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Introduction: What's in a Name?

Despite the many obvious differences, at once philosophical and political, between Theodor Adorno and Martin Heidegger, differences upon which the former insists so polemically in his major works of the 1950s and 1960s, these two thinkers are nonetheless in unqualified accord on at least two – far from unrelated – points, namely the first appearance of the term ‘nihilism’ (*Nihilismus*) within the discourse of Western philosophy, and the privilege to be accorded to the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin for what they both take to be its power of resistance to, and even its surpassing of, that which would go by the name of ‘nihilism’. In his 1940 lecture course *Nietzsche: The Will to Power (II. European Nihilism)*, first published in the two-volume *Nietzsche* (1961),¹ Heidegger follows Otto Pöggeler’s lead when he identifies Friedrich Jacobi as the first to have put the term ‘nihilism’ to ‘philosophical use’ (*philosophische Verwendung*) (Heidegger 1982b: 3). Five years later, in *Negative Dialectics* (1966), Adorno also identifies Jacobi as the thinker who ‘first put the term to philosophical use [*philosophisch verwendete*]’, adding that Nietzsche ‘adopted it, presumably from newspaper accounts of terrorist acts in Russia’ (Adorno 1973: 379).

The philosophical *Verwendung* of ‘nihilism’ to which both Heidegger and Adorno are referring here is to be found in an open letter from Jacobi to Johann Gottlieb Fichte, dated 21 March 1799 and first published in the autumn of that year. In this letter, Jacobi argues that transcendental idealism of the Fichtean kind is the philosophy of a ‘will which wants Nothing’ in the sense that it concerns itself solely with what the ‘I’ can produce out of itself, and thus seeks to reduce to nothing all that lies beyond it, namely ‘the true’ or ‘God’ – of which, Jacobi claims, one can only ever have a ‘distant presentiment’, not a knowledge. ‘By the true’, Jacobi writes, ‘I understand something which is prior to and outside of

knowing; which first gives knowing and the capacity for knowing, for reason, its value' (Jacobi 1987: 131). According to Jacobi, in its reduction to nothing of that which transcends philosophy as knowledge, and which gives that knowledge its value, Fichtean idealism is itself left with nothing – the 'empty self' – and thus, despite itself, becomes 'the Philosophical Knowing of Nothing'. It is for this reason that such idealism may be characterized as 'nihilism' (*Nihilismus*) (Jacobi 1987: 136). However, to counter this nihilism, which he deplures, Jacobi proposes nothing positive, but rather a 'Philosophy of Not Knowing' or 'Science of Ignorance' (Jacobi 1987: 136, 140). For Jacobi, then, the fundamental alternative is between a known nothing (the 'I') and an unknowable something ('God' or 'the true'), or between nihilism and faith (see Jacobi 1987: 135). As we shall see, if his positing of faith as that which stands as the only alternative to nihilism might appear to be at odds with much of the later thinking of nihilism, in certain key respects – not least its privileging of an alterity beyond the grasp of any knowledge determined as *Wissenschaft* – Jacobi's conception of nihilism, and of that which stands opposed to it, anticipates almost all the major redeterminations of nihilism over the subsequent two centuries.

While Jacobi may be the first to put the term 'nihilism' to philosophical use,² and to have done so in the form of a charge directed at a specific philosophical position, it is indisputably with what Adorno describes as Nietzsche's 'adoption' of the term that it undergoes a radical inflation. It is, however, precisely Nietzsche's role in the history of nihilism, and what is taken to be the dominance of his interpretation of nihilism, that recent contributions to the literature on nihilism have tended to challenge. This new consensus regarding Nietzsche's place within the history of the thinking of nihilism is far from being matched by any consensus on the real shape or limits of that history. In one of the more ambitious recent claims for that history's extension, Will Slocombe opens his *Nihilism and the Postmodern Sublime* (2006) with the assertion that, far from originating with Nietzsche, 'philosophies of nihilism are evident from classical Greece to Enlightenment Europe' (Slocombe 2006: 1). Certainly, as regards the earliest 'philosophies of nihilism', this claim would appear to require little more in the way of supporting evidence than the philosophical position attributed to the Sicilian sophist Gorgias of Leontini (c. 483–376 BC) in various histories of philosophy. Although perhaps best known as a teacher of rhetoric, author of the extant *Encomium of Helen*, and the first of Socrates' interlocutors in Plato's *Gorgias*, he is also reputed by a number of classical writers to have been the author of a lost treatise entitled *On Nature or the Non-Existent*, in which, as John Burnet

puts it in *Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Plato* (1914), he is thought to have argued: '(1) that there is nothing, (2) that, even if there is anything, we cannot know it, and (3) that, even if we could know it, we could not communicate our knowledge to anyone else' (Burnet 1914: 120). While Wilhelm Windelband, in his influential *History of Philosophy* (1892; English translation, 1893), labels this philosophical position simply 'the doctrine of "nihilism" ("there is no being")' (Windelband 1893: 105), Burnet carefully distinguishes between the 'cosmological nihilism' of Gorgias and the 'ethical nihilism' of Thrasymachus of Chalcedon (who flourished c. 430–400 BC), as presented in Book One of Plato's *Republic*. Whereas the 'cosmological nihilism' of Gorgias treats the nature of being – responding to the question of essence: 'What is ...?' (*ti esti* ...), to which Gorgias answers: 'Nothing is' – the 'ethical nihilism' of Thrasymachus treats the nature of justice (*dikē*) and right (*dikaïosunē*), and maintains that both of these are 'simply what is in the interest of the stronger party' (Plato 1987: 77; 338c).³

That the history of nihilism within Western thought has to be traced back beyond Nietzsche, although not as far as Slocombe claims, has been the argument of two important, if very different, recent works: Michael Allen Gillespie's *Nihilism before Nietzsche* (1995) and Conor Cunningham's *Genealogy of Nihilism* (2002). According to Gillespie, while Nietzsche's interpretation of nihilism in terms of the 'death of God' has dominated almost all subsequent analyses of the subject, this interpretation fails to grasp both the 'essence of nihilism' and its 'true significance' (Gillespie 1995: xi). According to Gillespie, far from lying in a loss of religious faith, the origin of what Nietzsche terms 'European nihilism' is in fact located in the severing of the relation between reason and revelation that occurs with the fourteenth-century nominalist reconception of God as 'an omnipotent divine will unconstrained by any rational notion of the good' (Gillespie 1995: xiii). It is just such a 'nihilist' conception of the will detached from reason that Gillespie proceeds to trace in a philosophical tradition that runs from Descartes to Nietzsche, by way of Fichte, the German Romantics, and Schopenhauer. Indeed, far from Nietzsche's interpretation of nihilism being either the first or the correct one, Gillespie sees Nietzsche's thinking of the overcoming (*Überwindung*) of nihilism through the Dionysian as itself the consummation of nihilism. While this conclusion repeats Heidegger's, Gillespie identifies the latter's own fundamental ontology as itself one more manifestation of nihilism, since, according to Gillespie, it remains governed by that radical division instituted by fourteenth-century nominalism: 'Being in [Heidegger's] thought is an omnipotent power beyond

nature and beyond reason, akin to the *deus absconditus* of nominalism' (Gillespie 1995: xxii). Despite his challenging of what he takes to be the Nietzschean and Heideggerian interpretations of nihilism, however, Gillespie remains very much aligned with both Nietzsche and Heidegger in two crucial respects: first, he undertakes what he sees as a necessary diagnosis of nihilism; and, secondly, this diagnosis has as its aim the overcoming of nihilism.

Whereas Gillespie locates the origin of nihilism in the 'collapse of the scholastic synthesis' of reason and revelation (Gillespie 1995: xxiv), Cunningham's 'genealogy of nihilism' traces nihilism considerably further back, although again not as far back as the pre-Socratics. According to Cunningham, it is Plotinus who inaugurates a tradition of 'meontological' thinking that grounds being in non-being (*me on*), this already 'realized logic of nihilism' extending from Plotinus right up to what Cunningham takes to be the most recent manifestations of such 'meontology' in Derrida and Deleuze. Among the many significant differences between Cunningham's and Gillespie's interpretations of nihilism is the fact that, unlike Gillespie, Cunningham makes no distinction between what Gillespie terms 'nihilism' and 'explicit nihilism' in his charting of this meontological tradition, the expression 'explicit nihilism' being reserved by Gillespie for 'nihilism' as it is deployed by those who make use of the term, above all Nietzsche and those who follow in his wake.

This distinction between 'nihilism' and 'explicit nihilism' is significant not only because it is precisely the radical inflation of 'nihilism' in Nietzsche that constitutes the point of departure for a series of countering redeterminations and redeployments of the concept of nihilism (a series to which both Gillespie and Cunningham belong), but also because it is with Nietzsche that the uncanniness (*Unheimlichkeit*) of 'nihilism' is first named. When, in the autumn 1885–autumn 1886 notebook that also contains an early draft plan for a work to be entitled *The Will to Power: Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values*,⁴ Nietzsche declares that 'Nihilism stands at the door' (*Der Nihilismus steht vor der Thür*), he immediately proceeds to ask: 'whence comes to us this uncanniest of all guests?' (*woher kommt uns dieser unheimlichste aller Gäste?*) (Nietzsche 1968: 7, translation modified; 1999: xii. 125). If, for Nietzsche, nihilism is '*the danger of dangers*' (*die Gefahr der Gefahren*) (Nietzsche 1968: 44–5, n.39; 1999: xii. 109; Nietzsche's emphasis), then this is precisely on account of its status as the 'uncanniest of all guests'.

One of the central arguments of the present book is that this very uncanniness, which is not necessarily to be understood in Nietzsche's own terms, prevents any effective appropriation of the concept of

nihilism in the interests of critique in the manner of, for instance, Stanley Rosen's *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay* (1969). Rosen's stated aim is to accomplish a 'critique of modern nihilism', a critique grounded in 'the premise that the Platonic–Aristotelian conception of the relation between reason and the good is superior to the modern, or predominantly modern, conception' (Rosen 1969: 138). According to Rosen, the two principal manifestations of what he terms 'modern nihilism' are Wittgenstein's 'ordinary language philosophy' and Heidegger's 'fundamental ontology', with the essence of this 'modern nihilism' lying in a radical separation of the concept of reason from that of the good. If the critique of 'modern nihilism' must engage above all with Heidegger, then this is not simply because Heidegger's 'statement' of the 'nihilist implications of the post-Hegelian philosophical world' is 'inadequate', but also, and indeed above all, because that statement 'is itself an expression, rather than an overcoming, of nihilism' (Rosen 1969: xvii). In a number of key respects, Rosen's critique of Heidegger's fundamental ontology as nihilist repeats that of Karl Löwith in *Heidegger: Thinker in a Destitute Time* (1953), including the latter's claims regarding the pure formalism of Heideggerian resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*), the contentless nature of facticity, radical finitude (or the exclusion of 'eternity'), historicism, and the dire political consequences of each of these. To nihilism thus conceived, Rosen opposes a 'Platonism' that sees 'no difference between philosophy and the good life' (Rosen 1969: xviii), and that insists on the indissoluble unity of reason and the good. However, rejecting (as does Heidegger) the possibility of any decisive overcoming of nihilism, Rosen claims that nihilism is a 'perennial human danger' or 'pestilence', and that it 'cannot be "solved" without the dissolution of human nature' (Rosen 1969: xx). Although he shows no awareness of the irony here – an irony the implications of which we shall have reason to consider at some length when analysing the sequence of major redeterminations of the concept of nihilism since Nietzsche – by charging Heidegger with nihilism Rosen is, like Löwith before him, in fact repeating *against* Heidegger the very charge directed *by* Heidegger *against* Nietzsche: a proposed overcoming of nihilism is in fact the expression or even the consummation (*Vollendung*) of nihilism.

Rosen's entire argument rests, of course, on the assumption that the various manifestations of something called 'nihilism' may both be identified and effectively countered through critique. Indeed, for Rosen, it is precisely through critique that both Wittgensteinian and Heideggerian nihilism may be shown to take the form of a self-cancellation: 'in each case, the principles of the teaching, when correctly and consistently

formulated in the terms approved by their own masters, lead to the negation of those principles, or to silence. And speech that is indistinguishable from silence is nihilism' (Rosen 1969: xix). Perhaps understandably, given his avowedly 'Platonist' position, at no point does Rosen address the question of whether it is in fact possible to launch a critique of nihilism from a position located safely beyond its borders, even though that critique appears to disclose the logic of nihilism as one of reversal, whereby, as in the case of Heidegger (as Rosen interprets him), the critique of nihilism can become the expression of nihilism. As we shall see, what Rosen misses here is precisely the manner in which, in its extreme uncanniness, nihilism tends to return to haunt the very discourses that would counter it, with this haunting being of a kind that does not permit one in one's turn simply to identify a given counter-discourse as itself nihilist.

Rosen's critique of 'modern nihilism' produces, then, a concept of nihilism as a philosophical position that is self-undoing, and that is to be countered for precisely this reason. In a reversal of the kind that is more than merely one characteristic among others of the history of the redetermination and redeployment of the concept of nihilism since Nietzsche, this determination of nihilism as self-undoing has recently been revalorized by Slocombe as a nihilism possessing radical emancipatory force, saving us – but who exactly? – from both philosophical and political fundamentalism, of which Rosen's 'Platonism' would, from Slocombe's perspective, no doubt be an instance. While insisting on the distinction between his own position and that of Gianni Vattimo (to which I turn in Chapter 7), Slocombe undertakes a revalorization of nihilism on the grounds that, as 'the philosophy of absence and nothingness', it 'must remain paradoxically present within philosophy and culture. Its eradication would hail a new fundamentalism, a new Enlightenment perhaps even more damaging than the first' (Slocombe 2006: xi). However, just as both Nietzsche and Vattimo find it necessary to distinguish between 'active' and 'passive' nihilism, so for Slocombe this revalorization requires a radical division within nihilism. Rejecting what he takes to be David Levin's massive oversimplification of nihilism as a 'rage against Being' (Levin 1988: 5), Slocombe discriminates between 'modernist' and 'postmodern' nihilism, and proceeds to find examples of the latter in a range of literary texts. Whereas the 'rage against Being' would be the essence of 'modernist nihilism', a 'postmodern nihilism' is 'intrinsically self-reflective and deconstructive' (Slocombe 2006: xiii). According to Slocombe, this 'postmodern nihilism' breaks with the 'sum of the historical nihilisms', all of which

would fall neatly within the category of 'modernist nihilism' determined as 'a totalitarian nothingness where nothing else but nihilism can exist' (Slocombe 2006: 100). Locating the origin of all such 'historical nihilisms' in atheism – 'The rise of nihilism as a cultural entity historically begins with the rise of atheism in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries' (Slocombe 2006: 8) – Slocombe sees a migration within 'historical' nihilism from religion to politics and then, with the publication of Nietzsche's *The Will to Power* (1901; expanded edition, 1906), to philosophy.⁵

Slocombe argues that 'postmodern nihilism' breaks with all historical nihilisms because it directs its negativity not only against the entire Western cultural tradition but also against itself, in an act of radical self-undoing: 'If ... nihilism is to be a valid philosophy and one that has emancipatory potential, it must be something that destroys itself. That is, one must read "there is no truth" as a semantic paradox: even the statement itself is not true' (Slocombe 2006: 100). In this respect, 'postmodern nihilism' would differ not least from a Nietzschean 'active nihilism', which remains 'modernist' precisely because, according to Slocombe, it fails to turn its critical light back upon itself – unlike Vattimo, Slocombe sees both Nietzsche and Heidegger as writing 'from "outside" nihilism, rather than from "within" it' (Slocombe 2006: 101). What soon becomes clear, then, is that the theorization of an emancipatory 'postmodern nihilism' is no less dependent upon a critique of nihilism – in the form of 'historical nihilisms' – than is Rosen's self-declared 'defence of reason'. Furthermore, just as Rosen seeks to produce a thinking that is ethical (through its reuniting of reason with the good), so Slocombe aims to theorize a 'postmodern nihilism' that is properly ethical in that, as a self-cancelling act of 'performative contradiction', it opens itself up to 'absolute alterity' (Slocombe 2006: 166, 104): 'By "being-Not", we are not being "for-the-Other" but allowing the Other simply "to be" without us' (Slocombe 2006: 170). In this respect, Slocombe's reinterpretation of nihilism falls squarely within a thinking of the ethical in terms of alterity that may be traced back to Jacobi and in which a certain 'faith' plays a fundamental role.

However different their approaches and their conclusions might be, then, Rosen and Slocombe share the assumption that the concept of nihilism may be appropriated in the interests of a liberating critique, and that this critique is governed by an ethics. As in both Gillespie and Cunningham, however, so too in Rosen and Slocombe, no account is taken of that uncanniness to which Nietzsche refers when he announces nihilism's being 'at the door'. And, as we shall see, it is precisely

this uncanniness that interferes with any effective appropriation of the concept, either for the purposes of a critique of nihilism from a position taken to be beyond its borders or for a revalorization of nihilism from within those borders. Indeed, to begin to try to think this *Unheimlichkeit* requires a reflection upon nihilism precisely in terms of the border or limit, and upon the status of any distinction between the homely (*heimlich*) and the unhomely (*unheimlich*), between *unheimlich* and *unheimisch*, between the home (*Heim*), the homeland (*Heimat*), and homelessness (*Heimatlosigkeit*), between Latinity and Germanness (*das Deutsche*) – for the philosophical *Verwendung* of *Nihilismus* is the entry of a decidedly Latinate word not simply into Western but precisely into *German* philosophy, from which it very quickly migrates to the so-called Romance languages.⁶ Above all, however, if one is to begin to think the uncanniness of nihilism, one has to consider what it might mean for nihilism to be ‘at the door’ (*vor der Thür*) – and to do so in a manner that is not necessarily Nietzschean, assuming that one could in fact establish what the ‘Nietzschean’ is here. The present book will have been an attempt to do just this: to consider what being ‘at the door’ might mean in the case of that which goes by the name of ‘nihilism’, while bearing in mind Heidegger’s point that ‘A name always hides within itself an interpretation’ (*Ein Name birgt stets eine Auslegung in sich*) (Heidegger 1982b: 176).

In a manner that is neither strictly historical nor genealogical, the present book may be distinguished from all of the above studies in a number of fundamental respects. First, I focus upon a sequence of major redeterminations and redeployments of an explicitly identified ‘nihilism’ within a tradition of philosophical and cultural critique that commences with – and remains tied to – Nietzsche. This sequence – which includes, but is certainly not limited to, the various philosophers and literary theorists included in this book – traverses any posited divide between the modern and the postmodern, not least on account of the privilege that continues to be accorded to certain forms of the literary for what is taken to be their power of resistance to nihilism, a privilege that stands in such striking contrast to the place assigned to art (*Kunst*) in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, where it is adjudged to be ‘far removed . . . from being the highest form of spirit’ and ‘for us a thing of the past’ (Hegel 1975: i. 13, 11).

Secondly, I aim to show that the uncanniness of that which goes by the name ‘nihilism’ manifests itself as a haunting return in the theorization of that which is taken to constitute the greatest resistance to nihilism, namely ‘art’, ‘poetry’, or ‘literature’. But if nihilism turns back upon those who would deploy it, this turning back is never strictly philosophical or literary-theoretical in nature. Rather, when a philosopher

or a theorist of the literary finds it necessary to redetermine and re-deploy the concept of nihilism, which almost always means to denounce it, to expose it, to identify it where it would dissimulate itself – be it as ‘idealism’, or ‘realism’, or ‘science’, or ‘positivism’, or ‘fundamental ontology’, or ‘metaphysics’, or ‘deconstruction’, to name but a few of its reputed masks, fronts, or haunts – one may be sure that among the borders philosophy and literary theory have already crossed is the one that would separate these discourses from the political. For nihilism is always as political as it is philosophical, and not merely when – as is the case with Wyndham Lewis, for instance – it is determined as the politicization of art.⁷ Thus, while Nietzsche may be said, as Adorno puts it, to have ‘adopted’ the term *from* a political discourse, he certainly cannot be said to have freed it from the political, rendering it purely philosophical. Indeed, there is arguably no concept less purely philosophical than the concept of nihilism. And if, as Adorno also asserts, Nietzsche ‘used the word to denounce the opposite of what it meant in the practice of political conspirators: to denounce Christianity as the institutionalized negation of the will to live’ (Adorno 1973: 379), this reversal is only the first of many in the sequence that will be considered in this book. Furthermore, just as the concept of nihilism cannot be detached from the political, so that which is taken to be the privileged form of resistance to nihilism – be it art, poetry, or literature – cannot be detached from either the philosophical or the political. While Alain Badiou may be right to identify Nietzsche as the ‘great “inventor” of contemporary anti-Platonism, at the dawn of the suture of philosophy and the poem’ (Badiou 1999b: 98) – a suturing that is never simply, as Rosen claims, the complete *disappearance* of any distinction between philosophy and poetry (see Rosen 1969: xvi) – the recognition of the problematical nature of the relation between the deployment of ‘nihilism’ and the privileging of art, poetry, or literature does not necessarily mean that we can envisage the kind of de-suturing of philosophy from the poem (*poème*) that Badiou takes to be both possible and necessary – and, indeed, necessary *because* it is possible. This de-suturing would first have to master ‘nihilism’, and the very possibility of such mastery is, as I aim to demonstrate, what remains in question, not least in Badiou’s own call for a return to Platonism.

Precisely because my aim is to show the uncanniness at work in the various major redeterminations and redeployments of the concept of nihilism from Nietzsche to Badiou, and to consider the implications of this uncanniness for any attempt to use (*verwenden*) the concept of nihilism, my approach should not be mistaken for either one more

critique or one more valorization of nihilism – assuming, *concesso non dato*, that the latter may be clearly distinguished from the former – any more than it should be mistaken for either an attempt akin to Glicksberg's (1975) to identify a 'literature of nihilism' or one more valorization of the literary as a privileged site of resistance to nihilism. Each of these procedures is called into question as soon as one registers the manner in which 'nihilism' returns to haunt the very discourses that would deploy it, and to do so precisely there where the resistance to, or the surpassing of, nihilism is theorized as taking place.

If I begin with Nietzsche, then this is not simply because it is with the later Nietzsche that philosophy takes as its explicit and overriding task the overcoming (*Überwindung*) of that which will henceforth go by the name of 'nihilism'; it is also because Nietzsche inaugurates a sequence of redetermining deployments of the concept of nihilism in which art in one form or another will be accorded a particular privilege on account of what is taken to be its power of resistance to nihilism; and, above all, because it is with Nietzsche, and those who attempt to redetermine and redeploy the concept of nihilism in his wake, that one finds what may perhaps be most economically expressed as the *resistance of nihilism*, a phrase in which both the subjective and the objective genitive would be operative. As we shall see, not only do the various – and often very different – forms taken by this *resistance of nihilism* in the work of the philosophers and literary theorists considered in this book traverse and – to say the least – complicate the distinction between the modern and postmodern, but they also traverse and complicate the distinctions between 'nihilisms', not only the five kinds of nihilism identified by Donald A. Crosby – namely political, moral, epistemological, cosmic, and existential (see Crosby 1988: 8) – or the five kinds identified by Karen L. Carr – epistemological, alethiological, metaphysical or ontological, ethical or moral, and existential or axiological (see Carr 1992: 17–18) – but also those added to Carr's list by Slocombe – theological, political, and semantic (see Slocombe 2006: 7). In short, the uncanniness of nihilism, as the *resistance of nihilism*, is to be found wherever an attempt is made to put the concept of nihilism to work for the purpose of critique, whenever there is a *Verwendung* of nihilism in the interests of an ethics – which, in each of the instances considered in this book, is always an ethico-aesthetics.

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