose seems to be illustrative of the plot, rather than to say anything in particular about the philosophy, or as a tool to help espouse a new artistic or world view.

I strongly suspect that Lewis’s reactions to Nietzsche were less indicative of an appreciation of his philosophy, and an actual desire to live up to Nietzschean values, than they were an expression of the vogue among those he associated with. Figures such as Orage who were important for Lewis’s career, and Hulme who sometimes reacted to Nietzsche (often negatively) in his own writings.¹²⁰ The proliferation of Nietzschean texts through little magazines, the forum for intellectual and cultural

---

¹²⁰ In *Speculations* Hulme writes ‘I do not mean what Nietzsche meant when he said, “Do not speculate as to whether what a philosopher says is true, but ask how he came to think it true.” This form of scepticism I hold to be just fashionable rubbish.’ Hulme. (1936) pp.17-18. Later in *Speculations* he also asserts that if people were to follow Nietzsche’s admiration for the renaissance it would lead the modern era to ‘degenerate into romanticism.’ Ibid, p.62. Though both, David Wragg and Tom Normand believe that there is a neo-Nietzschean element inherent to both Hulme and Lewis, expressed as a ‘radical conservatism. C.f Wragg (1993) p.102.
exchange in pre-war London made him difficult to ignore, and therefore essential for an ambitious avant-gardist to incorporate into at least a minimal part of their work.
Part III

Introduction

In contrast to the previous two parts of this thesis, here both chapters largely concern one person’s relation to Nietzsche and his philosophy, the writer and theorist Georges Bataille (1897-1962). Bataille’s first encounter with Nietzsche was working on the French translation of the Russian philosopher Lev Shestov’s book *The Idea of Good in Tolstoy and Nietzsche* in 1922/3,¹ and he remained a significant point of reference for Bataille throughout the rest of his career. But in what follows I am largely concerned with the years 1936-1945. As shown in the previous section, even prior to this Nietzsche’s reputation had been soured in some circles with several apportioning him blame for the First World War. But as fascist governments, primarily in Italy and Germany, started to lay claim to his philosophy, Nietzsche’s name and legacy were put at further risk. Bataille continued to read, discuss, and advocate for Nietzsche in this period. In the first chapter I will largely be discussing Bataille’s writings from 1936-39 in the journal *Acéphale*, especially the essay ‘Nietzsche and the Fascists: A Reparation,’ and take a more analytical approach to the way that Bataille responded to fascism in a discursive sense. But to discuss *Acéphale* in isolation is to tell only part of the story, and so naturally Bataille’s other interrelated projects, Contre-Attaque, the College of Sociology, and the secret society also named Acéphale are brought into the discussion.

In the second chapter of this part, I first examine the drawings that the surrealist artist André Masson (1896-1987) created for *Acéphale*. Masson and Bataille were close friends and collaborators, and Nietzsche was a point of bonding for them. In fact, Masson even describes how formative Nietzsche was for those in their circle:

Nietzsche, Sade, Dostoevsky, to salute them first of all … but here I must point out the difference with most of our contemporaries: our choice was not guided by literary or philosophical pretexts alone. Those three named above, tutelary, were for us, before anything else, the great shatterers of conventional horizons.²

These drawings are significant in the precise way their iconography illuminates several themes in Bataille’s Acéphale project, allowing them to be used as an effective interpretive tool. After discussing how Bataille and Masson created a mythic ideal, founded in their Nietzschean understanding, in the figures represented in these drawings, the remainder of the second chapter deals with the more theoretical side of Bataille’s relationship to Nietzsche. I attempt to get beneath the surface of Bataille’s critique of fascism by looking into his own philosophy, especially that espoused during the Second World War in his book On Nietzsche (1945). Of particular interest is the section of this book titled ‘Summit and Decline’ which is where Bataille’s moral philosophy is revealed.

With the rise of fascism, and specifically Nazism, in Europe during the 1930s Nietzsche’s intellectual legacy and his role in artistic discourse suddenly becomes subordinate to the misappropriation of his thought. Whereas artists and writers earlier in the twentieth century were able to play off Nietzsche’s philosophy to help develop their practice with relative political impunity, his name took on a different invocation after it became associated with fascist ideology. However, the so-called dissident Surrealist, Georges Bataille, was one who did attempt to continue to found his ideas on a Nietzschean bedrock, but furthermore Bataille also tried to rehabilitate Nietzsche’s image.

Bataille, best known for his erotic fiction, operated at the fringes of the Surrealist group, never fully a member, yet still excommunicated from the group in André Breton’s Second Manifesto (1929),¹ he described himself as Surrealism’s ‘old enemy from within’.² As well as being an author Bataille was the editor of several publications including *Documents*, *Acéphale* (distinct though related to the secret society of the same name, which I refer to without italics), and *Critique*, he was also a numismatist and a librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale. In this chapter I will discuss how Bataille’s relationship with Nietzsche’s thought was mediated by the experience of fascism’s rise, and ask whether Bataille’s adherence to Nietzschean ideas in this period raises more moral problems than it solves. The interrelation between Bataille, Nietzsche and fascism is inherently complex, but I seek to demonstrate that the ideas proposed by both Bataille and the fascist political system were reactions to societal problems diagnosed by Nietzsche, such as the nihilistic worldview and the absence of a sacralised power. Where Bataille and his fascist contemporaries differ is in the formation of a solution to

these issues, though even this assertion is not always clear-cut, especially when it comes to the use of myth.

After the Second World War, Bataille would write ‘Perhaps the absence of myth is the ground that seems stable beneath my feet, yet gives way without warning.’ This absence had been a preoccupation of Bataille’s for some time; in the mid to late 1930s Bataille had been actively attempting to create a myth, the purpose of which was to counter the myth-building of fascist thinkers such as Alfred Rosenberg as I will discuss below. Indeed, Bataille’s thought often returns to the idea of a lack, not just of myth, but also of the sacred. And of course, following Nietzsche, God is also in absentia for much of Bataille’s writing. Interestingly these absences have similar consequences: a breakdown in communication, and a fragmentation of community. As is often the case with Nietzsche, it is difficult to discuss any of Bataille’s ideas in isolation from the others, and while myth in various guises may be the main theme for much of this chapter, the sacred, sacrifice, sin, and crime are all too important to ignore.

To begin I shall discuss Bataille’s direct critique of the fascist appropriation of Nietzsche from the mid-late 1930s in order to establish the difference between the fascist and Batailllean Nietzsche. This does however raise questions as to the nature of Bataille’s critique and thus an investigation into his politics follows, before moving on to a discussion of the manifestation of these politics in the years preceding the second world war through the College of Sociology, and the secret society of Acéphale.

Reparations

In June 1936, Bataille launched the review Acéphale. The magazine ran until 1939, and its run comprised three single issues and one double issue. The first piece in the first edition, ‘The Sacred Conspiracy’, written by Bataille, began with three epigraphs, one from the Marquis de Sade, one from Søren Kierkegaard, and the final one from Friedrich Nietzsche. While the second text from this first issue was a short

---

essay by Pierre Klossowski on Sade, it was Nietzsche who would come to dominate the subsequent editions. The second edition, published in January 1937, bore the heading ‘Nietzsche and the Fascists: A Reparation’, underneath its usual synopsis of themes: ‘Religion, Sociology, Philosophy’. Bataille had been an avid reader of Nietzsche for many years, but there was a significant increase in the amount of books either by or about Nietzsche that Bataille borrowed from the Bibliothèque Nationale towards the end of 1936, no doubt in preparation for this issue. In the leading article of this edition he sought to remove the stain of fascist association from Nietzsche’s name by means of a searing polemic aimed at those who attempted to subordinate Nietzsche’s ideas to their ideological cause. Among those Bataille attacks are Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche (Nietzsche’s sister), Richard Oehler (Nietzsche’s cousin), Benito Mussolini, and the fascist thinkers Alfred Rosenberg and Alfred Bäumler. Bataille reveals the deceitful manipulation of Nietzsche’s works these figures undertook in their attempts to align Nietzsche’s thought with fascism, in order to argue that ‘Fascism and Nietzscheanism are mutually exclusive, and are even violently mutually exclusive’. But there is a great deal more to Bataille’s argument than this, and in the essay’s most vituperative passage he declares:

NIETZSCHE’S DOCTRINE CANNOT BE ENSLAVED.
It can only be followed. To place it behind or in the service of anything else is a betrayal deserving the kind of contempt that wolves have for dogs.

DOES NIETZSCHE’S LIFE MAKE IT SEEM LIKELY THAT HE CAN HAVE HIS “WINGS CLIPPED” BY ANYONE AT ALL?
Whether it is anti-semitism, fascism—or socialism—there is only use.
Nietzsche addressed free spirits, incapable of letting themselves be used.

Despite the title of the essay, in this passage it is not just the fascists from whom Bataille is attempting to reclaim Nietzsche. Instead, it appears he is trying to remove the philosopher from political constructions of any stripe. So, while Bataille wrote numerous articles, essays, and even books on both fascism and Nietzsche, it is legitimate to ask whether his contest with the fascists over Nietzsche is a separate issue from his personal politics and his study of fascism. Whereas later scholars that attempt to disassociate Nietzsche from fascism, and Nazism in particular, are writing with hindsight, in a world in which these ideologies are commonly thought of as malign, Bataille’s engagement with fascist thought—including its use and misuse of Nietzsche—was taking place in the very period of fascism’s ascendance, in a climate of democratic crisis, and therefore had different stakes and a different meaning. Naturally this means Bataille’s methods in reclaiming Nietzsche differ somewhat from those of Walter Kaufmann and Alexander Nehamas, and are altogether more controversial.

There is a certain Icarian overture being played in the above quoted passage. Bataille had already written of Nietzsche’s ‘Icarian complex’—his urge to ‘reject bourgeois tawdriness and conventional morality’ as a result not of friendship for the proletariat, but rather due to a desire to seize ‘fire from heaven’—in his 1930 essay ‘The Old Mole and the Prefix Sur’. So, what does it mean to clip the wings of a philosopher who flew so close—arguably too close—to the sun? What does stifling this Icarian complex achieve, and why does Bataille seek to defend this particular aspect of Nietzsche’s thinking despite its political and moral ambiguity?

To better understand Bataille’s project it is best to begin by looking at how Nietzsche had his “wings clipped” by the fascists that used his philosophy. Bataille’s criticisms start out with the easiest targets: Förster-Nietzsche and Oehler. Nietzsche’s relatives attempted to forge an image of an antisemitic Nietzsche, despite Nietzsche’s expressed disgust for antisemitism. Bataille shows how a simple manipulation of section §251 of Beyond Good and Evil (1886) in which Nietzsche parodies antisemites, a

7 Bataille, ‘The Old Mole and the Prefix Sur in the Words Surhomme and Surrealist’ in ibid., 37.
8 Ibid.
9 Though it remained unpublished until 1968.
parody Oehler edited out of context, made it appear that this antisemitic view was the one being expressed. In reality, in the latter part of this section Nietzsche launches into a tirade that borders on philosemitism and ultimately insists that Europe should welcome the assimilation of the Jewish diaspora (BGE §251).

In contrast, Bataille thinks of Mussolini’s Nietzsche as less of a perversion, and more the product of a synthesis, specifically with the thought of Georges Sorel and, as Bataille indicates, Max Stirner. But Bataille is less concerned with Mussolini than with the other figures in the essay. Bataille sees Mussolini as a prisoner of the ideology he created, ‘slowly enslaved by everything he was able to set in motion only by paralysing, little by little, his earliest impulses.’ Thus, at least in Bataille’s argument, Mussolini’s use of Nietzsche is mostly to be found in his vocabulary, cherry-picking maxims and turns of phrase from Nietzsche’s works to help give expression to a political will. Bataille writes that ‘Official Fascism has been able to use the invigorating Nietzschean maxims, displaying them on walls; its brutal simplifications must nevertheless be sheltered from the too free, too complex, and too-rending Nietzschean world.’ Mussolini’s Nietzsche is a gross simplification, deployed to flatter the populace. Mussolini used the attractive wordplay and ideas of Nietzsche, such as the Übermensch, to seduce the nation into believing in the destiny of a reborn Italy, despite Nietzsche’s philosophy—a philosophy meant for ‘free spirits’ as Bataille indicates—being seemingly incompatible with the fascist political system.

Of all those Bataille seeks to denounce, it is Alfred Bäumler whom he takes the most seriously. Bäumler was an academic; in the 1930s he was made chair in Philosophy and Political Pedagogy at the University of Berlin. Unlike those who offered a manipulation or a simplification of Nietzsche’s texts, Bataille recognised Bäumler as the most dangerous of Nietzsche’s fascist interpreters as the reading of a political Nietzsche that Bäumler promulgated was indeed a possible interpretation. He

---

11 Ibid, p.186.
12 Ibid, p.187
offered a reading with more intellectual weight behind it than any of the other figures Bataille deals with, but still a reading Bataille disagreed with.14 It was this new reading of Nietzsche that Bäumle proffered that truly made Nietzsche’s philosophy more amenable to fascism; in 1931 Bäumler published *Nietzsche, the Philosopher and Politician*. In this book, much as Heidegger would seek to do in his lectures on Nietzsche of 1936-1940, Bäumler places the will to power as the central tenet of Nietzsche’s philosophy. This is immediately problematic as the book *The Will to Power* was largely systematised by Förster-Nietzsche. As Kaufmann notes, Nietzsche abandoned the project of *The Will to Power* in 1888, but Förster-Nietzsche took the most simple note of the 25 he had written on the structure of *The Will to Power*, a mere four lines, and used these as headings for what was to become an expansive collection of aphorisms masquerading as a philosophical system compiled in such a way that it would vindicate her worldview.15 Furthermore, as Kaufmann explains, the idea of the will to power seems to stand in contrast to much of Nietzsche’s earlier philosophy. Whereas in Nietzsche’s early works there were polar drives in the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the will to power is a singular drive, and would take precedence as the basic matter of human striving and creation. Kaufmann describes it as a ‘reconciliation’ between all the oppositional forces that had previously constituted Nietzsche’s thought.16 A kind of philosophical *deus ex machina*.

In *Nietzsche, the Philosopher and Politician*, Bäumler criticises Ernst Bertram’s *Nietzsche: Attempt at a Mythology* (1918), which was until that point one of the best received books on Nietzsche, for overlooking *The Will to Power* (both concept and book), and sets about offering a new interpretation of Nietzsche’s oeuvre based on what the social scientist Max Whyte characterises as ‘heroic realism’.17 Whyte presents the difference thus: ‘Crucially, the violent dynamism of German tragic culture was not to be

---

identified — à la Bertram — with the Dionysian spirit of music, but with heroism, self-overcoming and martial ideals.\(^{18}\) Simultaneously, to discredit Bertram is also to discredit the idea of an anti-German Nietzsche that arises in the third chapter of Bertram’s book: ‘The German Becoming’. While Kaufmann would later criticise Bertram for opening up an ambiguity in Nietzsche’s thought that allowed for his misuse, writing that Bertram’s book ‘was but one step to the Nazi’s “subjective” historiography’,\(^{19}\) this ambiguity cuts both ways. Bertram may state that Nietzsche is one of the most German thinkers, lending him a certain status in the Germanic nationalist pantheon, but he also renders a picture of a troubled man full of self-loathing whose most German trait is that he manages to rid himself of his Germanness.\(^{20}\) Thus Bertram’s Nietzsche is problematic from both sides of the debate.

Bäumler’s rejection of the Dionysian was already evident in some of his earlier works, for example the introduction he wrote to Jakob Bachofen’s 1926 work *The Myth of Orient and Occident*. In this lengthy introduction (standing at 269 pages) Bäumler dedicates the third and final section to a discussion of the chthonic, the Dionysian, and the Apollonian. This work is ill-disposed towards the Dionysian aspects of Nietzsche’s thought, and is in fact quite critical of Nietzsche, comparing him unfavourably to the author of the main text, Bachofen.\(^{21}\) David Pan argues that this aversion to the Dionysian is based on Bäumler’s preference for an ‘objective and material rather than a subjective and aesthetic foundation for myth and symbol.’\(^{22}\) However, by 1930 when Bäumler was to write the afterword to a new edition of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* his views on Nietzsche had evidently grown softer, writing of the book: ‘this work is the

---

\(^{18}\) Ibid, p.177.
\(^{19}\) Kaufmann (2013) p.13.
\(^{22}\) Pan (2001) p.44.
Magna Carta of a new era, it is the Grundbuch\textsuperscript{23} of a heroic humanity.\textsuperscript{24} This idea of ushering in a ‘new era’, or a ‘new order’ is a common theme in National Socialism and other iterations of fascism; seven years later describing the Degenerate Art exhibition Fritz Kaiser would write that its purpose was to provide an insight into the ‘cultural degeneration of the last decades’\textsuperscript{25} while the German people stood on the precipice of this ‘new era’. In Nietzsche, the Philosopher and Politician, Bäumler is attempting to use Nietzsche as the philosophical basis for this new era. And, for all the arguments against a fascist interpretation of Nietzsche, it is understandable how this interpretation came about. Indeed, many of these rebuttals to the fascist reading of Nietzsche, partially including that of Bataille which is central to this chapter, serve more as an argument against an antisemitic Nietzsche. But this is not enough; antisemitism is not the central defining characteristic of the fascist ideology.

The reason that fascists were able to make an effective use of Nietzsche is to be found in his diagnosing of a decadent and sick society, and in his prescription for an overcoming of this, which is somewhat ill-defined. Regardless of whether Nietzsche would have or would not have been a fascist (though, I am firm in the opinion he would not), his vocabulary, and the core issues at hand in his work are ripe for fascist appropriation. Malcolm Bull presents the problem thus ‘Nietzsche’s affinity with Nazism is with its means more than its ends … being largely opposed to German nationalism, anti-semitism, and the power of the state, Nietzsche could not have been an uncritical Nazi.’\textsuperscript{26} The means however are still a problem. This is, after all, the philosopher who wrote that ‘In truth, however, the evil instincts are expedient, species-preserving, and indispensable to as high a degree as the good ones’ (GS §4), and ‘That new party of life which takes in hand the greatest of all tasks, the breeding of a higher humanity,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23} Literally, ‘ground book’ this refers to a land registry. Bäumler is using it here seemingly as a metaphor meaning that Zarathustra is where all the information for mapping out a ‘heroic humanity’ can be found, and all those who are a part of this ‘heroic humanity’ will find an identification within the book.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Bäumler, ‘Nachwort,’ in Friedrich Nietzsche, Also Sprach Zarathustra: Ein Buch Für Alle Und Keinen (Alfred Kröner Verlag, Leipzig: 1930) p.410.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Malcolm Bull, Anti-Nietzsche (Verso, London, New York: 2011) p.29.
\end{itemize}
including the ruthless destruction of everything degenerating and parasitic, that excess
of life on earth from which the Dionysian state, too, must arise once again.’ (EH, BT,
§4). And finally, this following passage from The Gay Science which Bäumlern himself
cites, and from which his idea of a ‘heroic humanity’ seems to arise:

I welcome all signs that a more virile, warlike age is about to begin, which will
restore honour to courage above all. For this age shall prepare the way for
one yet higher, and it shall gather the strength that this higher age will require
some day—the age that will carry heroism into the search for knowledge and
that will wage wars for the sake of ideas and consequences. (GS §283)²⁷

This seeming support for war is met by Bäumlern with approval; he writes that justice is
only born through struggle, not in the sense that someone with a more liberal standpoint
would agree with, wherein which an oppressed group may fight for equality or freedom.
But instead, he views the struggle as the means through which the naturally dominant
arise: ‘But this is also true Germanic intuition: in battle it turns out who is noble and who
is not: by innate courage the Lord becomes the Lord, and through his cowardice the
slave becomes a slave.’²⁸

Bäumlern’s views on justice help elucidate why Nietzsche’s ideas of decadence
and overcoming are so well disposed to be used by the fascists due to the way that
fascism functions as an ideology. While providing a concrete definition of fascism is
difficult due to its various presentations, in his writings on the topic Roger Griffin, a
leading scholar of fascism, states that there is a “fascist minimum” for all of the
ideology’s permutations in which the belief in a ‘core myth of the reborn nation’²⁹ is a
key aspect. Griffin labels this ‘palingenetic myth’, which incorporates a ‘myth of renewal,
of rebirth … the vision of a radically new beginning which follows a period of destruction,

²⁸ ibid. p.67. trans. by Matthias Pfaller.
²⁹ Roger Griffin, ‘Fascism,’ in International Fascism: Theories, Causes and the New Consensus, ed.
or perceived dissolution.' There are any number of themes in Nietzsche’s thought which can act as this dissolution: decadence, the death of God, slave morality; if one reads of these without any nuance or without due attention to their rhetorical and figural character, they can easily become weaponised concepts, used to marshal an image of a stagnant, even a decaying civilisation in need of overhauling by any means necessary, no matter how unjust. Naturally, the creation of a myth, especially in the Sorelian sense, is one way in which to build the momentum needed to form a social movement that can overcome these issues. To build an image of a new, greater society, overcoming the struggles of the former one, and emerging victorious from its ashes. This is the same tactic that Nietzsche uses as a literary device in Thus Spoke Zarathustra. The way in which Zarathustra preaches of the Übermensch, he binds the Übermensch to images with a strong mythical significance, such as lightning (the tool and weapon of Zeus): ‘Behold I am the herald of the lightning and a heavy drop from the cloud: but this lightning is called the Overhuman’ (Z, Prologue, §4). The Übermensch is also described as something beyond the human being, as an overcoming (Z, Prologue, §3).

Fascism is, of course, not the only ideology that makes use of myth, Sorel himself when writing about the myth of the general strike in Reflections on Violence (1908) identified more closely with syndicalism than with fascism. Any effective political ideology makes use of Sorelian myth by pitting those that it is attempting to speak to against something or someone else that must be overcome. Communists build the image of a suppressed proletariat overcoming the bourgeoisie to gain the means of production and hence their liberation, conservatives build the image of a growing middle class overcoming their circumstances of poverty through hard work and determination free from government interference. However, these examples are more of an economic

---

31 ‘men who are participating in great social movements always picture their coming action in the form of images of battle in which their cause is certain to triumph. I proposed to give the name of ‘myths’ to these constructions, knowledge of which is so important for historians: the general strike of the syndicalists and Marx’s catastrophic revolution are such myths.’ c.f Georges Sorel, ‘Introduction: Letter to Daniel Halévy.’ in Sorel: Reflections on Violence, ed. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1999) p.20.
overcoming, fascism works differently again: it also uses a myth of a cultural
overcoming. As Griffin says, ‘for fascism to “take off”, let alone “break through”, it must
be the product of an interaction of psychological, cultural and ideological factors, with
social, political and economic ones.’\textsuperscript{32} In other words, as the myth of fascism is born out
of a perceived crisis, it must seek to curtail any possible cause of said crisis.

The fascist use of myth goes some way to explaining Bataille’s words in a 1934
letter to Pierre Kaan, a co-editor of \textit{La Critique sociale} who would go on to be an
organiser in the French Resistance, in which he wrote: ‘I have no doubt as to the level
on which we must place ourselves: it can only be that of fascism itself, which is to say,
on the mythological plane.’\textsuperscript{33} It is a startling assertion that reveals something of the
nature of Bataille’s anti-fascism. If any project is to succeed in the face of fascism, it
needs to understand what it is dealing with, what myth means to fascism, and how it is
used. For when the reckoning happens, traditional political methods are no match for a
myth. However, to engage fascism on its own terms, with its own tools, is an unsavoury
proposition; Bataille’s notion to do so is actually rather radical, and it stems from a
recognition of the same ailments, as defined by Nietzsche, that Western society was
facing at the time. That is to say, the nihilistic moment. Bataille continues in the letter: ‘It
is therefore a matter of proposing values that may participate in a living nihilism, fully
commensurate with Fascist imperatives.’\textsuperscript{34} A living nihilism, a world affected by skewed
value systems, unsure of itself or its surroundings, is it any wonder that myth is the
solution to such an issue? Bataille especially demonstrates just how much power he
believes myth to have in ‘The Sorcerer’s Apprentice’, first published in the \textit{Nouvelle
Revue Francaise} in 1938, in which he writes ‘whereas art acknowledges the final reality
and the superior character of the real world that constrains man, myth enters into
human existence like a force demanding that \textit{inferior} reality submit to its rule.’\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{32} Griffin (1993) pp.204-5.
p.79.
\textsuperscript{34} Bataille (2018) p.79.
Wing (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis: 1988) p.22.
Therefore myth does not serve a solely Sorelian function in this instance, but also a more traditional one as being something that helps give meaning and reason to what humanity is unable to understand, a purpose of providing definition to human experience.

The above shows there to be some common ground between Bataille and the fascist philosophers: they both recognise a pervasive nihilism in their world. Where they differ is how to address this issue. Sure enough, both recognise myth as a solution echoing Nietzsche’s sentiment in the Birth of Tragedy that

> Without myth … all cultures lose their healthy, creative, natural energy; only a horizon surrounded by myths encloses and unifies a cultural movement … even the state knows of no more powerful unwritten laws than the mythical fundament which guarantees its connection with religion and its emergence from mythical representations. (BT §23)

However, the fascist and Bataillean approach to myth creation differ in nature. I shall turn now to the final figure Bataille castigates in ‘Nietzsche and the Fascists’, Alfred Rosenberg, to help explain the difference.

In his analysis of Rosenberg’s, The Myth of the Twentieth Century (1930), Albert Chandler states that Rosenberg’s idea of myth ‘does not mean something that is untrue, but something which is true in a profounder way than science or common sense. It means a view of life and nature that is accepted on faith and inspires social action. It is a kind of cult or religion or intuitive philosophy.’ However, it is Sorelian myth that Rosenberg seems to make the most use of in this book. Rosenberg punctuates the narrative with a racial struggle in which the Nordic spirit must overcome the supposedly pernicious influence of other peoples, notably the Jewish people. For example, ‘the Jew’

---

37 Rosenberg does, however, also use myth in a pejorative sense, citing the ‘Jewish Myth’ frequently as one that is patently untrue. For example, ‘Jewish parasitism as a concentrated enormity is thus derived from the Jewish Myth, the domination of the world agreed to by the God Yahweh’. In Alfred Rosenberg, The Myth of the Twentieth Century, trans. Vivian Bird (Historical Press Review, Sussex: 2004) p.300.
writes Rosenberg ‘cannot attain mastery in a state which is supported by enhanced concepts of honour. For exactly the same reason, however, the German cannot live within the democratic system and be fruitful.’\textsuperscript{38} Rosenberg pits race against race and defies heterogeneity to build an image of the unified Nordic type that can overcome the influence of the Jewish people, of the Catholic Church, and of capitalist democracy, ‘or else he perishes without salvation from sins against his organic truth.’\textsuperscript{39} This organic truth is the Nordic type’s supposed inherent sense of honour, something that stems, as all the racial characteristics do in Rosenberg’s eyes, from the blood.\textsuperscript{40} Blood and honour, these are what comprise the dual core of Rosenbergian myth. It is an appeal to nationalistic (and racial) sentiment and emotion. This is why despite its lack of factual evidence, its self-indulgent writing, and Hitler’s and Goebbels’ stated dislike of \textit{The Myth of the Twentieth Century}, its importance cannot be understated. It was the second best-selling book in Germany during the period of Third Reich, and it aspires not to logic, but to a mythic ideal.\textsuperscript{41} And Rosenberg fully recognises that Germany’s post-war nihilistic malaise is ripe for exploitation by his appeal to the values of blood and honour precisely due to the way they play into the stratified myth of justice through struggle that is seen in the work of Bäumler.

In the above quoted letter to Pierre Kaan, what Bataille is suggesting is a counter-myth, that instead of overcoming nihilism through a faith in Rosenbergian values, one should create values that can exist within a nihilistic world. In \textit{Inner Experience} (1943) Bataille writes ‘I have defined the self as a value, but refused to confuse it with profound existence.’\textsuperscript{42} While this book was published some nine years after his letter to Kaan this perfectly illustrates the division between Bataillean and fascist (specifically Rosenbergian) myth. As explained, fascist myth places the onus on the self, on the individual’s power to overcome and to become heroic, stronger, more spiritual, and thus enter into a society built upon these individualistic virtues. This is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{38} Rosenberg (2004) p.453.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Ibid, pp.3-4.
\end{itemize}
essentially a poor reading of Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), a return to what Nietzsche labelled ‘noble values.’ Bataille does not seem to understand the notion of ‘overcoming’ in the same way. He is almost more pragmatic than his fascist contemporaries; nihilism to him is something that must be lived with, it is not overcome through a return to the noble values, but rather by finding values that cannot be destroyed by nihilism, which is indeed more in line with Nietzsche’s own sentiments.

Yet for all Bataille’s writings against the fascist use of Nietzsche, and on fascism itself, there are troubling snags. The way Bataille writes of fascism does not so much disparage the ideology itself, but rather its approach to ideas, in other words Bataille seems more concerned with the how of fascism than with its outcomes. Even in one of his most sustained essays on fascism, ‘The Psychological Structure of Fascism’ (1933), Bataille treats his subject dispassionately, the purpose of the essay being ‘a rigorous (if not comprehensive) representation of the social superstructure and its relations to the economic infrastructure in the light of fascism.’ Even the more acerbic nature of ‘Nietzsche and the Fascists’ does not demonstrate much of an anti-fascism in any conventional sense. The question remains then: is this a disagreement of philosophical, ideological, or moral significance? In order to help answer this question I will turn now to the matter of Bataille’s own politics.

The Political Bataille

Interpretations of Bataille’s politics are somewhat contentious, and his stance has been described as ambiguous. Denis Hollier writes extensively on the problem of this ambiguity, especially with regards to whether Bataille’s politics were fascist or anti-fascist in his 1990 essay, ‘On Equivocation’. While some scholars, such as Michel Surya, argue that there is no doubt Bataille was anti-fascist, others like Carlo Ginzberg argue that his politics were more fascist than not. Of Bataille’s detractors, one of the most vociferous is the historian, Richard Wolin. Wolin dedicates a chapter of his book

---

The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism, to arguing that Bataille’s methods of political engagement in the 1930s certainly define him as a fascist. Wolin invokes a plethora of arguments that do not always hold up to close scrutiny, beginning with Jürgen Habermas’ assertion that post-structuralism, which was greatly influenced by Bataille, was a kind of ‘young conservatism’ that Wolin argues is not like the neoliberal conservatism that dominated politics when Habermas wrote his 1981 lecture ‘Modernity: An Unfinished Project’, but rather more akin to the conservatism of a group of German proto-fascists from the Weimar republic, such as Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt, Oswald Spengler, and Ludwig Klages. Though Wolin believes there are numerous differences between post-war French thought, and Weimar era German thought, he argues that their parallels come into sharp relief when examining Bataille. He goes on to say that

‘If one scrutinizes the political positions held by Bataille during the 1930s, the theme of left fascism assumes a vivid and disquieting reality … More damning still are the remarks of the left-wing anti-Stalinist, Boris Souvarine, in whose journal, La Critique sociale, many of Bataille’s pathbreaking essays from the 1930s appeared. In his preface to the 1983 republication of the review, Souvarine claims that Bataille was a fascist sympathizer, and that, if he had had the courage of his convictions he would have rallied to the cause.’

This claim by Souvraine’s has already been dismissed by Michèle Richman, Surya, and Harry Weeks, the latter of whom is particularly disappointed of Wolin’s lack of criticality when assessing Souvraine as a source, noting that when he said this of Bataille it was founded on hearsay. Weeks and Richman also offer a robust rebuttal of Wolin’s argument that Bataille’s political sympathies can be discerned from an apparent

affection for fascist Italy, and admiration of fascist methods, by pointing out the obvious, that Bataille never wrote uncritically of the fascist project or power structure.⁴⁹

We might also, as Patrick Ffrench has already done, look to the effect of the war on Bataille’s thought to inform a judgement of his politics. Ffrench avoids the more politically focused discourse engaged by the likes of Wolin that relies on the use of labels and affirmations of political thought. Instead, he produces an assessment of one of the most problematic parts of Bataille’s thought, his preoccupation with sacrifice, in relation to the concentration camps, and his limited writing on the horror of the holocaust after the war had ended.⁵⁰ Using Bataillean logic, Ffrench discerns that the murders that took place in the camps do not ultimately qualify as sacrifice in Bataille’s anthropological understanding of the term as his definition has an implicit mimesis. It necessitates an understanding that the victim is human, and there is commonality between sacrificed and sacrificer, but the Nazis were blind to the humanity of their victims.⁵¹ Yet, and in my opinion quite rightly, Ffrench believes that in light of the concentration camps ‘One can sense, however, that the structure of sacrifice trembles.’⁵² And in the second half of the essay Ffrench cites Bataille’s retreat from the topic of sacrifice and its conflation instead with poetry in the first years following the war as being evidence that Bataille himself was at least somewhat aware of this. But I would propose this awareness and retreat are symptomatic of a trepidation in Bataille that he be misunderstood as a philosopher whose positions would be able to be used to justify fascist murder.

Meanwhile, Hollier finds that the ambiguity of Bataille’s politics is itself an important aspect of his overall philosophy, if not his political philosophy, writing that ‘the Nietzschean lack of knowledge about the future (unknowing as the experience of the

⁵¹ Ibid, p.129.
⁵² Ibid, p.130.
future) to which Bataille refers so often defines not an imperfection, but the very form of historical experience. The equivocal, being the very nature of the present, requires hermeneutical risk.\(^{53}\) While this argument has merit, especially given the inherent equivocation in much of Bataille’s thought, his distaste for the fascist appropriation of Nietzsche’s thought and the formation of the anti-fascist group/publication Contre-Attaque, seem to indicate that despite any perceived ambiguity Bataille was ultimately more anti-fascist than not. The equivocation in this instance is more a matter of this anti-fascism’s praxis and purpose. Many of the ideas Bataille discusses in the myriad outlets he oversaw, from *Documents* to the College of Sociology, via *Acéphale*, especially myth, sovereignty, and the return to instinctual over intellectual living, are similarly important in the construction of the fascist ideology. This overlap of interests with fascism is undoubtedly the cause of the tension surrounding Bataille’s politics. This led to his being labelled as ‘surfasciste’ by certain members of the Surrealist group, especially for his work with Contre-Attaque, despite the group’s original anti-fascist platform.\(^{54}\)

Contre-Attaque was the most orthodox expression of political resistance that Bataille took part in. The group was a joint venture with the leader of the Surrealists, André Breton, someone who more readily identified with communism, and did not share Bataille’s fondness for equivocation. The letter to Pierre Kaan quoted in the previous section was penned during the planning stages of Contre-Attaque, and it was this method of resistance, using fascism’s own tools (or as Weeks would say, weapons) against it, as well as the group being equally critical of democratic regimes (largely for their failure to stop the spread of fascism) that led to the swift unravelling of the group after Jean Dautry’s accusations of surfascism.\(^{55}\) ‘Surfasciste’ soon became a slur, leading to the Surrealist faction of Contre-Attaque abandoning the group.\(^{56}\) Following

\(^{53}\) Hollier, (1990) p.22.
\(^{56}\) Ibid.
this exodus Bataille dissolved what was left of the Contre-Attaque, Jean-Michel Besnier
cites the reason for this ultimate dissolution as stemming from an acute awareness of
the misconception placed upon the group due to Bataille’s proposed methods of anti-
fascism.\textsuperscript{57} But despite this, perhaps now with retrospect, ‘surfasciste’ is a useful term
when discussing Bataille’s politics. The prefix ‘sur’ is itself something of an equivocation
as it comprises many meanings: on, over, about, beyond, towards, etc. Is ‘surfasciste’
intended to mean that Bataille is more fascist than the fascists, or does it mean that he
has created something beyond fascism in the way the Surrealists aimed to create works
beyond reality? It may even be a warning that the path of Bataille’s thought will lead him
towards fascism. The label speaks to the seeming obsession of Bataille with fascism.
As Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi notes, in the latter half of the 1930s ‘For Bataille, now
disillusioned with the communist experiment, fascism raised even more troubling
questions about the relationship between affective forces and politics. How to
understand fascism’s success, or more generally fascism, became Bataille’s major
preoccupation.’\textsuperscript{58} This preoccupation led him towards forming two parallel organisations,
the purpose of which was to relocate the sacred in modern life: the secret society
Acéphale, and The College of Sociology.

\textbf{The Sacred and The Profane, The Public and the Secret}

The College of Sociology was a loose collective of intellectuals that banded around
Bataille and notably included Roger Caillois, Michel Leiris, Pierre Klossowski, Jean
Wahl, and Alexander Kojève, among others. It ran from October 1937 to June 1939. It is
also often mentioned that Walter Benjamin would sometimes visit their meetings at the
Café Grand Verfour, though there is no record of Benjamin having ever addressed the
college, there are letters showing he relayed the events to other members of the

\textsuperscript{57} Jean-Michel Besnier, ‘Bataille the Emotive Intellectual,’ in \textit{Bataille: Writing the Sacred} ed. Carolyn
\textsuperscript{58} ibid p.128.
Institute for Social Research: Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer.\footnote{See for example Benjamin’s letter to Adorno after attending Kojève’s lecture on Hegel and the end of history given to the College, reproduced in Michael Weingrad, ‘The College of Sociology and the Institute of Social Research,’ \textit{New German Critique} No.84 (2001) p.141.} Despite moving on from Contre-Attaque, suspicions of a cryptofascism or proto-fascism still clung to certain members of the College, and Adorno seemed concerned about the direction of Caillois’s thought in particular.\footnote{Ibid, p.139.} But what was it in the College that could keep such suspicions alive, and perhaps even validate them?\footnote{Roger Caillois, ‘For a College of Sociology: Introduction,’ in Hollier ed. (1988) p.11.}

The first mention of the College came in a note that was published in issue 3-4 of \textit{Acéphale} (1937) announcing its formation, and its intent to go beyond science in its study of social structures. The notice stated that science was hindered by an overt focus on so-called primitive societies at the expense of modern ones, and to build a community dedicated to the study of sacred sociology. The following year in an edition of the \textit{Nouvelle Revue Francais}, the lead articles were written by Bataille, Caillois and Leiris, and these made up a whole piece titled ‘For a College of Sociology’. In his introduction for this Caillos defined sacred sociology as being ‘the study of social existence in every manifestation, where there is a clear, active presence of the sacred.’\footnote{Ibid.} He goes on to say, ‘the intention is, thus, to establish the points of coincidence between the fundamental obsessive tendencies of individual psychology and the principal structures governing social organization and in command of its revolutions.’\footnote{Bataille, ‘The College of Sociology,’ in Hollier ed. (1988) p.341.}

The relationship between affective forces and politics that Falasca-Zamponi mentions in the above section harkens to some of the closing remarks from Bataille’s final 1939 address to the college, which is arguably an excellent summation of the College’s intended purpose. In the lecture Bataille asks, in words that reference James Frazer’s \textit{The Golden Bough}: ‘Could there be a society without a spiritual power radically separate from temporal power?’\footnote{Ibid.} The question is left hanging, perhaps because it is so difficult to answer, and indeed even more difficult for a reader than a listener, as any
sense of emphasis has long since been lost. It seems to echo Carl Schmitt’s assertion (made in 1922) that ‘all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularised theological concepts.’ But whereas Schmitt is explicitly discussing the way in which the modern political power-structure has been mapped using theological power-structures as a guide, and the ways in which these equate, Bataille’s question contains an allusion to the ineffable. He chooses the word spiritual, rather than theological, or religious, allowing for vagaries in its interpretation. A spiritual power could be any form of ethereal force, it could be the sacred, it could be sacrifice, it could be myth. Any of these qualify as a form of spiritual power in Bataillean thought. And where Schmitt writes of a conflation of the theological and temporal, Bataille speaks of a separation of these elements. He is asking whether it is the spiritual that is more integral to the formation of society instead of the temporal. The latter may well be modelled on the former, but temporal power is not as effective at binding humanity together. In the words of Jean Luc-Nancy ‘It seems that all religion can do is assemble a community … one is always sent back to the etymology of “religion” as *religare* meaning “to link,” “to tie by a bond.”’ A power which is purely temporal does not have the communifying value of the sacred behind it. This is the root of Bataille’s obsession with fascism: its ability to combine the sacred and the state, the spiritual and the temporal, what the Italian historian Emilio Gentile labels the ‘sacralisation of politics’. With this in mind, Bataille’s politics, while still bound in the ethereal, start to reveal at least a more tangible project: a discursive struggle to reclaim the mystical elements that can form lasting community from the grasp of fascism.

This led to an interest in secret societies and orders, and on January 24, 1939, Bataille delivered the lecture ‘Hitler and the Teutonic Order’ at the college. No manuscript of this lecture has been discovered, but according to the historian Eric

Kurlander there had been ‘a resurgence of interest in occult-Masonic orders that merged the practices of astrology and spiritualism with neo-pagan religion and politics’\textsuperscript{67} in the first decades of the twentieth century and the Teutonic Order was one such conservative masonic order. Among some Nazi scholars such as Rosenberg, the Teutonic knighthood was venerated for its sense of honour.\textsuperscript{68} In the absence of any text, Hollier attempts to piece together parts of other texts that may have informed this lecture, particularly\textit{La Gerbe des Forces} by Alphonse de Chateaubriand (1937) which Caillios had read. In writing of the book, Caillios notes that there was an attempt to recreate such orders in the Third Reich,\textsuperscript{69} for example Heinrich Himmler initially wished to model the S.S after the Order.\textsuperscript{70} Though interestingly the Teutonic Order was disbanded by Hitler after the\textit{Anschluss} (the union of Germany and Austria) in 1938.\textsuperscript{71} Taking into account Bataille’s belief that fascism must be fought with its own weapons, his forging of a secret society can be seen as an extension of this belief. Likewise, Hollier offers that Bataille was not alone in this desire, he writes ‘for Caillios the College of Sociology must become an Order of Sociologists (in the sense in which one might speak of the Order of Teutonic Knights), a dense nucleus from which a sense of plot and conspiracy ... may spread.’\textsuperscript{72} For Bataille, the secret society can also be seen as an extension of his loyalty to Nietzsche, as in a later, post-war, text Bataille opines on Nietzsche’s lifelong desire to found an order, despite that he is often ‘considered to exist at the summit of individualism.’\textsuperscript{73} Bataille states that this individualism was part of a greater concept of community in which “great individuals” ... meant something only in so far as they constituted a mother-cell of a new whole, of a secondary community, of a recast and rejuvenated society.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{67} Eric Kurlander,\textit{Hitler’s Monsters: A Supernatural History of the Third Reich} (Yale Scholarship Online, ebook: 2018) p.15.
\textsuperscript{68} Gregers Einer Forssling,\textit{Nordicism and Modernity} (Palgrave Macmillan, ebook: 2020) p.159.
\textsuperscript{72} Hollier ed. (1988) p.145.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
As Bataille’s political aims were rooted in the ethereal, it makes sense that his political praxis moved in this direction also. As Contre-Attaque was ending, Bataille began to plan the formation of the secret society Acéphale. Bataille resigned as the general secretary of Contre-Attaque on 2 April 1936, and just two days later he had written a programme, a manifesto-like set of 11 points, that acted as the main principles of Acéphale and disseminated it to those members of Contre-Attaque with whom he was still on good terms.\textsuperscript{75} While the initial idea to form the group immediately followed the dissolution of Contre-Attaque, the group was not truly realised until February 1937, furthermore (and just like the College) it was short-lived disbanding in 1939 just prior to the Second World War.\textsuperscript{76} Aside from Bataille, and Caillois, other members of Acéphale included Georges Ambrosino, a physicist who had been a member of Contre-Attaque; Pierre Andler, a contributor to \textit{La Critique sociale}, also erstwhile of Contre-Attaque; René Chenon, a former student of Ambrosino, who often contributed to \textit{La Critique sociale}; Jacques Chavy, another former member of Contre-Attaque; Patrick Waldberg, an American who associated with the Surrealists, and was the secretary of the college of sociology; and Isabelle Farner (later Walberg), a sculptor who also worked on translations of Nietzsche for the group. There were others, but aside from Caillois those I have listed were possibly the last remaining members of the society having been the only ones to whom Bataille addressed his final letters relating to Acéphale.\textsuperscript{77}

The secret society had an internal journal which was often used to plan issues of the magazine (even though not all involved in the society contributed to the magazine, and not all those that contributed to the magazine participated in the secret society). This may explain the declaration that ‘WE ARE FEROCIOUSLY RELIGIOUS and, in so far as our existence amounts to the condemnation of everything that is known today, an inner necessity demands that we be equally unyielding.’\textsuperscript{78} Made in the opening essay of \textit{Acéphale} 1, ‘The Sacred Conspiracy’. And Bataille later recalled that his attempt with

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{75} Bataille, (2018) p.109. \\
\textsuperscript{78} Bataille, ‘The Sacred Conspiracy,’ in Ibid. P.124.
\end{flushleft}
the secret society was to found a religion which was ‘antichristian, essentially Nietzschean.’ But what were the elements of this Nietzschean religion?

The programme Bataille created for Acéphale was essentially revolutionary in its basis, though not in any conventional sense, containing points such as ‘7. To fight for the break-up of all communities, including, national, socialist, and communist communities and churches, apart from this universal community,’ and ‘9. To take part in the destruction of the world as it presently exists, with eyes wide open to the world that will follow.’ The idea of this world that will follow is nebulous in its description. In the programme Bataille insists on the formation of a creative universal community. Further, this community is not utopian, for the importance of crime, and of violence is affirmed as part of the totality of human experience. And of course how could violence and crime be beyond the remit of a group that seeks to destroy the world as it presently exists?

But much as with the Futurists, this destruction was a creative act intimating the Nietzschean foundations of such a view for whom creation and destruction go hand in hand: ‘We can destroy only as creators.’ (GS §58). For point three of the programme is ‘To take on the function of destruction and decomposition, but as an achievement, not as a negation of being.’ This further affirms the mysticism inherent in Bataille’s politics as this point is a firm indication of the necessity of sacrifice. As demonstrated in point seven, it is largely communities native to the modern industrial era that Bataille is seeking to destroy, and he had demonstrated as early as the late 1920s in Documents, specifically in the critical dictionary entry for ‘Slaughterhouse’, a belief that it was the removal of sacrifice, and hence a lack of connection to the sacred that plagued society in the modern era. This is confirmed by the purpose of the College of Sociology as the

---

81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
College was dedicated to ‘the study of social existence in every manifestation, where there is a clear, active presence of the sacred.’

The sacred varied in meaning from member to member of the College/Acéphale. Michel Leiris for example had an incredibly personal and intimate definition of the sacred. In ‘The Sacred in Everyday Life’ Leiris lists the maternalised figure of a salamander stove, several of his father’s possessions (his gun, money box, and top hat—symbols of his paternal duty and authority), and his parents’ bedroom as sacred objects and places. For Bataille the sacred is a little more nebulous, containing multitudes. To begin with, the sacred has a polarity (this is also evident in Leiris’ ideas), there is the left (profane) and the right (pure), Bataille also describes these as the repulsive and attractive elements of the sacred. We may also think of them as the Dionysian and the Apollonian, for just as Nietzsche in the Birth of Tragedy declares these polar drives, one dark and intoxicating, the other light and dream-like, only to further on unite Apollo and Dionysus in ‘The Dionysiac World View’, Bataille also writes of how the left and right poles of the sacred are, in a manner, interchangeable, and interdependent. In ‘Attraction and Repulsion II’ a lecture given to the College in February 1938, Bataille provides the example of a village church, the sacred nucleus of a community, despite this being an attractive, right poled location, what gives the church its sanctity is a collection of repulsive aspects:

in many cases, bodies have been buried under the paving stones, and in all churches a saint’s bone has been sealed under the altar during the consecration of the edifice. All the dead bodies from the agglomeration may have been buried within the immediate confines as well. The whole

---

86 Bataille, ‘Attraction and Repulsion II: Social Structure,’ ibid. pp.121
87 ‘The struggle between both manifestations of the Will [Dionysian and Apollonian] had an extraordinary goal, the creation of a higher possibility of existence and the attainment thereby of a yet higher glorification (through art). The form of glorification was no longer the art of semblance [as associated with Apollo] but rather the tragic art, in which, however, the art of semblance has been entirely absorbed. Apollo and Dionysos have become united.’ (DWV §3)
possesses a certain force of repulsion that generally guarantees an interior silence, keeping the noise of life at a distance. At the same time it possesses a force of attraction, being the object of an unquestionable affective concentration that is more or less constant on the part of the inhabitants, a concentration partly independent of sentiments that can be described as specifically Christian.  

Sacrifice is another example discussed by Bataille of the darker, but necessary, aspect of the sacred which invokes a communal magnetism. In Patrick Ffrench’s words, ‘The experience of sacrifice as Bataille conceives it depends on an identification with the victim or at least on a sense that the sacrificial wound is a wound in the community, in man as such.’ As will be discussed in greater depth in the following chapter this wound opens up communication and builds community. Further, there were political examples that Bataille could draw on to evidence his theory of sacrifice acting as not only a communal, but also political foundation, notably, the regicide of Louis XVI. As Jesse Goldhammer writes, in France

the concept of sacrificial violence became inextricably linked to the formation of both political and spiritual communities bound together by traditionally elevated notions of power. Sacrifice accomplished this remarkable task by skilfully manipulating the sacred categories that structure people’s perceptions of authority. Impurity and purity, sin and redemption, moral decadence and regeneration—these are the duelling sacred polarities altered by sacrificial bloodshed in the French Discourse.

This specific sacrifice, the execution of Louis XVI, was not specifically addressed by Bataille in Acéphale or the College, but both Caillois and Klossowski discussed it in

---

89 Ffrench (2006) p.129
addresses to the College. Klossowski in ‘The Marquis de Sade and the French Revolution’ and Caillois in ‘The Sociology of the Executioner’. For his part, in 1938 Bataille wrote a piece titled ‘The Obelisk’ for the magazine *Mesures* (edited by Jean Paulhan, another contributing member of the College). This article was named for the obelisk that was erected in the Place de la Concorde, the public square that was the site of Louis’s execution. In the essay, Louis’s regicide is conflated with the death of God, and Bataille announces that the ‘*The Place de la Concorde* is the space where the death of God must be announced and shouted precisely because the obelisk is its calmest negation.’ As Bataille reminds us, the public square is not just the site of regicide, but also where Nietzsche’s madman announced God’s death. Despite the regicide being foundational for the French republic, in sacrificing the sovereign, God’s regent in the temporal space, the revolutionaries opened themselves up to a similar disorientation. But the obelisk, ancient and foreboding, emanating the weight of Egyptian sovereign power orients those in its presence.

Bataille writes of the power and symbolism of both obelisks and pyramids in ancient Egyptian culture and goes on to note that it was on encountering a pyramid-shaped rock while walking near Surlei that Nietzsche conceived of the eternal recurrence. This was an orienting experience for Nietzsche, that like the death of God also first appears in *The Gay Science*. Nietzsche describes the eternal recurrence as ‘the highest attainable formula of affirmation’ (*EH*, Books: Thus Spoke Zarathustra, §1). Some, such as Arthur Danto, have read the eternal recurrence as a cosmogonic system, but Deleuze argues that despite Nietzsche proclaiming the eternal recurrence to be ‘the most extreme form of nihilism’ (*WP* §55) (in contradiction to his claim in *Ecce Homo*) it actually serves to annihilate nihilism because ‘only the eternal return can complete nihilism because it makes negation a negation of reactive forces.

---

92 Ibid. p.213.
themselves.'

94 The obelisk, ‘the purest image of the head and of the heavens’ similarly negates the negation of the sacrifice in its faux-sovereign majesty, however this is only for ‘those who do not look at it, who are not struck by it; but a mortal torment is the lot of the one before whom its reality becomes naked.’ Yet the mortal torment of those faced with the reality of the square’s sacrificial void does not deter Bataille from a belief in the sanctity and use value of sacrifice. We also know that the Place de la Concorde continued to hold a sacred power for Bataille as it was used in at least one initiation to Acéphale, the former member Michel Koch told Marina Galletti that he signed his pledge to the society in front of Bataille and Ambrosino while in a taxi at the Place de la Concorde.

96 This signing of a pledge was just one of several rituals undertaken by initiates to the secret society. The members travelled to the site of a lightning-struck oak tree near the ruins of the fortress Montjoie within the forest of Marly where they conducted rituals. Waldberg recalls a ritual of blood, offering his arm to someone bearing a knife that looked like the one wielded by Masson’s illustration of the acéphalic man on the cover of Acéphale. Galletti also notes a prohibition among members on shaking hands with antisemites (it is worth mentioning that several members of Acéphale, Andler, Chenon, and Koch were Jewish). A small piece of evidence in this secret society’s opposition to Nazism. All this was in an attempt to reinvigorate a sense of the sacred in society and found a community with the power to defeat what Bataille labelled the ‘tricephalous [three-headed] monster’, its three heads being Christianity, Socialism, and Fascism. Through Acéphale and the College, Stoekl argues that Bataille was in a way revising Durkheim, who held that festivals and rituals, grounded in the sacred, were an essential means of renewing society. But what for Durkheim was fundamentally rational was for Bataille the opposite.

97 Brotchie, ‘Marly, Montjoie and the Oak Tree Stuck by Lightning,’ in Ibid. p.51.
is synthesised with Nietzsche. The rituals and festivals become those of Dionysos. The sacred element becomes ambiguous, and the value of sacrifice is affirmed.

It is the way the act of sacrifice manages to conflate all aspects of the sacred, drawing together the impure and pure, the left and right, that creates a disorienting wound which opens possibility, that allows it to become the cohesive element in the foundation of a community. Sacrifice was, in the words of Leslie Hill ‘like a puzzle that, once unlocked, would reveal the founding secrets of humanity itself, not to mention the fundamental economy of religion, poetry, and philosophy too.’ As such Bataille’s politics in the late 1930s are founded in a belief of the power of sacrifice, and the sacred, and so these elements become vital to his projects. It is little wonder then that rumours of a planned human sacrifice surround Acéphale, and that the magazine of Acéphale took as its cover André Masson’s iconic headless being, the acéphalic man (fig.20), so full of allusions to sacrifice, myth, and sovereignty. There is much insight to be gained into the political philosophy and the Nietzschean aspects of Bataille’s thought, through the mythology the acéphalic man represents, and it can act as a key to help decode the difference between Bataille’s political project and that of fascism, and to get beneath the surface of Bataille’s project. In the following chapter I will discuss the Acéphalic man, and the mythos that surrounds him in further detail.

It is difficult to conclude this chapter in a standalone fashion other than to say that for Bataille, Nietzsche’s philosophy was of paramount importance, and its fragmentary and malleable nature, shared by Bataille’s own thought, made them both susceptible to fascist appropriation/interpretation. Bataille did not help his own case with his equivocational nature, and it seems that later in his career, after the war he began to realise the danger posed by the instability of his thought. Not just evidenced by

---

103 The first acknowledgement of the plan to sacrifice one of the members of Acéphale was from Roger Caillois in 1945. In 1995 another member of the society, Patrick Waldberg recalled a moment in the final meeting of the group which took place just before the outbreak of the second world war, Bataille asked the other three attendees if any of them would assent to execute him. They all declined. C.f Galletti ‘The Secret Society of Acéphale,’ in Brotchie and Galletti ed. (2017) p.19. and Patrick Waldberg ‘Extract from Acéphalogram,’ In Brotchie and Galletti ed. (2017) p.456.
Ffrench’s analysis of his turn to poetry over sacrifice, but also by his own admission calling Acéphale ‘a monstrous mistake’. But as the next chapter shows, this fragility of thought seems to be a necessity in Bataille’s own moral understanding even in the face of fascism’s political dominance.

VI I Acéphalic Being: Masson, Bataille and a Revolutionary Nietzscheanism

Having discussed the more practical elements of Bataille’s discursive engagement with fascist writers and thinkers over Nietzsche’s legacy I will now deepen my analysis of Bataille’s antifascist praxis (if indeed it can be called praxis) through a Nietzschean vision articulated in the magazine Acéphale, and in his concept of summit morality, which is most widely theorised in La Somme Athéologique, a trio of books published during the Second World War comprising Inner Experience (1943), Guilty (1944), and On Nietzsche (1945), which are perhaps the least analytical, and most personal of all Bataille’s writings. The first part of this chapter is an examination of how with Acéphale, and the illustrations the magazine’s co-founder, the Surrealist André Masson (1896-1987) made for it, Bataille and Masson envisioned and represented a new form of community as a response to the rise of fascism. I argue that with an iconographical reading of the illustrations in Acéphale, a self-identification with Nietzsche on the part of both Bataille and Masson comes into view. Even from cursory readings of Acéphale, the lectures given to The College of Sociology, and the accounts of the secret society of Acéphale, one can see that Bataille, and his cohort were enchanted with the idea of bringing a sense of the sacred into society, here I show the mythological factors, and the Nietzschean foundations of such a project. In the second part of this chapter, I move on to Bataille’s reimagining of morality as summit and decline in relation to Nietzschean thought, using the concept of Promethean Virtue from Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy as a framework to help understand this particularly difficult element of Bataille’s work, as it seems to me that this concept of Nietzsche’s underpins a good portion of Bataille’s moral understanding. This is the succeeding idea to the sacred, and presents a different, but equally important part of Bataille’s Nietzschean thought.
Masson, an artist described as ‘mythological in his essence” by Jean-Paul Sartre, had been part of Breton’s initial surrealist group. He met Bataille in 1925 when their mutual friend Michel Leiris brought Bataille to Masson’s studio at 45 Rue Blomet. The two became close friends, even becoming brothers-in-law for a time with Bataille being married to actress Sylvia Maklès (who would go on to marry psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan) from 1928-1946, (though they separated in 1934) and Masson marrying her sister Rose in 1934. Masson would go on to produce a number of illustrations for Bataille’s writings, notably the rather graphic drawings he created for Bataille’s 1928 novella *The Story of the Eye*. Like Bataille, Masson was one of those who received the sharp end of André Breton’s pen in the ‘Second Manifesto of Surrealism,’ and was excommunicated from the mainstream group. Though, as William Rubin and Carolyn Lanchner point out, Masson had been growing distant from the group for several years, spending a good deal of time away from Paris, and he had already had reservations about Breton’s authoritarian streak which led to a verbal altercation between the two prior to the publishing of ‘The Second Manifesto of Surrealism’. This aversion to authoritarianism was also at the crux of the anti-fascist projects of *Acéphale* and *Acéphale*, and is evident in the illustration of the acéphalic man that adorned the magazine’s cover. Like Bataille, Masson felt he owed a great debt to Nietzsche, saying:

I discovered Nietzsche when I first arrived in Paris […]. I am usually very good at telling how things have come to be, at discerning origins – in the case of Nietzsche it proved impossible to do so. And this became part of my personal mythology – the fact that Nietzsche seemed to have come out of nowhere so that he may give birth to me. Because I feel that before discovering Nietzsche, before

---

5 Ibid, p.132.
discovering his work, his thought that was my thought, my own perception of myself did not exist. And it is always so.\textsuperscript{6}

This extreme level of identification with Nietzsche on Masson’s part recalls Bataille’s own remark that ‘I am the only one who thinks of himself not as a commentator of Nietzsche but as being the same as he’.\textsuperscript{7} Not only did they use the magazine \textit{Acéphale} to defend the legacy of the philosopher they so admired, but also to espouse a set of values founded on Nietzschean principles. Furthermore, this espousal of values was not only conducted in writing, but they were also illustrated by Masson who was the sole illustrator for the journal, creating a number of drawings for its pages. All these illustrations contained the same figure he drew for the cover, the acéphalic man—though he occasionally took on different guises, as explained below. In the first part of this chapter, I discuss Masson’s illustrations for \textit{Acéphale}, and how they act as an interpretive tool for the philosophy espoused within the journal’s pages and that Bataille had based on a Nietzschean understanding of being, and the self.

\textbf{The Multiple Identities of the Acéphalic Man}

According to Masson, while he was staying in the Catalunyan city of Tossa de Mar, during the mid-thirties, Bataille asked him to illustrate the cover design for his new journal, \textit{Acéphale}. In Masson’s words, Bataille said to him ‘Give me a headless god— you’ll figure the rest out yourself.’\textsuperscript{8} As a result Masson produced the acéphalic man, an unnerving and allegorical image that contains numerous visual references and instances of symbolism, the significance of which have been a source of continued discussion among scholars.\textsuperscript{9} Even Bataille’s interpretation of the figure goes against

\textsuperscript{9} Further on I note interpretations that work to identify the acéphalic man by Jeremy Biles, Shep Steiner, and Allan Stoekl, as well as those of Masson and Bataille. Further interpretations of this image and its
Masson’s recollection of the request, stating “He is not a man. He is not a god either.” The journal of Acéphale was the public face of the secret society bearing the same name that represented a move away from conventional political action and into the esoteric for Bataille.

When studying the acéphalic man one is struck by the lack of the head (or at least of a conventionally placed head), acéphale after all does mean headless, and the apparent virility of the body despite this lack. The body is lithe and muscular, almost statuesque in its firm pose. The body’s power seems well rooted, coming up from the feet and radiating from the chest with stars in place of nipples, and then out into the hands grasping the sacrificial dagger in the left and the flaming heart in the right. This sense of power does not dissipate from the hollow at the top of the neck. The sharp lines throughout the body, particularly the dagger-like shape in the lower left leg, bear a stylistic resemblance to Masson’s massacre sketches and paintings from the early 1930s, lending a further air of violence to the figure to complement its virility. One might ask how can a body exist like this, with so much energy and power, when it is in a state of decapitation?


presume decapitation and the prior presence of a head is to conform the acéphalic man to human standards when he is not human. So, what is he then, this headless being? Naturally there are multiple interpretations. Following on from Bataille’s pronouncement of what he is not, Jeremy Biles proposes that he is both man and God,\textsuperscript{12} whilst Shep Steiner, taking a different cue from Bataille’s quote in the essay ‘Propositions’ that ‘the headless man merges and melds with the identification with the superhuman’\textsuperscript{13} argues that he, along with many of the other male figures Masson drew in this period, is an Übermensch.\textsuperscript{14} In her 2016 PhD thesis, Lesley Thornton Cronin also conforms to this view of the acéphale as an Übermensch.\textsuperscript{15} Likewise, in a recent article, the prolific translator of Bataille, Allan Stoekl, refers to the acéphalac man as ‘that headless superman’.\textsuperscript{16} Given both Bataille and Masson’s deepening fascination with Nietzsche in this period, this identification with the Übermensch is a logical assumption. Furthermore, Clark Poling has already noted that in a 1936 letter to Bataille, Masson referred to one of the illustrations he did for Acéphale as his Zarathustra drawing, and Poling often refers to the figure as Acéphale/Zarathustra.\textsuperscript{17} But even within the pages of Acéphale, he changes and takes on new identities. In the issue titled ‘Dionysos’, he is drawn as the debaucherous god of wine himself. The illustration titled Dionysos (fig.21) shows the acéphale/Dionysos stabbing himself in the side with his dagger, and his flaming heart is replaced by a bunch of grapes hanging from a stick. He is also shown in the same issue, no longer acéphalic, but as the bull-headed minotaur, which is perhaps a further identification with Dionysos as one of excerpts from the opening text, taken from Walter Otto’s book 1933 book Dionysus, takes Taurus the bull to be one of Dionysus’ forms:

\textsuperscript{15} Thornton-Cronin (2016) p.267.
\textsuperscript{17} Poling (2008) p.92.
'Taurus was one of the forms of Dionysus not only because of its fertility and abundance of life, but also because of its raging madness, its dangerous nature'.\(^\text{18}\)

There is a collection of possibilities when it comes to the Acéphalic Man: he is a god, demi-god, Übermensch, Zarathustra, and Dionysos (which given Zarathustra’s identity melding with that of Nietzsche’s own, and Nietzsche’s self-identification with Dionysos ‘Have I been understood? — *Dionysus against the crucified one…!*’ (*EH, Destiny §9*) leads to an identification of the acéphale with Nietzsche himself). We can also look to other works Masson produced to deepen an iconographical reading of the acéphale.

There are similar drawings in Masson’s oeuvre both from much earlier and much later than the drawings he made for *Acéphale*, that can be used as a point of comparison. In a 1925 drawing featured in *Andre Masson: Drawings*, titled *La mère* [The Mother] (fig.22) Masson used some of the same visual motifs seen in the acéphale man. There are stars in place of nipples and, while she does not hold a labyrinth in her gut, there is a pear that has been cut in half with seeds in place of ovaries, and in place of her head is a giant blooming flower. The overall style is more in line with some of the other drawings done for *Acéphale* as opposed to the cover image (particularly the illustrations for the first two issues) with a lighter and more fluid line. The mother figure is seemingly floating in a seated position, she is surrounded by a flurry of crosshatched lines as well as more jagged and more flowing shapes while several fish swim around her, including what is possibly a misogynistic joke on the part of Masson with one of these fish placed at her crotch. In Michel Leiris’s introductory essay to *André Masson: Drawings*, he notes that even from the earliest drawings, there is a recurring theme of cosmogony in Masson’s work. Leiris writes:

> His first known drawings (pen-drawings often heightened with watercolour) are erotic: paradisiac embraces antedating all the laws of gravity and the setting up of all rules; male and female bodies locked together, symbolising cosmogonies.

---

Hence the act of physical love as part of genesis became for him, very early on, a fundamental theme, and one which manifests itself unconsciously in drawing—more so than in the more premeditated medium of painting.\(^{19}\)

While *La Mère* has certain hints of eroticism with her nudity and the symbolic fertility of the riven pear in her torso, this shows that preoccupation with cosmogony is not always explored through erotic scenes. The chaotic meeting of lines, the varied symbols of new and renewed life and of course the title, *La Mère*, the mother makes us ask: is she the mother, is she Gaia revelling in her creation? Greek mythology was a fertile ground of themes for Masson throughout his career. The 2007 exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Andros, *André Masson and Ancient Greece*, featured nearly 100 of Masson’s works exploring Greek mythology. It was against the backdrop of Arthur Evans’ excavation and reconstruction of Knossos in Crete (beginning in 1900 and continuing into the thirties), the centre of Minoan culture, supposed home of Daedalus’ labyrinth, and the stories of Pasiphae and Poseidon’s bull, and their child, the minotaur, that Masson and Bataille became involved with one of *Acéphale*’s precursors, the journal *Minotaure* (1933-39).\(^{20}\) *Minotaure* was edited by Breton (with whom Masson reconciled in this period) and Pierre Mabille. The magazine took inspiration from the earlier review *Documents* (1929-31), which was largely edited by Bataille. The original editorial board of *Documents* comprised several prominent museum workers\(^{21}\) and as such it had a wide-ranging purview summed up by its descriptor of being a journal for archaeology, fine arts and ethnography. Likewise, *Minotaure* had a broad scope, featuring artworks by the likes of Picasso, Dalí, and Masson, as well as writings on topics similar to *Documents*: ethnology, archaeology, and the fine arts. While Bataille

---


\(^{20}\) c.f Cathy Gere, *Knossos and the Prophets of Modernism* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London: 2009) for a thorough exploration of the impact the excavation and reconstruction of Knossos had on Modernism. It’s relation to the journal *Minotaure* and particularly on Picasso is found in chapter 5.

would only contribute to one edition of *Minotaure*, Masson was frequently featured, and some suggest that the two of them were the originators of the journal’s title, though others claim it was Roger Vitrac.\(^{22}\) the Minotaur itself would be a recurrent theme in his work. In one interview from 1986 Masson described the Minotaur as having ‘a strong and baneful influence’ on him.\(^{23}\) In his essay, ‘André Masson’s Monsters: Making Art in a Minotaurian Era’, Oliver Shell, cites Breton’s words from an article he wrote in the final edition of *Minotaure* about Masson, that Masson was ‘tracing life back to its very source.’\(^{24}\) Shell declares this to be prophetic of a new phase that Masson would undertake once he settled in Connecticut during the Second World War, in which his artwork took on a telluric element, which he contrasts with the monsters (of which the minotaur is the most notable) that dominated his pre-war works.\(^{25}\) But this is a narrow conception of the source of life on Shell’s part. I would argue that Masson’s preoccupation with mythological themes is also a preoccupation with the source of life. A similar observation is made by Doris Birmingham in her excellent essay regarding the recurrence of Pasiphaë and the bull in Masson’s work as she stylistically links Masson’s 1943 painting *Pasiphaë* with his telluric works, citing the influence of the mythographer Jakob Bachofen, and Roger Caillois on Masson, the latter of whom wrote about the myth of Pasiphaë in his 1938 book *Man and the Sacred*.\(^{26}\) Taking into consideration Masson and Bataille’s shared fascination with Hellenic culture,\(^{27}\) the acéphalic man’s statuesque appearance redolent of Greek sculpture, his ability to contain multiple identities including Dionysos, one might equally ask, is he also a Titan? After all, like the Titan Prometheus he is a bearer of fire, holding the flaming sacred heart which Masson tells us is not the conventional sacred heart belonging to

\(^{22}\) Jed Rasula, ‘Dangerous Games and New Mythologies: *Cercle et Carre* (1930); *Art Concret* (1930); *Abstraction-Creation* (1932-5); and *Minotaure* (1933-9),’ in ibid, p.278.


\(^{25}\) Ibid.


Christ, ‘but rather to our master Dionysus.’ His labyrinthine guts are displayed from his riven torso, as if waiting to be plucked out by an eagle. In some of the further illustrations Masson created for Acéphale, we see the acéphalic man in chaotic environs, and in a mountainous world of eruption and creation further enforcing this Olympian connection. This would not be the only headless Titan to be drawn by Masson: in a 1971 etching titled Titan (fig.23) a colossal figure stands, once again surrounded by a cacophony of shapes both harsh and fluid. Like La Mère, a fish swims between his legs, and, like the acéphale, where his genitals should be instead there is a small head. Most notably of all he is also acéphalic, but instead of a hollow at the top of the neck there is an explosion of forms, shapes and lines protruding outwards mostly down his left-hand side. Prometheus himself was a theme for Masson in the painting The Torture of Prometheus dated 1945. In this painting Prometheus’ body becomes a compressed mess of lines barely distinguishable from the eagle swooping down in the centre of the canvas to gnaw at his belly, the merging of the two returns the work to one of Masson’s most persistent themes, the labyrinth.

This is not the first time Masson integrated Prometheus with a different myth, David Lomas argues that there is a prefiguring of Bataille’s ‘Van Gogh Prometheus’ in the figure of Osiris, from Masson’s 1936 series of etchings Sacrifices. In Osiris (fig.24) the Egyptian god of the same name is seen jumping above a field of corn, which was part of his initial purview as an agricultural god, before also becoming the god of the afterlife and resurrection. His body here is like that of the acéphalic man, strong and muscular and there is a labyrinth in his gut, but his head, unlike in traditional representations of Osiris, has been replaced by a burning sun, even though he is more

---

29 The mountain in one of these Acéphale drawings is Montserrat, where Masson and his wife Rose were forced to spend a night after getting caught in a treacherous fog. This was a formative experience for Masson recalling a night he spent wounded on the battlefield of the Chemin de Dames in the First World War. Inspiring the Heraclitan poem ‘Du Haut de Montesrrat’. C.f Cox, ‘Presocratic Surrealism: Bataille and Masson with Nietzsche, Sade and Herakleitos,’ unpublished.
regularly associated with the sun after it had set, or in later texts, the moon.\textsuperscript{31} It might be compared to the small illustration of an acéphale in the preface of Masson’s \textit{Anatomy of my Universe} (1943) in which the figure, bereft of his dagger and sacred heart, and without a labyrinth in his torso, is given a black sun for a head—perhaps a sun that has set. Like Prometheus, Osiris is a tragic figure. Osiris was murdered by his brother Set, not once, but twice. First, Set trapped Osiris in a box and drowned him in the Nile, and then after his resurrection by his wife Isis, Set dismembered him, and scattered the different pieces of his body across Egypt. But his death was also a life-giving act, as the myth goes that his drowning caused the Nile to flood and create fertile land.\textsuperscript{32} But it is giving this Osiris/acéphale a sun head that is the source of the promethean conflation.

In an extrapolation from Bataille’s readings of Frazer (whose \textit{The Golden Bough} and its theme of the dying god was the inspiration behind \textit{Sacrifices}) and Bataille’s essay ‘Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent van Gogh’ (1930), Neil Cox argues that ‘Bataille agrees with those who find the eagle [the agent of Zeus] himself, not Prometheus, culpable of having stolen fire from the wheel of the sun. Thus Prometheus is not being punished—rather he is the means for Zeus to sacrifice himself—and the eternally regenerating liver of Prometheus is the figure of the endlessly sacrificed body of God’.\textsuperscript{33} Whether Osiris, Dionysos, or Prometheus, the acéphalic man’s godly identities are all sacrificial in nature.

To identify the acéphalic man with Prometheus (or indeed with any Titan) as I have done above is, in a sense, to do the same as Leiris when referring to Masson’s earlier drawings, it is to identify him with an origin myth, the acéphale as a cosmogony. Prometheus and the titans, as children and grandchildren of Gaia and Ouranus, are inevitably bound in the imaginary to the mythic creation of the world. Furthermore, the mythographer Apollodorus (c. 186–120 BCE) credits Prometheus with the creation of

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
The myth that Prometheus created man is also to be found in Goethe’s *Prometheus* (1789), in which Prometheus recounts his defiance of Zeus, and in a display of almost Bataillean sovereignty (a concept discussed in further depth below), announces that man will not heed Zeus’ authority. Goethe was himself the subject of portraits by Masson, and the lines from *Prometheus* in which Goethe makes this attribution are also reproduced in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872): ‘Here I sit, forming men/In my own image,/A race to be like me,/To suffer and to weep,/To know delight and joy,/And heed you not,/Like me!’ (*BT* § 9). Yet the acéphalic man is clearly not Prometheus; he is his own entity, a bundle of overlapping identities, that play off one another. However, these differing identifications do not preclude him from having definite, and quite probably deliberate, Promethean signifiers, hence making him representative of all that Prometheus implies: creation (both in the ordinary sense, and in the sense of the mythic origin, i.e. Creation), sacrifice (the ancient Greek poet Hesiod (c. 700 BCE) credits Prometheus with the invention of sacrifice), and myth. In other words, the acéphalic man is a signifier for a Bataillean understanding of the sacred. As mentioned above, the sacred is subject to multiple interpretations by Bataille and his cohort in the College of Sociology, the most useful, and also the most general being that it is anything that holds ‘communifying value.’ In his final address to the College of Sociology in 1939, however, Bataille also defined the sacred as ‘communication between beings, and, hence, the formation of new beings.’ I will discuss the former element of this definition further on, however it is the corollary aspect that is interesting here: the formation of new beings.

**Towards an Acéphalic Mythology**

---

The religious historian Mircea Eliade, who briefly wrote for the journal *Critique*, which was edited by Bataille,\(^{38}\) argues in his book *The Sacred and The Profane* (1957) that all acts of creation are an attempt to be closer to the sacred by emulating the original act of Creation. Ergo, procreation, the founding of a nation, and even the creation of a work of art can be interpreted as an attempt to emulate and be closer to the divine or the sacred, perhaps because only through small acts of creation is it possible to understand the significance of Creation. There is already some evidence of this return to the origin in the acéphalic man through his signification of Promethean myth, but it is reinforced by Eliade’s assertion. According to Leiris this association is a common theme for Masson, he writes that ‘The metamorphosis the body undergoes merely by being disrobed, the act of love, the surging birth of myth, the act of drawing: all are one to Masson.’\(^{39}\) In this light the acéphalic man becomes almost allegorical for creation, but he relates more specifically to the Hellenic origin myth.

The acéphalic man’s lack of the head, then, should be read not as an absence, but as the void, the chaos\(^{40}\) from which Creation springs in the Greek mythos. The body is in fact whole despite its acéphalic nature, existing in the sacred state close to the mythic origin of being, the point at which the world came from nothing, which as Eliade writes is synonymous for existing within *reality*: ‘for primitives as for the man of all pre-modern societies, the *sacred*, is equivalent to a *power*, and in the last analysis, to *reality*, the sacred is saturated with *being*. Sacred power means reality and at the same time enduringness and efficacy.\(^{41,42}\) So the expression of this nostalgia for mythic


\(^{39}\) Leiris (1972) p.6.


\(^{42}\) In a later essay, ‘Cosmogonic Myth and Sacred History’ (*Religious Studies*, Vol.2, No.2, (1967) pp. 171-183), Eliade illustrates this point using the customs of Borneo’s indigenous Dayak people. Eliade explains how Dayak customs relate back to their origin myth so as to connect the everyday and the sacred. For example, in marriage ceremonies couples hold a replica of the tree of life that is destroyed by warring theriomorphic hornbills in the Dayak cosmogonic myth in order to form a direct connection between the couple and the original people created by the destruction of the tree of life. (pp.175-76)
origin—that is, the desire to be in close proximity to Creation (as this is a sacred event)—is also the desire for an authentic existence fuelled with a virile power.

All this prompts a reconsideration of the importance of the head. If the acéphalic man is an expression of sacralised being, living as one might at the point of Creation, then what is it about being acéphalic that is so essential to this expression? Conventionally the head is what provides the controlling directive for the body, not just in terms of human physicality but also in communities and other forms of organisation. But this convention is negated by the acéphalic state of being. This negation is alluded to in Bataille’s text ‘The Sacred Conspiracy,’ written for the first issue of Acéphale, in which he states ‘It is time to abandon the world of the civilised and its light. It is too late to be reasonable and educated—which has led to a life without appeal. Secretly or not, it is necessary to become completely different, or to cease being.’

He continues, explaining why achieving this headless state is desirable:

> Human life is exhausted from serving as the head of, or the reason for, the universe. To the extent that it becomes this head and this reason, to the extent that it becomes necessary to the universe, it accepts servitude. If it is not free existence becomes empty or neutral and, if it is free, it is in play. The Earth, as long as it only gave rise to cataclysms, trees, and birds, was a free universe; the fascination of freedom was tarnished when the Earth produced a being who demanded necessity as a law above the universe.

To be acéphalic, then, is simultaneously regressive and progressive. It is a return to the sacred beginning, to the primordial, cataclysmic, state of freedom. But it also represents a progression to the ‘completely different’ way of being that Bataille advocates. Here, I believe Bataille is alluding to the intellect/instinct dichotomy seen in the thought of Nietzsche, and the way in which humanity’s separation from its bestial origins is the cause of its suffering. Nietzsche states that man’s greatest suffering is caused by

---

himself and is the ‘result of a violent separation from his animal past, of a leap which is also a fall into new situations and conditions of existence, of a declaration of war against the old instincts, which previously constituted the basis of his strength, pleasure, and fearfulness’ (GM, II, §16). On the contrary, the acéphalic man represents an escape from humanity’s exhausting servitude to the supposed necessity of reason, which is in essence what causes man to suffer from himself; it is the embodiment of an almost revolutionary desire for freedom. Without the head as the symbolic pinnacle of the hierarchy to sustain order in the body, or to interpret its movements as part of a universal logic, humans are able to explore an un-abstracted, and more vital and instinctual experience of the world. A position not dissimilar to how Surya describes Bataille’s own convictions: ‘If “madness” there was, it was Bataille’s madness in never settling for knowledge: he also needed the assurance of experience.’ Thus there is a strange introspection that comes from attaining an acéphalic state. It requires a redefinition of man’s relationship to the earth, to the universe, and even to himself. This is Bataille’s reworking, or perhaps more accurately, re-presentation of Nietzsche’s irrationalism and of his ideas of sovereignty.

**Headless Sovereignty**

Nietzsche’s idea of the sovereign individual is explicitly discussed in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in which Nietzsche describes it as being the end point of humanity. A sovereign individual in this instance is both autonomous and ‘supra-moral,’ described as ‘the man with his own independent enduring will, the man who is entitled to make promises’ (GM, II, §2). Nietzsche goes on to say that ‘in him we find … a special consciousness of power and freedom, a feeling of the ultimate completion of man’ (ibid). Similarly, Bataille later describes sovereignty as ‘an aspect that is opposed to the servile and the subordinate.’ A free being then. But free from what? Free to do what? Judging

---

by the above quoted lines from *The Sacred Conspiracy*, there is certainly a freedom from reason, and the necessity of man-made law. For Nietzsche this is phrased as a freedom from the morality of custom, for ‘morality is nothing other (therefore no more!) than obedience to customs, of whatever kind they may be’ (D, I, §9). Those that have traditionally had this freedom, as described by both Bataille and Nietzsche, were those that made the customs: kings, chieftains, and gods (each one the head of their social order). It could be said that the only way to untie one’s bonds to the morality of custom is to ascend to one of these privileged positions. But Bataille, taking his cue from Nietzsche, suggests the more subversive solution of rejecting this servitude outright. In Bataille’s formulation, remove the head and a collective sovereignty will follow. This opposition is clearly illustrated by Bataille in his essay ‘Propositions’ in which he writes:

1. “The Most perfect organization of the universe can be called God.” The fascism that recomposes society on the basis of existing elements is the most closed form of organization; in other words, the form of human existence closest to the eternal God.

6. The acéphalic man mythologically expresses sovereignty committed to destruction and the death of God, and in this identification with the headless man merges and melds with the identification with the superhuman, which IS entirely “the death of God.”

Eric Santner is one scholar who is particularly critical of Bataille’s vision of sovereignty, describing Bataille’s project as an ‘attempt to stage the next and final act in the great historical drama of sovereignty in the West: the decapitation not, as in the terror of the French Revolution, of the royals and all enemies of the People but rather of that newly sovereign entity itself.’47 But Santner misses the mark with his analysis, as he ascribes Bataille’s vision of sovereignty to his more scatological theories, and the idea of base

---

materialism. He describes it as a symptom of what the Bulgarian writer Elias Canetti labelled survivor syndrome, formulated in the 1960 book *Crowds and Power*, which Santner understands as follows:

The survivor is the figure driven to sacrifice the world, to consecrate, consign, assimilate the rest of humankind to the entropic forces of base materiality, in a word, to reduce everything to shit, which as I see it thereby ceases to function as the operator of, to use Bataille’s term, a radical heterology and instead comes to resemble a mad dream of a total, scatological homogenization.48

Interestingly, even though in his book Canetti introduces the idea of the survivor by discussion of the effect of witnessing the death of another, and the transformation of the initial horror into a form of satisfaction, Santner does not discuss Bataille’s ideas of sacrifice in relation to sovereignty.49 Nor does he mention the rumours that Bataille planned to conduct a human sacrifice in *Acéphale*. But even if Santner’s arguments were bolstered with this discussion, he fails to mention any political context for Bataille’s theories, and by his own admission glosses over some of the tensions in Bataille’s imagining of sovereignty.50 The ambiguity of Bataille’s politics discussed in the previous chapter make this a contentious element of his thought, because as soon as one introduces the notion of sacrifice, and sacrificial violence into a discourse of sovereignty it contains an implication of revolution, of disrupting, and perhaps restructuring hierarchies. This leads to the questioning of the ends that this violence seeks to attain. But even though Bataille was responding to a political issue, with a seemingly traditional revolutionary solution, it is in fact a mystical response. This is elegantly summarised by Alexander Irwin when he writes ‘What Bataille sought to present was not a set of ethical propositions or rationally coordinated political theses, but rather a style of life that, considered as a (lacerated but living) whole, offered an alternative to the values and

50 Santner (2011) p.106.
forms of existence that had found their culmination in totalitarian oppression and war. The articulation of this sovereign existence and the language Bataille uses to express these values however, opens Bataille up for potential misappropriation as he is attempting to use the same mythic forces mobilised by the fascists he is opposing.

Benjamin Noys has provided one of the most engaging and nuanced interpretations of Bataillean sovereignty in *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction*. In this book Noys uses one of Bataille’s most troubling works, *The Trial of Giles de Rais* (1959)—an account of the notorious medieval French knight who committed countless terrible crimes, murdering and mutilating potentially hundreds of young boys—to discuss Bataillean sovereignty. This reading demonstrates the fragility of Bataille’s thought, and the difficulty inherent in interpreting its moral value. In Noy’s words, ‘Here we are confronted with sovereignty in all its magisterial obscenity, in crimes that leave us gasping for breath and revolted.’ Noys recognises sovereignty as an impossibility within Bataille’s thought, because ‘Not only does sovereignty express the tension between a free existence and the social hierarchy, it also expresses the tension between a disordered experience and an ordered concept.’ It is the second tension that comes to bear most in *The Trial of Gilles de Rais*, a man whose heinous crimes were committed with exuberant excess—an excess that Bataille defends. But what Noys recognises and what I also attempt to demonstrate in my arguments in the following section of this chapter, with the added aid of a Promethean framework, is that sovereignty is also tied to Bataille’s notion of summit and decline, and in the case of Gilles de Rais, particularly the summit. In a more conventional interpretation of sovereignty, a hierarchy is implied where power accumulates at the top, within one individual, the sovereign. Bataille’s heterogenous version of sovereignty works against this. Rais accumulated sovereign power through the extent and excess of his crimes, the kind of power that a sovereign could wield indifferently by virtue of their position (one only need look to the bible for the most famed stories of kings massacring infants),

---

53 Ibid.
and even though Rais was born to nobility, this was not his right. As Bataille says, ‘a feudal lord’s privilege has only one meaning: freeing him from work it consecrates him to the game.’ Moreover, while the likes of Herod and the unnamed Pharaoh of Exodus unleashed the power of their sovereign realm, using those beneath them in the hierarchy, their army, to undertake the detestable task of child-slaughter, Rais relished it for himself. But this is not the only difference, throughout the book Bataille makes numerous mentions of the fantastic fiscal expenditures made by Rais to form a kind of sovereign image, for example:

Gilles de Rais fancied himself a sovereign lord. As Marshal of France, after the victory at Orléans and the consecration of Charles, he had himself bestowed with quasi-royal arms. He rode preceded by a royal escort, accompanied by an “ecclesiastical assembly.” A herald of arms, two hundred men, and trumpeters announced him; the canons in his chapel, a kind of bishop, cantors, and the children in his music school made up his retinue on horseback, glittering with the richest ornaments. Gilles de Rais wanted to be dazzling, to the point of ruinous expenditure. In providing for the necessities that his delirium commanded, he liquidated an immense fortune without thinking.

This brings to mind Bataille’s argument in *The Accursed Share* that the worker spends his money on wine not as a necessity, but to escape his station in life, if just for a short time: ‘As I see it, if the worker treats himself to the drink, this is essentially because into the wine he swallows there enters a miraculous element of savour, which is precisely the essence of sovereignty … the glass of wine gives him for a brief moment the miraculous sensation of having the world at his disposal.’ Importantly, he lapses from his reality and tastes sovereignty not via intoxication, but via expenditure. For someone of Rais’ wealth and place in the sovereign hierarchy this disposition should have already

---

55 Ibid. p.9.
been afforded him, but his lust for the trappings of sovereignty spilled over from the financial to the violent. However, Rais’s violence differs from that of the sovereign. Taking the sociologist Max Weber’s\textsuperscript{57} theory from the 1921 essay ‘Politics as a Vocation’, a state, or in a feudal society, a sovereign, “claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory”\textsuperscript{58} we can see that the differences between the violence of the sovereign and the violence of Rais are first legitimacy, and second use value. In Weber’s theory, violence (or physical force) is a tool used by the state that keeps it from descending into anarchy, but Rais’s violence had no use value other than for his perverse pleasure, it was pure expenditure, a tactic we already know Rais used to bestow on himself the trappings of sovereignty. The glass of wine is to the labourer as murder is to Rais: a taste of freedom. There was no legitimate use for Rais’ crimes, and so he subverted the hierarchy of the sovereign, and through the expenditure of useless violence and the accumulation of blood, claimed a different kind of sovereignty-one that resists traditional sovereignty. Of course, this makes \textit{The Trial of Gilles de Rais} a difficult book to accept, though as Noys argues, ‘to reject Bataille is to reject violence, but this does not lessen the power of violence, it increases it’.\textsuperscript{59} If we fail to understand that Rais is a part of the human totality, a totality which contains a great deal of violence whether legitimate or illegitimate, then we fail to understand Bataille, because Rais’ crimes challenge the limits of reason and being. I agree with Noys when he casts doubt on Bataille’s attempt to portray sovereignty within the individual of Gilles de Rais, as it runs the risk of limiting our understanding of the concept:

Bataille tries constantly to produce sovereignty, to describe it, to analyse it and to give it an existence; but sovereignty does not play the role of a concept that

\textsuperscript{57} Bataille certainly had knowledge of Weber and his theories. In \textit{The Accursed Share vol. I} Bataille engages with Weber’s thought more fully, especially his 1905 work \textit{Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism}, which is the heading of one of the subchapters, Bataille credits Weber for ‘having rigorously analysed the connection between a religious crisis and the economic turnover that gave rise to the modern world.’ Bataille, trans. Hurley (Zone Books, New York: 1991) p.116.


\textsuperscript{59} Noys (2000) p.62.
dominates a certain domain. Instead sovereignty exists as an anti-concept or, to draw on Bataille’s arguments about the ‘headless’ (atheology and Acéphale), it is an ‘a-concept’. This would be a headless concept, one without authority and prone to a fundamental irregularity. The sign of the sovereign operation is that it actively displaces the mastery implicit in any concept, as Derrida remarks, “sovereignty does not govern itself” [c.f Bataille: A Critical Reader, ed. Botting and Wilson. p.116]. So, sovereignty is always dislodging itself from conceptual security at the same time that it is always resting within a concept.60

With this in mind, one might also consider Bataillean sovereignty in a more traditionally political sense, and as suggested by Noys, relate this sovereignty back to Acéphale. There is a comparison to be made with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s political thought regarding the general will and popular sovereignty. No doubt what Rousseau labels popular sovereignty is far less mystical in its formation than Bataille’s sovereignty, but as the philosopher Simon Critchley’s concise explanation of the concept shows, it is acéphalic in nature: ‘Popular sovereignty consists in acts of legislation by the general will, where the people determine themselves by themselves and not through the mediation of any monarch, prince, aristocracy, or unrepresentative body.’61 There is a certain anarchistic streak to this formulation of sovereignty, and indeed anarchism (especially in the individualist strain) was undergoing a growth in popularity in interwar France.62 But the symbolism of the acéphalic man, and this formulation of sovereignty is not born out of anarchist politics, but rather is an expression of Bataille’s and Masson’s anti-fascist sentiment. Though for Masson, more than Bataille, anarchism and anti-fascism may be more closely linked. After experiencing the pro-fascist Paris riots in February 1934 and moving to Spain, Masson then found himself caught in the midst of the Catalan uprising in October 1934.63 Masson and his family were forced to take

60 Ibid. pp.65-6.
shelter at a friend’s house in Barcelona while Spanish forces clashed with those that supported the newly founded Catalan State. Masson felt unable to sit by, and joined an anarchist group, the Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias, before returning to France once more in 1936.\footnote{Robin Adèle Greeley. ‘The Barcelona Acéphale: Spain and the Politics of Violence in the Works of André Masson’, in 
Encounters with the 1930s, ed. Jordana Mendelson (La Fabrica, Madrid: 2012) p.330.} The acéphalic man is a critique of fascist power structure, and the fascist community, with its unwavering faith in whichever patriarchal figure, whether it is Franco, the Führer, or Il Duce, that stands atop their social system.\footnote{Paul Wilkinson, a scholar of fascism, labels this cult of the leader as one of the central tenets in his definition of fascism describing it as, ‘the total subordination of the individual to the absolute state under an absolute leader or Führer figure’ c.f. Paul Wilkinson, ‘Fascism’, in International Fascism: Theories, Causes and the New Consensus ed. Roger Griffin (Arnold, London, New York, Sydney, Auckland: 1998) p.29.} This anti-fascist element is particularly powerful in one untitled work Masson produced of the acéphalic man in 1936 known as the Barcelona Acéphale (fig.25). While the Barcelona Acéphale did not appear in the pages of Acéphale (and nor was it published anywhere else), it contains more directly political imagery than any of the illustrations that Masson made for the magazine. Unlike Masson’s other acéphale drawings this one has replaced the head with the communist hammer and sickle, beneath his right foot is a Christian cross, and beneath his left a swastika. Behind the figure a city, presumably Barcelona, is under aerial attack and burning, as the inscription at the bottom reads ‘Barcelona Juillet [July] 1936’, the same month and year of Franco’s coup d’etat. Where the illustrations that were in Acéphale exist in a mythic time, the Barcelona Acéphale is firmly situated both geographically and temporally, as well as of course, politically.

The acéphalic man offers an alternative community that still draws on the same base concept of myth that fascism does, but treats it differently: it is not a myth of overcoming an Other, as with Nazism, but rather of overcoming order by attempting to reimagine creation/Creation. This acéphalic overcoming acknowledges the importance of the void, and attempts to utilise it and its creative force, rather than viewing it as a problem which must be surmounted.

This returns us once more to Prometheus, the Titan who sought to subvert hierarchy and order by defying Zeus, the king of the gods, through the theft of fire on
behalf of mankind. The Promethean myth is, in a sense, an acéphalic myth in that the Titan subverted hierarchy, but it also contains various other themes that occupied Bataille: sacrifice, (auto-)mutilation, sin, and crime. Prometheus also happens to be one of the mythic beings that Nietzsche writes about in The Birth of Tragedy to help elucidate his ideas, as such his myth is a useful one when interpreting the overlap of Bataille's and Nietzsche's thinking, especially with regards to sin and crime. These are the areas in the books of the Somme Athéologique, where Bataille's thought can appear to be most sympathetic with fascism, so having discussed the anti-fascist symbolism of Acéphale, it is important now to discuss these more difficult themes in Bataille’s thought, and what it means to utilise this area of Nietzsche’s philosophy during one of European fascism’s most dominant periods.

Promethean Virtue

While Dionysus and Apollo are no doubt the main mythological actors in The Birth of Tragedy, Prometheus can, in a way, be said to have received top billing. The frontispiece for the first edition of the book was adorned with his image (fig.26) depicting him free from his chains treading on the eagle that had served as his torturer, staring defiantly up at the sky. And indeed, Prometheus does feature quite prominently, especially in section nine of the book during Nietzsche’s discussion of sin. This is also a theme that Nietzsche would return to with the aid of Prometheus in The Gay Science. But prior to discussing the use of Prometheus, it may first be useful to understand his character, and his mythology a little.

Prometheus is already a complex figure in the Greek pantheon and by the time Nietzsche published The Birth of Tragedy this complexity had been compounded with Romantic interpretations. Percy Bysshe Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound (1820) being the most overt tale relating to the Titan, along with Lord Byron’s poem Prometheus from 1816. But Prometheus, or Promethean characteristics, are also evident in the eponymous heroes of Byron’s Manfred (1817), and Goethe’s Faust (1829), and of course Mary Shelley titled her 1818 science fiction novel Frankenstein; or The Modern
Prometheus, as the book contains multiple thematic references to the Prometheus myth. Francesca Cauchi argues that it was Prometheus' being 'a god-defying god made to suffer like man [that] epitomizes the Romantic rebel-hero torn apart in his lofty solitude by the visceral strife between his human and divine urges.' These traits are also to be found in the ancient Prometheus of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* (fifth century BCE) in which Prometheus is shown to be proud, stubborn, and wise. In Hesiod's *Theogony* (eighth century BCE) Prometheus is anti-authoritarian, described as 'subtle, shifting-scheming', and 'sly'. Not only did he steal fire from the gods to gift to man, but in the lead up to this crime, the lesser repeated part of the myth, Prometheus invents sacrifice. During a feast at Mekone Prometheus attempts to trick Zeus into choosing a lesser portion of food made solely of the bones of an ox, while giving men the meat and offal. It is after this event that Zeus takes fire away from man as a punishment and Prometheus steals it in return. The Prometheus of Hesiod is presented as more of a trickster deity than the tragic-heroic idea of him that is popular now. However, he does also appear to have an innate sense of justice, when man is punished for Prometheus' trick on Zeus, Prometheus attempts to right the wrong by subversively undoing the punishment. Nietzsche's Prometheus, while certainly more influenced by Aeschylus and Goethe, does have this same sense of nobility, and in *The Gay Science* he explicitly describes the act of theft committed by Prometheus as a noble one (*GS* §135). In *The Birth of Tragedy*, the theft of fire is discussed in relation to the Semitic myth of the Fall, and Nietzsche uses the story to argue that evil and sin are justified parts of human existence, suffering the consequences of transgressive actions is the price paid for advancement, it is a form of sacrifice. Essentially, Nietzsche is arguing that good must be bought with sin:

---

69 I say men rather than humans here as at this point in the *Theogony* only man had been created.
70 Ibid, p.19.
Humanity achieves the best and highest of which it is capable by committing an offence and must in turn accept the consequences of this, namely the whole flood of suffering and tribulations that the offended heavenly powers must in turn visit upon the human race as it strives nobly towards higher things. (BT §9)

Nietzsche labels this ‘active sin’ and describes it as ‘the true Promethean virtue’ (ibid). Prometheus in *The Birth of Tragedy* becomes a kind of proto-Übermensch as Nietzsche describes the core of his legend as being ‘that wrongdoing is of necessity imposed on the titanically striving individual’ (ibid). So not only is there a general sense that transgression should be valued, but there is even an active encouragement of transgression if one is to achieve feats worthy of the Titans. Prometheus committed a transgression against the Gods, and as a result was sentenced to torment, having his liver torn daily from his body by Zeus’s eagle. But Prometheus’s transgression was humanity’s advancement, through fire and tools and knowledge, as Aeschylus put it in *Prometheus Bound*: ‘know that all the skills that mortals have come from Prometheus.’

Therefore, sin and evil, in some senses, become justifiable as a means of progress. This destabilises the dichotomy of good and evil; if evil is the cost of good then acting as part of a process to achieve greater things, does this mean its designation as ‘evil’ is nullified? And vice versa, if any form of good either comes out of, or causes, a form of evil can it still truly be considered good? If good and evil negate one another’s designations, what is left but a moral ambivalence, and equivocation? The same is true of the Fall, when Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge they suffered banishment from paradise and a slew of other hardships, but they also became self-aware beings. Where these myths differ is the veneration granted to Prometheus compared to the castigation Adam and Eve suffer for their failing.

Bataille illustrates this point of moral ambiguity in *On Nietzsche* by using a different (and somewhat more reductive) Nietzsche quote, ‘the highest good and the

---

highest evil are identical\textsuperscript{72} as the epigraph for section IV of ‘Summit and Decline’, which was originally given as a lecture but later reproduced as part two of \textit{On Nietzsche}. In the following passage Bataille echoes Nietzsche’s sentiment from \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} stating:

\begin{quote}
\textit{All “communication” participates in suicide and crime.}

Funereal horror accompanies it, disgust is its sign.

And in this light evil appears—as a source of life!

By destroying in myself, in others, the integrity of being, I open myself to communion, I attain a moral summit.

And the summit is not \textit{submission to}, it is \textit{wanting} evil. It is the voluntary accord with sin, crime, evil. With an endless fate that demands that for some to live, others must die.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

Such a passage seems to support Nick Land’s assertion that ‘Bataille is a philosopher not of indifference, but of evil’,\textsuperscript{74} echoing the accolade that Bataille awarded to Nietzsche in the preface to \textit{On Nietzsche}.\textsuperscript{75} But is it really so simple? The accord with evil which Bataille writes of is a reimagining of the way in which morality functions, a reimagining that equivocates moral values. As Bataille writes: ‘It might be that all morality rests on an equivocation and derives from slippages.’\textsuperscript{76} This is because Bataille does not necessarily think in terms of good and evil, but of summit and decline. This is an incredibly muddy area in Bataille’s thought, many of his notions are conflated, and his meaning and intention is not always clear or well-explained. As Hollier writes, for Bataille ‘Meaning exists only at risk. It is never fixed, never arrested … Bataille’s writing does not hoard but rather expends itself. There is no meaning except through

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{73} Bataille (2015) p.40.\
\footnote{\textsuperscript{74} Nick Land, \textit{The Thirst For Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism} (Routledge, London: 1992) p.59.\
\footnote{\textsuperscript{75} Bataille (2015) p.7.\
\footnote{\textsuperscript{76} Ibid, p.31.}
\end{footnotes}
sacrifice—which is meaningless.' Nevertheless, given the environment Bataille was writing in it is important to discuss Bataille’s moral ideas, especially considering the troubling equivocation this morality supposedly rests on.

As noted, the summit and the decline do not necessarily align with traditional moral categories of good and evil. Bataille does state that the summit is more akin to evil, but even this is couched in ambiguous language: the summit is ‘closer to evil than to good’. But is the evil that the moral summit appears close to also the type of evil that is necessary for human progression, is it a Promethean transgression? If so, is this where the ambiguity of its moral value lies?

The summit is a difficult concept to navigate, its use is multifarious as it is seemingly both a state to be reached, and the means of reaching it. To be more specific, the summit is simultaneously the transgression of the limit of being—something destructive, or to put it in Bataille’s language: something wounding—but also being itself. To reach the summit demands a recognition of the utility, even the necessity, of violating the limit of being. This is because causing this wound, in the self and in others, allows for communication (Bataille does not believe communication possible between two intact beings), hence ‘All “communication” participates in suicide and crime’, and further communication is essential for life. Bataille even goes as far as to say in On Nietzsche that ‘“Communication” is love’. Attaining the summit then is the act of opening oneself and making oneself communicable in the most vital terms, ‘The moral summit is the moment of risk, of the suspension of being beyond itself, at the limit of nothingness.’ But Bataille does not use the word ‘opening’ rather he uses much more physical language, the language of the summit is full of lacerations and wounds, it is the language of violence, and sacrifice. The risk Bataille writes of is the act of inflicting the laceration that would allow for communication, it is a sacrifice of self, as it is what transgresses the limit allowing nothingness to permeate being. As Bataille writes in

---

78 Bataille (2015) p. 32
79 ibid. p. 33
80 ibid.
Guilty: ‘Communication demands a defect, a “fault.” It enters, like death, through a chink in the armour. It demands a coincidence of two lacerations, in myself and in the other.’

Returning again to the words Bataille wrote to Pierre Kaan in 1934: ‘It is therefore a matter of proposing values that may participate in a living nihilism,’ this complex notion of the summit starts to gain a modicum of logic. It is the acceptance of nothingness, it may not be a living nihilism, but it could be a way to live with nihilism. But does this mean that the summit is a myth? Or is it rather Bataille’s attempt to mythologise a value system based on equivocation rather than a Manichaean dichotomy of good and evil.

To look closer, the idea of Promethean virtue and the idea of summit morality are counters to Christian moralising as this is essentially the morality of decline, described by Bataille as being the state from which moral rules arise. As such, in ‘Summit and Decline’ Bataille attempts to theorise the moral justification of evil through a familiar Christian narrative, but re-framed in Bataillean language. Bataille begins ‘Summit and Decline’ with the apex of Christianity, the ultimate sacrifice, the ultimate moment of risk: the putting of Christ on the cross.

Unsurprisingly, Bataille does not view the crucifixion in the traditional Christian sense of Jesus dying for humanity’s sins, but rather he sees the act as the sin itself, a sin for which we are all culpable. In Guilty Bataille writes

Who has not noticed that in proposing sacrifice, I have proposed sin?
Sacrifice is sin, communication is sin. They say sins of the flesh are sacrifices to Venus … And just as love is sacrifice, sacrifice is sin … In the death of Jesus, human beings took upon themselves inexpiable crime: the summit of sacrifice.

But sin, as stated above, has been shown by Nietzsche to have value, even virtue, when it comes to the advancement of humankind, and here Bataille is deepening this

moral ambiguity by paralleling sin with sacrifice, something that we know Bataille considers sacred. But it is precisely the sinful element of the crucifixion that makes it sacred in Bataillean terms. By participating in the sacrifice of Christ, communication is made possible, this is because it lacerates being and creates a community of guilt. In his response to ‘Summit and Decline’ Pierre Klossowski put it that ‘for Bataille, not being guilty is really not being at all. To be guilty or not to be, that is the question, because being without guilt, for Bataille, is not expending, it is not being able to expend, and to have nothing to give is to be annihilated by the One who gives all, including what we are.’ There is no moral state of innocence, and unlike in Christian notions of morality the sin is not a chain to be broken, or a stain to be wiped away, but something that comprises an integral part of one’s self-hood.

Klossowski was not the only one to offer a critique of the idiosyncratic moral system Bataille is proposing. Sartre was also present when Bataille initially gave ‘Summit and Decline’ as a lecture, in his response he stated that ‘Sin, according to [Bataille], has a dialectical value, meaning that it disappears from itself; it has the role of pushing you toward a state wherein you are no longer able to recognise it as sin.’ Bataille agreed with this assessment, responding ‘Naturally.’ Therefore, if we are all guilty for the inexpiable crime, the sin of the crucifixion, this guilt surely dissipates as the dialectic progresses and the virtue of the sin has come to bear fruit. For Bataille argues that the sin of the crucifixion allows for the possibility of communion with God. Without the laceration of being which is caused by the sacrifice, communication remains impossible. This is both true for communication between humans, and between humans and God. This is exemplified by the literal lacerations suffered by Jesus through his physical rending; once the Roman centurion pierced Christ with his spear and blood and water poured from the wound (John 19:32-34) humanity’s relationship with the divine was irrevocably altered. There is an Augustinian element to this, the notion of a founding act of sin and of the collective guilt which follows. But where Augustine

86 Sartre, in ibid p.61.
87 Bataille, ibid.
believes us all to be, in the words of theologian Rowan Greer, ‘born moving away from God’ as a result of original sin, Bataille believes that sin in the form of the crucifixion is what brings humanity closer to God as it also served to lacerate God in a ‘night of death in which the Creator and the creatures bled together.’

To summarise Bataille’s convoluted atheology: life, or being, is communication which in turn is a form of expenditure which can only be expressed when in a state of guilt—the summit is a form of expenditure so deep that it violates being (which in Patrick Ffrench’s assessment was proved impossible by the holocaust, ergo we may only strive for the summit), it is the cause of the guilt but also necessary for being. Heretofore morality in the traditional sense has been a morality born of decline which is to say a morality that ‘gives all value to the concern for conserving and enriching the being.’ Bataille recognises a paradox in attempting to theorise a summit morality stating ‘The fact of “speaking” of a summit morality itself upholds the morality of decline.’ But perhaps the theorisation is itself a form of expenditure, the sharing of these ideas is, as Hollier denotes it, the expenditure of meaning. Giving voice to these ideas would require their prior accrual of some kind of meaning only for Bataille to shear through it and offer his words up to the void.

The Bataille of the Somme Ateologique is undoubtedly Bataille at his most bleak. Guilty was written as a semi-diary over a long period of time, Stuart Kendall describes it as being the opposite of Sartre’s Nausea (1938). For in Guilty, meaning slowly dissipates for Bataille, he becomes more isolated, and more untimely. This is unsurprising as Bataille began writing Guilty in 1939, after the death of the author Collette Peignot (A.K.A. Laure) with whom Bataille was romantically involved. Bataille later took a hiatus from working on Guilty to write Inner Experience, but once that was

---

90 It is possible that this anti-Augustinian stance in which Bataille seeks to equivocate moral values is also inherited from Nietzsche. Nietzsche believes that Augustine’s moralising was weaponised, a revenge upon the world by a ‘person who is fundamentally ashamed of his existence’ (GS §359).
93 Ibid, p.49.
sent to the publishers in 1942, he returned to Guilty.95 The last of the three books of the *Somme Athelogique, On Nietzsche*, serves not so much as an elucidation of Nietzschean philosophy, but a diary of Bataille’s living through desperate times with Nietzsche as his only companion. The negative psychological state of Bataille, dealing with bereavement, physical health problems, and living through war, is not meant to act here as an excuse for the extremity of his thought, at least not in a conventional sense. But it could be seen as part of the pattern of justification in the context of the idea of Promethean virtue. Given Bataille’s fervid, almost torturous, discussions of sin, further contextualised by his lapsed Catholicism, rather than his ideas being seen as a consequence of his suffering, might Bataille’s suffering be considered a consequence of his ideas? For even if it is in a self-recognised paradox, Bataille is attempting to advance a moral understanding which advocates transgression. In taking up Nietzsche’s moral thinking, Bataille has also taken up the mantle of Prometheus for himself.

But a question of value still hangs over Bataille’s moral summit, and to what extent Promethean virtue is a virtue at all. Is a morality so inherently bound to sacrifice and transgression not at risk of becoming a justification for fascism? Especially given the time of Bataille’s writing. Prometheus was an anti-fascist symbol in the hands of Jacques Lipchitz, but an Aryan ideal when sculpted by Arno Breker. Nietzsche’s thought was considered a guide for free spirits to Bataille, but a vindication of war and antisemitism to the likes of Bäumler and Oehler. In proposing a moral system of equivocation Bataille places his own thought at risk. If the consequence of attaining the summit is as Bataille says ‘an endless fate that demands that for some to live, others must die’96 does it not at least share in the fascist justification of violence and mass slaughter?

In his seminal essay ‘Redemption through Sin’ from 1937, the religious historian Gershom Scholem (who moved in some of the same social circles as Bataille et al.)97

95 ibid pp.xii-xiii.
97 It was Scholem who gave Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* to Benjamin, a painting he left in Bataille’s care before fleeing France. C.f Weingrad (2001) p.130.
wrote that ‘Evil must be fought with evil. We are thus gradually led to a position which as the history of religion shows, occurs with a kind of tragic necessity in every great crisis of the religious mind. I am referring to the fatal yet at the same time deeply fascinating doctrine of the holiness of sin.’ In this light Bataille’s moral equivocation becomes justifiable as anti-fascism. And further, it fits into the paradigm of his earlier anti-fascist actions with Contre-Attaque, using fascism’s own weapons—in this case its twisted moral justifications—against it. I disagree with Kendall that the Bataille of the Somme Athéologique is untimely, if anything Bataille is a product of his time: desperate and depleted by the tragedies that surrounded him, clutching at whatever might ease the struggle. Where one stands on Bataille’s use of Nietzsche to equivocate morality during the height of fascism in Europe will surely depend on one’s own politics, and on whether or not one believes that it takes evil to defeat evil. For in theorising that good can be accomplished through sin, and in attempting to overcome nihilism through its acceptance, and even in his attempt to reclaim Nietzsche, Bataille lays the groundwork for being able to accept oneself and the atrocities that may well need to be committed in the act of overcoming fascism.

**Conclusion**

Over these last two chapters we have seen the prominence of Nietzschean philosophy in Bataille’s engagement with fascism, beginning with his writings in Acéphale in 1936, and concluding with his wartime theories on morality. I doubt there are many in the avant-garde for whom Nietzsche meant quite as much as he did to Bataille: his mission to reclaim Nietzsche’s philosophy from fascist appropriation comes across almost as personal. There is clearly a level of identification with Nietzsche on the part of Bataille, even saying at one point ‘for a long time, it seemed to me that my thinking had no other

---

meaning than to continue that of Nietzsche.\textsuperscript{99} However, this continuation was not always straightforward.

When Bataille and Masson founded \textit{Acéphale}, they highlighted the importance of myth not just for ancient societies, but for modern ones too. Through both this magazine, the secret society, and the College of Sociology Bataille in particular attempted to use his understanding of Nietzsche to cement a powerful new myth founded on sacrifice that could rise to the challenge of his historic moment: the challenge of fascism. But in doing so Bataille also opened himself up for critique. His thought, continuing from Nietzsche’s, was equally if not more ambiguous, and this ambiguity instilled a doubt as to the moral value of such a philosophy, especially at such a time. With the \textit{Somme Athéologique}, Bataille’s thought grew even more fractured; his attempt to follow Nietzsche beyond good and evil by equivocating morality into an idea of summit and decline is perhaps one of the most demanding interpretations of Nietzsche, and takes Nietzsche’s thought almost to its limit. But the task was a valuable one for Bataille. He took the lesson of the death of God to heart, that there must be a foundation, values must be created, or else nihilism will prevail. Bataille’s ongoing engagement in this time with ideas of community, sacrifice, the sacred, myth, morality, sovereignty, all are part of an attempt to create these values, however heterodox they may be.

Conclusion: Variegations in Thought

Through the case studies in this thesis, I have presented a few of the many dimensions in a wider pattern of Nietzschean interpretation occurring in the historic avant-garde. As is clear from the diversity of these case studies, despite some commonality in the Nietzschean themes with which these avant-gardists engaged, there is also some significant divergence in how they attempted to co-opt his philosophy to their respective projects. Furthermore, this was affected by the wider perception of Nietzsche in their respective historical moments. But this is characteristic not solely of the way in which these avant-gardists responded to their respective milieux, and to each other, but also of the very nature of Nietzsche’s philosophy. So, what can we learn by looking at these particular case studies in conjunction? What can they tell us about the avant-gardist engagement with Nietzsche as a whole? And can they tell us anything about Nietzsche and his philosophy?

As noted in the introduction, my original intention for this thesis was to ask in what ways was the post-theological moment of the avant-garde, and the Nietzschean challenge of the death of God merely an element of or fundamentally intrinsic to avant-gardism. And even though I have altered this thesis multiple times, in a way this theme was never too far away from focus. Certainly, in the first section and in the chapters on F.T Marinetti and Georges Bataille the lack of divinity is palpable. Across the cases of Wassily Kandinsky, Hugo Ball, Richard Huelsenbeck, Marinetti, and Bataille, we see five men who believe they are living in a time in which the extant system of values had to be replaced, and their various projects contained clear attempts to create new values. To help understand the reason they believed that new values were needed, Nietzsche’s definition of nihilism provides a succinct explanation: ‘What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devaluate themselves. The aim is lacking; “why?” finds no answer.’ (WP, §2) The highest value being God, nihilism is the corollary of his death. The historic moment of the avant-garde is tied to nihilism and a sense of cultural crisis that emanates from it. And this response to cultural crisis is evident across all these case
studies. Kandinsky identified Nietzsche as the instigator of this crisis,¹ but he saw an opportunity in it as well. Viewing materialism as an insipid substitute of the divine that had sapped the modern era of its purpose through its instability (atoms could be split after all), it would be abstraction, Kandinsky’s art, that would serve as a rallying cry that could drag humanity back towards a venerable spiritualism. This of course was a project that Ball genuinely believed (if at least for a time) that Kandinsky was capable of accomplishing, especially through the unification of the arts in the form of a Gesamtkunstwerk. Ball’s lecture on Kandinsky is indicative of their shared view of a world in crisis, and the role of the artist (especially Kandinsky himself) as a visionary leading humanity beyond uncertainty.

For Huelsenbeck, the devaluation of values was even more dramatic, the First World War was a further cause of their erosion, and the Church in Germany was also responsible as a result of their pro-war stance for the devaluing of the divine. Dada was from the outset a highly critical endeavour, and Huelsenbeck continued this tradition in Berlin, and this criticality, combined with a well-versed philosophical outlook in a way continued Kandinsky’s project. But rather than seeing abstraction and a spiritual art as the answer, Huelsenbeck drew inspiration from Nietzsche’s works, and invented the Dadaist neue mensch. This Übermensch-type as described by Huelsenbeck was a formula for an anti-decadent, anti-ascetic way of being, again making it a reaction to a moment of crisis, in which it was (at least in Huelsenbeck’s opinion) all too easy to succumb to these negative modes of being.

Through Futurism, Marinetti created the most extreme example of the avant-gardist reaction to the past, with a clear decision to negate the veneration of the ancient in a violent break from artistic tradition. This extended into the political, philosophical, and spiritual. But unlike in the cases of Kandinsky, Ball, and Huelsenbeck, whose projects negated previous values through the creation of new ones, Marinetti conceived

of destruction as a value in itself, and hence placed the destruction of values as the highest value. In some ways he can be seen as the opposite of Huelsenbeck, pro-war compared to anti-war, instead of looking to the ‘force of [the] soul’ as Huelsenbeck’s neue mensch does, Marinetti’s multiplied man is a physical being designed for the mechanistic world, that has done away with emotion, and has no need for a spiritual life. That Marinetti disavowed Nietzsche while Huelsenbeck affirmed him only supports this opposition. But as I have shown Marinetti’s writings that distance Futurism from Nietzsche serve a purpose that is both Nietzschean and Futurist; one must surpass one’s teachers.

Bataille’s case in the context of Nietzsche and the avant-garde is distinctive when compared to those that preceded him, and indeed he is a particular case in this thesis in not being at the forefront of a canonical avant-garde group. But he is also the one to whom Nietzsche meant the most. For he was not only facing questions of a Nietzschean nature, but questions of the philosopher’s very value to the present. No other avant-gardist I have discussed contended with the danger of Nietzsche having such an open and manipulatable oeuvre, a problem reflected in Bataille’s own writings. The fact that avant-gardists position their programmes as visionary in political and cultural terms means that they are inherently affected by and invested in their political moment, and this extends to any philosophy that underpins or is claimed to underpin their activity. Bataille’s project of reclaiming Nietzsche, of trying to build a counter-myth to contest the mythic core of fascism based on Nietzschean ideas, surely demonstrates this.

Ultimately it is Wyndham Lewis that proves to be the most unusual case in this thesis. He does not engage with the ideas of value creation, he envisions no vorticist version of the new man, and seems relatively unperturbed by the death of God, if he thought about it much at all. There is also a distinct problem with Lewis in comparison to

---

the other case studies in that an attempt to characterise his Nietzscheanism is susceptible to be coloured by Lewis’s own reminiscences. This is for example partially why Michael Nath refutes Shane Weller’s proposed Nietzschean reading of Lewis: it is founded on Lewis’s citation of Nietzsche being a paramount influence on him (and many others) before the First World War, but in a text written for a publication that was first released 32 years after the end of the war. Furthermore, it was in a section of the book that was largely meant to be about Shakespeare. Not to mention in the very next paragraph Lewis lists the things he most dislikes about Nietzsche: notably Thus Spoke Zarathustra, a book that seemed to hold great importance for others in this thesis. But still this idea of Nietzsche as a paramount influence, for many in the pre-war era, and Lewis’s characterisation of him as a philosopher belonging to the twentieth century, does at least show an engagement with Nietzsche, but one that is nowhere near as vital as other cases.

We can see from the conjunction of these studies that there was indeed a kind of Nietzschean metanarrative connecting the various movements of the avant-garde. The intellectual culture of exchange, little magazines, new translations, and the flurry of interpretations served to filter Nietzsche’s ideas and reception: the avant-garde should certainly be considered in a historiography of Nietzschean interpretation. What is interesting is that this metanarrative itself is not so much about Nietzsche’s ideas of the future, but rather his ideas of the present. That is to say, Nietzsche’s problematising of his experience of modernity. Modernity in crisis. Yet, the earliest of these case studies occurs over three decades after Nietzsche’s first published work. It would of course be strange, given the content of Nietzsche’s philosophy if there was unanimity in the way his ideas occurred in and were utilised by the avant-garde. Ironically it is this lack of cohesion that forms the unifying thread of the avant-garde Nietzsche, as it is characteristic of a significant element of Nietzsche’s philosophy. As Arthur Danto says,

---

5 Ibid, p.35.
‘It is always healthy, [Nietzsche] thought, to remind ourselves that our ideas are arbitrary structurings of chaos, and the question is not whether they are true but whether we should believe them and why’.\(^6\) This inherent scepticism is seen in Kandinsky’s loss of faith in science, in the anticlericalism of both Huelsenbeck and Marinetti, in Lewis’s anti-Futurism, and Bataille’s critiques of fascism. Yet this is more than mere scepticism, Danto is writing about Nietzsche’s perspectivism. This has been a subtle presence in this thesis; it is, according to the likes of Alexander Nehamas, an intrinsic part of Nietzsche’s system (or lack thereof), that given its ability to simultaneously undermine and unite his various ideas ‘must be addressed by all attempts to address his thought’.\(^7\) It is also a concept I have given short shrift in this thesis, but I concur that in these case studies it cannot be ignored, and so, I shall now address it here as a way of uniting them.

Perspectivism is of course not a concept original to Nietzsche, Gottfried Leibniz, and Immanuel Kant both had aspects of perspectivism to their systems, but where Nietzsche differs is the way his later perspectivism is ‘radicalized in a way that makes it emblematic for the crisis of philosophical knowledge in modernity’.\(^8\) Initially Nietzsche’s perspectivism, as outlined in Human, All too Human (1878), is a critique of the philosophical tradition of discerning a thing in appearance from a thing in itself. Nietzsche makes a salient, and quite beautiful point in this critique when he advocates for a longer view of history, and the way the idea of things is informed by their becoming. He writes:

> Because we have for millennia made moral, aesthetic, religious demands of the world, looked upon it with blind desire, passion or fear, and abandoned ourselves to the bad habits of illogical thinking, this world has gradually become so

marvellously variegated, frightful, meaningful, soulful, it has acquired colour – but we have been the colourists: it is the human intellect that has made appearances appear and transported its erroneous basic conceptions into things. (HH §16)

But it becomes more than this, it is the idea that all ideas are merely interpretations, including the idea of perspectivism itself. This creates an issue with the value of truth and philosophy. Not only is there a post-theological crisis (or maybe there isn’t… after all, it is only one interpretation), but there is also an epistemological crisis that needs to be contended with—though arguably the two are not unrelated. Other scholars, such as Paul Edwards identify this philosophical crisis of knowledge as being a central characteristic of modernism, he writes ‘[t]he whole of modernism turns around this crisis, which has its roots in the material history of modernity at least as much as in the philosophy that accompanies, or in Nietzsche’s case seems to predict it. This perspectivism places Nietzsche’s entire philosophy at risk, but it is also what gives it an enduring appeal. Unfortunately, as with any piece of scholarship, only so much could be done in this thesis, but another study might privilege a perspectivist interpretation of the Avant-Garde. Already one could relate Kandinsky’s intellectual disposition being affected by the splitting of the atom, and Nietzsche’s declaration that ‘physics is only a way of interpreting or arranging the world … and not a way of explaining the world.’ (BGE §14). Or one might consider Acéphale alongside Nietzsche’s maxim that ‘We behold all things through the human head and cannot cut off this head’ (HH §29).

But to think about it with a wider view, we can see through the various interpretations these avant-gardists provided, of Nietzsche and of this moment of crisis, a justification of Nietzsche’s perspectivism. The modernist moment was not just a moment of crisis and nihilism, but a moment of ‘becoming’, and these avant-gardists have contributed to its variegation. The thought they espoused was not just a reaction to the world, and history they perceived, but also what would make the world ‘so marvellously variegated, frightful, meaningful, soulful’ (HH §16). Perhaps the most

---

valuable aspect of Nietzsche, even to those avant-gardists that deny his influence, is in the way his philosophy paved the way for a radical modernism, creating an intellectual environment that questioned values, and even how one might interpret reality itself. It was apt to begin this thesis with Kandinsky, as his recognition of the destabilising influence of ‘the mighty hand of Nietzsche’\textsuperscript{10} is what each of these case studies have in common. Even in the case of Lewis, whose dualistic blasting and blessing is its own form of perspectivism simultaneously defining new values, and old values in new ways. Yet there is a certain self-referential critique at work in Nietzsche’s perspectivism that I am not sure is replicated in Avant-Garde Nietzscheanism (except perhaps in the case of the later Bataille, for whom meaning seemingly dissolves), as to be an avant-gardist also requires a conviction in one’s own ideas and works. By focusing on the crises diagnosed in Nietzsche’s philosophy these avant-gardists had something to test their theories against, and to define the boundaries of their aims. Their manifestoes, their artworks, novels, plays and poems could be more than art for art’s sake, but also posited as the solution to these crises.

Illustrations:

Fig. 1 Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Brücke Program*. 1906, woodcut print, 15.1 x 7.5cm, MoMA, New York.
Fig. 2 Erich Heckel, *Franzi Reclining*. 1910, woodcut, 22.7 x 41.9cm, MoMA, New York.

Fig. 3 Max Pechstein. *Killing of the Banquet Roast*, 1912, woodcut with watercolour, 22.6 x 26.4cm, MoMA, New York
Fig. 4. Erich Heckel. *Friedrich Nietzsche*, 1905, woodcut, details unknown.

Fig. 5. Wassily Kandinsky. *Departure*, 1903, Woodcut Print, as reproduced in *Verses Without Words*, 7.7 x 8.2cm, MoMA, New York.
Fig. 6. Wassily Kandinsky. *Colourful Life*, 1907, tempera on canvas, 130 x 152.5cm, Lenbachhaus, Munich.

Fig. 7. Wassily Kandinsky. *Composition V*, 1911, oil on canvas, 190 x 275cm, Private Collection.
Fig.8. Wassily Kandinsky. *Composition I*, 1910, photograph of oil on canvas, original destroyed.
fig.9 George Grosz, *The Funeral*, 1917/18, oil on canvas, 140 x 110cm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.
fig.10 George Grosz, Detail of Germany: A Winter’s Tale, 1917-19, as reproduced in Faces of the Ruling Class: 57 Political Drawings (1921)
DON INIGO VON LOYOLA
SCHLUSSESANG

Die Schiff-Gellizen werden auf und nieder-gezogen vom Monde sonnert sich ab die Seele und die Tasche der Seele die Indianer haben wir belehrt und die Huren die des teufischen Lasters schuldig waren schon acht Tage lang kusse ich den Stein auf den unser Herr Christus den Fuß setzte als er zum Himmel auffuhre ein biischer Knabe geübelt mich morgens ehe die Sonne aufgeht und die Frösche trinken mein heiliges Duth ich warf meine Augen hinter mich und die Zöllner und Sünden leuchtten auf ihnen bis ihnen der Atem ausfuhr ich überschreite den Rubicon in meinem Kopf wirbeln die Sakramente meine Mausolee steigen über die Städte und das Volk betet sie an o ich halte die Schatten-
dächer und Erdteile vor mich wie zu meiner Freude wer will es mir wehren mit Schreien gehe die Erde vor mir auf ABBA ABBA rufen die Wesen hinter meinem Weg wenn ich meinen Atem anhalte jammert es aus den Gräbern wenn ich tanze sagen die Wölfe zu ihren Jungen kalter Herr kalter Herr wie den doch
O ja doch aber nicht im Ganzen
DU IST MEIN WEG UND DIE WAHRHEIT DU SOLLST MIT MIR SEIN

fig.11 George Grosz. Illustration for the poem ‘Don Inigo of Loyola: Final Song’ by George Grosz for 1920 edition of Phantastische Gebete by Richard Huelsenbeck, University of Iowa Dada Archive.
fig.12 George Grosz, *Panorama (Down with Liebknecht)*, 1919, pen and Ink with watercolour, dimensions unknown, Private collection, New York.
Fig.13 Wyndham Lewis, *The Enemy of the Stars*, 1913, pen and ink wash, 44 x 20cm, location unknown, as reproduced in *Blast I* (1914)
Fig. 14 Wyndham Lewis, *The Vorticist*, 1912, pen and ink and watercolour 42 x 30.5cm, Southampton City Art Gallery.
Fig. 15 Wyndham Lewis, *The Dancers (Study for Kermesse)*, 1912, pen and ink and watercolour, gouache 29.5 x 29cm, Manchester Art Gallery.
Fig. 16 Wyndham Lewis, *Figure (Spanish Woman)*, 1912 Pen and ink and goache on paper 31 x 21cm, Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust.
Fig. 17 Umberto Boccioni, *States of Mind I: The Farewells*, 1911, oil on canvas 70.5 x 96.2cm, MoMA, New York.

Fig. 18 Umberto Boccioni, *States of Mind II: Those Who Go*, 1911, oil on canvas 70.8 x 95.9cm, MoMA, New York
Fig. 19 Umberto Boccioni, *States of Mind III: Those Who Stay*, 1911, oil on canvas 70.8 x 95.9cm, MoMA, New York.
Fig. 20 André Masson, Cover of Acéphale, issue 1 ‘La Conjuration Sacrée’, 1936.
Fig. 21 André Masson. *Dionysos*, as reproduced in *Acéphale* 3-4, 1937.
Fig. 22 André Masson. *La Mère*, 1925, Indian ink, 44 x 30.8cm, reproduced in *André Masson: Drawings*, 1972.
Fig. 23 André Masson, *Titan*, pencil and dry point etching, 1971, 47.5 x 33.5cm Private Collection.
Fig. 24 André Masson, Osiris, 1936, as reproduced in Sacrifices (1936)
Fig. 25 André Masson, Barcelona Juillet 1936, (A.K.A 'The Barcelona Acéphale) (1936) Zinc Plate
Fig. 26. Artist unknown, frontispiece for first edition of Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1872.
Bibliography


Author Unknown. ‘Leading Opinions Concerning Nietzsche.’ The Eagle and The Serpent, No. 5, (1898) pp.75-78.


Gaudier-Brzeska, Henri. ‘Vortex (written from the trenches).’ *Blast.* No.2 (1915) pp.33-6.


Jordan, Sharon. ‘“He is a Bridge”: The Importance of Friedrich Nietzsche for Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.’ in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*. Edited by Jill Lloyd and Janis Staggs. Prestel, Munich, New York, London: 2019.


Steinberg, Leo. 'The Philosophical Brothel.' *October.* Vol.44 (1988) pp.7-74


*The New Age.* Edited by A.R Orage vol. 1, n. 25 (October 1907) p.395


