



The impossibility of flight

An analysis of Wyndham Lewis's *Enemy of the Stars* in the light of Nietzsche's literary approach to an overcoming of nihilism in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

Bachelor's Thesis

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Abstract

As a key work from the early 20th century avant-garde, Wyndham Lewis's play *Enemy of the Stars* can be seen as a modernist reaction to the nihilism inherent in modernity. One of the most comprehensive expressions of nihilism may be found in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. This study will bring the two authors together by investigating what nihilism means and a possible way out of this nihilism as presented in various elements in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, and how these elements feature in Lewis's play.

Key words: Wyndham Lewis, Friedrich Nietzsche, modernism, nihilism

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Chapter 1: Introduction

What is nihilism?

In his essay “Twentieth Century Nihilism” (1952), the avant-garde writer, painter, and critic Wyndham Lewis diagnoses his contemporary existentialist thinkers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, in this way:

The hypothesis of an absolute somewhere else than in existence (as posited in classical metaphysics) is rejected by the Existentialist. For the reason is substituted *intuition*.

The absolute, implicated with our temporal existence, is to be contacted by ultra-rational, intuitive agencies. All ultimate cognitive possibilities are removed from their traditional seat in the human reason – that characteristic endowment of man – and transferred to those means of apprehension we share with the lizard and the bee. As a knower, even the big toe or the penis has priority over the mind.¹

For Lewis, the rejection of both an absolute or transcendent reality as something that lies outside of us and the primary position of human reason in favour of intuition constitute a form of nihilism, for example in its denial of the self: “A man, having delivered up his soul, not to the Devil but to the tree outside his window – to his coal scuttle and ‘bedroom suite’ and to all the objects he can lay his eyes on, then suddenly cuts himself off from all this, from the external world [...] he finds himself [...] in an empty house – a void, a *nothing*.”²

Interestingly, it is precisely in the work of one of the most important forefathers of twentieth-

¹ Wyndham Lewis, “Twentieth Century Nihilism,” in *The Essential Wyndham Lewis*, ed. Julian Symons (London: André Deutsch Limited, 1989), 244.

² *Ibid.*, 247.

century existentialist thought, Friedrich Nietzsche, that one of the most compelling diagnoses and explorations of the complicated nature of nihilism and its definitions can be found. This begs the question: what, then, is nihilism? And what is the relation between the form of nihilism that Lewis rejects and the nihilism that is found in Nietzsche's writing?

The term *nihilism* has played an explicit role in Western thought from the eighteenth century onwards, beginning with critiques of Immanuel Kant's idealism by authors such as Johann Georg Hamann and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. Kant's theories were criticized not only for their denial of the possibility of actual knowledge of God, but because Kant's statement that reason can, and should, criticize everything implies that reason must also criticize itself. This critique of the self, as Frederik Beiser writes, results in the looming "nightmare [...] that the self-criticism of reason ends in nihilism, doubt about the existence of everything."³ Whereas for Nietzsche the problem of nihilism would arguably become first and foremost a moral and cultural problem⁴, rather than an epistemological one (i.e. a problem of what can or cannot be known), both Kant's philosophy as a whole and the element of self-criticism play an important role in the development of nihilism as set out by Nietzsche.

Paul van Tongeren gives an overview of the ways the term *nihilism* has been used to denote a vast variety of philosophical, cultural, and political phenomena from such critiques of Kant's philosophy onwards in *Het Europese Nihilisme*. Romanticism, for example, can be argued to express nihilistic tendencies, in its positing of the self as a radically free being and thereby denying the world outside of the self⁵. Another conception of nihilism is attributed to the Russian revolutionary tradition, where nihilism begins to denote something positive and is

³ Simon Critchley, *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 22.

⁴ Shane Weller, *Modernism and Nihilism* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 4.

⁵ Paul van Tongeren, *Het Europese Nihilisme* (Nijmegen: Uitgeverij Vantilt en Paul van Tongeren, 2012), 46.

no longer used pejoratively: the Russian revolutionaries were interested in Hegel, and shared his view of negation as a moment in a progressive process, concluding that destruction is justified in order to bring about something new⁶. In another example, the nineteenth-century literary landscape in France exhibits tendencies of nihilism in a development commonly known as decadence. This decadence results from an inability to arrange and find order in the plurality and chaos of the time, exemplified in developments such as urbanization, socialism, and industrialization.⁷ Incidentally, the French context is where nihilism is not seen simply as either something negative or positive, but takes the shape of a diagnosis of the contemporary cultural environment.

The aforementioned diagnosis takes a more extensive and encompassing shape in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, however complex and mysterious this shape might be. As mentioned above, Kant's idealism is an important link in the chain of the history of European thought and the nihilism inherent in it, a history that has its inception with Socrates and Plato. These two philosophers stand at the very beginning of Western philosophy for Nietzsche⁸ – Kant is but a symptom of the disease that infects Western culture. Although this disease is arguably most accurately termed nihilism (and this is the name it has been given from Nietzsche onwards), Nietzsche's use of the term itself is scarce, and limited to a specific period in his writing. The word nihilism can most frequently be found in his writings from 1885 to 1888, although it is still not very common in these texts either, especially in the published work.⁹ Investigation of his posthumously published notes, however, makes it clear that in this later period of Nietzsche's writing, the theme of nihilism and its overcoming is a

⁶ Ibid., 50.

⁷ Ibid., 55.

⁸ Ibid., 79.

⁹ Ibid., 64.

central one. Moreover, it is during this period that Nietzsche seems to discover that his published works up to that point did not necessarily primarily deal with the great variety of subject matter these works deal with, but can actually be placed in the light of the insight he seems to have gained by the time of the later writings – the insight into nihilism.¹⁰

In addition to presenting a history of nihilism, Nietzsche also concerns himself with a possible way to escape its grip, or alternatively, a possibility that opens up when it has reached its end. Interestingly, nihilism is not seen as a problem with a theoretical solution, but one that has to be lived, practically. In other words, the answer to nihilism is not a philosophical theory, but a way of living.¹¹ The fact that the solution to nihilism goes beyond theory means that it cannot be expressed in a philosophical treatise. In fact, the end of nihilism, or the conclusion of its development, and the effects of this conclusion are expressed most enigmatically in a literary text: *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1883-1891)¹². This text presents nihilism as a given condition or presupposition, yet one of which humanity is still unaware, and the character of Zarathustra as a prophet, come to show the people how they should react to this terrible fate. The death of God as it is described in *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, book 3, paragraph 125, is the precondition for what Zarathustra attempts to bring to the people: it is the expression of the downfall of everything that gave the world purpose, in the face of which something must be done.

¹⁰ Ibid., 68.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The title of this work will from here on be rendered *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, which is the title of the translation of the book used in this study.

Modernism and nihilism: the research question

Nietzsche's critique of Western culture is often seen as one of the first systematic critiques of modernity as being inherently nihilistic.¹³ His writings have been the inspiration for a number of early twentieth-century movements concerned with what was seen as the "desacralization"¹⁴ inherent in modernity. Fredric Jameson, for example, is quoted in Weller's book, arguing that modernity may be seen as a "catastrophe [...] which dashes traditional structures and lifeways to pieces, sweeps away the sacred, undermines immemorial habits and inherited languages, and leaves the world as a set of raw materials to be reconstructed rationally."¹⁵ Weller sees the First World War as increasing the urgency of modernist projects of *resacralization*, among which can be counted Heidegger's fundamental ontology, Italian fascism, German Nazism, and in the artistic realm, the European avant-garde movements.¹⁶

The attitude of the various avant-garde movements towards nihilism is ambiguous – Weller points out that "on the one hand, aesthetic modernism [a term he equates with the avant-garde art and literary movements of the early twentieth century] is repeatedly seen, and indeed repeatedly sees itself, as the counterforce to the perceived nihilism of modernity [, on] the other hand, it is also seen, and on occasion sees itself, as the incarnation of nihilism."¹⁷ While David Graver understands Lewis's *Enemy of the Stars* itself as "a pointed example of

¹³ Weller, *Modernism and Nihilism*, 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

the nonprogrammatic avant-garde of the early twentieth century,”¹⁸ several scholars describe Wyndham Lewis as a figure who can be placed quite firmly in the former category as given by Weller. Scott Klein, for example, points out that the 1914 magazine *Blast*, a “spearhead”¹⁹ for Lewis and his Vorticist movement, served as a “rallying cry [against] the excessive valuation of time [and] the sentimentalizing of mass culture.” More specifically, Lewis was looking for stability in the modern environment of plurality and contingency, and he found this stability in an assertion of the self. The artist, for Lewis, “creates forms that reaffirm [...] his individuality and independence.”²⁰ Additionally, Joel Nickels calls Wyndham Lewis “one of modernism’s most vocal advocates of the static, self-contained ego.”²¹ Lewis’s egoism entailed that “individuality and stability [...] are the last lines of fortification against the sensationalism of crowd life” and the “hypnotic effects of mass political movements.”²²

As Lewis seems to have regarded the denial of the ultimately rational and individual self in existentialist thought, and modern mass culture as a whole, as a symptom of nihilism, it is by all means notable that Friedrich Nietzsche paved the way to existentialism precisely by making similar diagnoses of modernity. This means that Lewis’s and Nietzsche’s respective conceptions of nihilism seem to be out of joint. In order to shed light on these ostensibly conflicting conceptions of nihilism and the position of Wyndham Lewis’s critique within Nietzsche’s diagnosis of Western culture, the primary question this study will attempt to

¹⁸ David Graver, “Vorticist Performance and Aesthetic in Enemy of the Stars,” *PLMA* 107, no. 3 (1992): 484, doi: 10.2307/462756.

¹⁹ Scott Klein, “The Experiment of Vorticist Drama: Wyndham Lewis and “Enemy of the Stars,”” *Twentieth Century Literature* 37, no. 2 (1991): 225, doi:10.2307/441848.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 227.

²¹ Joel Nickels, “Anti-Egoism and Collective Life: Allegories of Agency in Wyndham Lewis’s *Enemy of the Stars*,” *Criticism* 48, no. 3 (2006): 347, <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

²² *Ibid.*, 347.

answer is: How is a possible escape from nihilism, as conceptualized in Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-1891), presented in Wyndham Lewis's *Enemy of the Stars* (1914)?

This study will focus on Lewis's play rather than his theoretical texts, because Nietzsche presents his solution to nihilism as a narrative construct, using metaphors and literary tools, rather than through a philosophical treatise. The impossibility of presenting a solution theoretically necessitates an investigation into both Nietzsche's and Lewis's literary work and the devices they employ, in order to draw accurate comparison between their respective strategies. Furthermore, while scholars such as Klein and Nickels have investigated the attitude towards modernity as expressed in Lewis's work in relation to his views or political inclinations, no study seems to have been undertaken to show how this attitude can be placed in a Nietzschean context, nor have scholars examined how literary expressions of nihilism occur in both authors and how they relate to each other.

A preliminary hypothesis focuses on the way in which, on the one hand, Lewis's play seems to present a solution to the problem of nihilism, or at least the possibility of an escape, in the way the two main characters Arghol and Hanp relate to each other and their environment. On the other hand, however, the play seems to exhibit precisely the characteristics of a radical nihilism that Nietzsche presents in his work, and what it presents is not an escape from, but a further deepening of nihilism. There is thus a complex and multi-faceted relationship between Nietzsche's and Lewis's works, which seems to result in a radicalisation of nihilism even as the characters seek to escape its strictures.

Outline

The theoretical framework for this study first and foremost derives from Nietzsche's writings, which will have to be condensed into a number of key concepts related to Nietzsche's conception of nihilism. These notions will be distilled primarily from Nietzsche's

Thus Spake Zarathustra, with texts such as paragraph 125 from book three of *The Gay Science* offering further context and exploration of especially the idea of the death of God. Firstly, however, the general 'system' or history of nihilism as it is presented in Nietzsche's work will be described in further detail in Chapter 2. This conceptualization of nihilism will contain elements such as the devaluing of all values, the suffering from life and its various forms, and a history of nihilism in Western culture, and it will primarily draw on Paul van Tongeren's book *Nietzsche en Nihilisme*, which explores Nietzsche's thoughts on nihilism by extensive referral to both his published works and his notes. Chapter 3 will further concretize various elements of literary manifestations of nihilism and its overcoming that are featured in Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, by analyzing the relationship between the master and the disciple, the death of God, the relationship with the earth, the significance of flight, and lastly the significance of failure in *Zarathustra*. Chapter 4 will apply these concretized elements to a reading of Wyndham Lewis's *Enemy of the Stars*, where analogies and discrepancies between Lewis's and Nietzsche's work will be explored, and the extent to which Lewis's play reveals a form of nihilism and its possible overcoming will be assessed.

Aside from providing a synthesized answer to the research question, the conclusion to this study also addresses its further relevance and implications. Primarily, the attempt to bring Lewis's work into contact with Nietzsche's in such a concrete way as will be presented in this study has not been undertaken before, and with regard to the relationship of modernism to nihilism, it will shed at least some light on the way this relationship takes shape in one of the most important and striking works of avant-garde theatre from the early twentieth century. In more general terms, the answer could be relevant in relation to the question of the differences between modernism and postmodernism. A number of contemporary British authors, such as Zadie Smith and Tom McCarthy have, or have been, identified with early 20th century modernism. This resurgence of modernist sensibilities has led explorations of the underlying

philosophical dispositions or culturally critical attitudes of modernism on the one hand, and postmodernism on the other. The connection of both movements to ideas of nihilism might shed light on these differences, and this study will contribute to providing new insights into these dispositions.

Chapter 2: Nietzsche and nihilism

This chapter will present a historical overview of Nietzsche's ideas on nihilism and its development, which will lead into the possible culmination of nihilism that will be the topic of analysis of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in Chapter 3. This overview will draw mainly, although not exclusively, on Paul van Tongeren's *Het Europese Nihilisme* and Van Tongeren's readings of primary texts by Nietzsche. Presenting a Nietzschean history of nihilism might seem to be contradictory to the aim of this study. Why should such an overview be even relevant if that aim is to investigate how a possible solution to nihilism might be gleaned from a literary text, given voice through metaphors, characters, and other literary devices? Furthermore, Nietzsche's writings show a development where, instead of writing *about* various aspects of nihilism in a specific time period, or simply about various observations of the world around him, in the early texts (*Die Geburt der Tragödie*, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* 1-4), the author himself seems to 'become' an expression of the problem and its solution in the later writings, or at least presents himself as such (most notably in *Ecce Homo*, as Paul Van Tongeren suggests)²³. This later presentation of the author by himself is what Ruth Burch calls his "post-nihilistic self,"²⁴ which in the words of Charles E. Scott exists in the "performative movement of self-overcoming."²⁵ Both the seeming insufficiency of a systematic overview of nihilism and the performative aspects of especially the later work suggest that Nietzsche's ideas on nihilism are not made to be caught in an overly systematic historical account of these ideas. Several reasons do exist, however, for inclusion of such an overview in this study.

²³ Van Tongeren, *Het Europese Nihilisme*, 64.

²⁴ Ruth Burch, "On Nietzsche's Concept of 'European Nihilism'," *European Review* 22, no. 2 (2014): 198, doi:10.1017/S1062798714000040.

²⁵ Charles E. Scott, "Nietzsche," in *A Companion to Continental Philosophy*, ed. Simon Critchley and William Schroeder (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999), 156.

Firstly, Nietzsche attempts to provide such accounts himself on several occasions, and a number of the texts in which he provides a system or a history of nihilism will be central to this portion of the study. A systematic overview may be found in paragraph 370 of *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (“Was ist Romantik?”). This text seems to present a schema or table, circumscribing a number of categories of nihilism. Additionally, the two texts that are central to the historical overview of nihilism will be “Der Europäische Nihilismus” from 1887 (a text never published during Nietzsche’s lifetime, but later discovered in his notes), and a text from the *Götzen-Dämmerung* (1889), called “Wie die “wahre Welt” endlich zur Fabel wurde – Geschichte eines Irrthums.” The former presents, as the title suggests, a history of European nihilism. The latter presents a similar history, but of the concept of the true world, which becomes a fable: the “history of an error.”

The second reason why a historical account of nihilism as presented by Nietzsche is pertinent to this study is that the culmination of this history is precisely what this study is concerned with. Ruth Burch states that Nietzsche “regards nihilism not as an end but as a transitory phase.”²⁶ If the history of nihilism and the current state of nihilism can be caught in systems and overviews, it is precisely the continuation of nihilism, its eventual end, and what might follow that end that may only be expressed in a literary way. Burch calls this the “creat[ion of] conceptual frameworks,”²⁷ which is opposed to the rational and systematic method of the sciences. This culmination as expressed in narratives will be the focus of Chapter 3, where its expression in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* will be explored, and which will provide the framework for the analysis of Lewis’s *Enemy of the Stars* in Chapter 4. For such an exploration of how nihilism may be overcome to make sense, however, a historical overview of the development of nihilism is necessary.

²⁶ Burch, “On Nietzsche’s Concept of ‘European Nihilism,’” 201.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 199.

The inception of nihilism

First and foremost, a crucial element of the history of nihilism must be discussed: its inception. If nihilism is a transitory period, there must be something that precedes it. What this might entail can be found in numerous places in Nietzsche's work, for example the aforementioned "Das Europäische Nihilismus", also known as the Lenzerheide fragment. The first segment of this text deals with what Nietzsche calls the "Christian moral-hypothesis" which seems to have been an antidote to a presupposed form of nihilism: "Morality was the great antidote against practical and theoretical nihilism."²⁸

The three advantages of the Christian moral-hypothesis reveal as much: the first is that it gave humankind an "absolute value, contrary to [its] smallness and contingency in the stream of becoming and disappearing"²⁹. Secondly, it granted the world, despite all of the suffering and evil, the "character of perfection,"³⁰ which made this suffering and evil in the world seem purposeful. Thirdly and lastly, it made it seem as if humankind had the ability of knowledge of the absolute, giving humans "adequate knowledge" of the "most important" thing about which knowledge can be had.³¹ In other words, the Christian moral-hypothesis granted not only human beings, but also the world in which they lived, purpose and value. The notion that the purpose and value needed to be given implies that these two aspects are actually not inherent to the world.

²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Der Europäische Nihilismus," in *Friedrich Nietzsche, Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli andazzino Montinari (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1967), [http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/NF-1886,5\[71\]](http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/NF-1886,5[71]).

All translations of this and any other works by Nietzsche from the original German are mine.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

This is where nihilism begins for Nietzsche, and it is a distinct and clear echo of Schopenhauer's ideas on the human condition, as Paul van Tongeren shows on numerous occasions. Van Tongeren characterizes both Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's views of life in itself as a "Sisyphus labour"³²: for Schopenhauer, every effort to be rid of life's suffering only results in that suffering changing appearance – from the initial desperation involved in mere survival, to feelings of fear, envy, desire, hate, and greed when that first desperation has been satisfied, to boredom and apathy, leading to the inevitable return of one of the previous forms of suffering.³³ In short, human life is suffering, "life is a tragedy," and "eventually all aspirations are in vain, because every success finds its destruction in death".³⁴ Van Tongeren also makes clear that what this suffering consists of is not necessarily the incessant labour of life itself³⁵. Instead, it is the meaninglessness of life's labour that constitutes its suffering. This is encapsulated by the inherent meaninglessness of the world itself. In one of his posthumously published notes, Nietzsche gives the presupposition of various forms of nihilism:³⁶ "Presupposition to this hypothesis [the hypothesis of nihilism:] That there is no truth; that there is no absolute nature or state of things, that there is no 'thing in itself.'"³⁷

³² Van Tongeren, *Het Europese Nihilisme*, 127.

³³ *Ibid.*, 126.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁶The forms of nihilism named in this particular text are not of direct significance at this moment – what is important is the presupposition to them that is given here.

³⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, "NF-1887,9[35]," in *Friedrich Nietzsche, Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli andazzino Montinari (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1967), [http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/NF-1887,9\[35\]](http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/NF-1887,9[35]).

To further clarify this issue, Van Tongeren³⁸ points to a fragment from Nietzsche's *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, where Nietzsche parodies the beginning of the Gospel of John. The original text is this: "In the beginning there was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."³⁹ The English *Word* is a translation of the Greek *λόγος* or *logos*. Van Tongeren points out that this word may indeed mean *word*, but it may also mean *reason* or *intelligibility*.⁴⁰ Thus, it can be said that, for the Christian tradition, in the beginning of the world, at its foundation and its core, there is reason – the reality in which human beings exist is fundamentally rational and with that, purposeful and orderly. John may be paraphrased as: "In the beginning there was order, reason, and intelligibility." Nietzsche gives a pastiche of this: "In the beginning was the absurdity, and the absurdity was, by God!"⁴¹ The Gospel of John begins by implying the order inherent in the world, whereas for Nietzsche, the world is inherently meaningless. The history of nihilism for Nietzsche, then, can be said to begin with a primal or originary nihilism, a fundamental nihilism that consists in the inherent meaninglessness of the world, and the meaninglessness of human existence, which is characterized by suffering.

A historical overview of nihilism

Nietzsche's characterization of the Christian moral-hypothesis as the antidote against the meaninglessness of suffering raises the question of the moment that the meaningless of

³⁸ Paul van Tongeren, *Nietzsche & het nihilism* (2011; Leusden: ISVW uitgevers/Luisterwijs), CD 6.

³⁹ *New King James Bible*, (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982): John 1.1, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+1:1&version=NKJV>.

⁴⁰ Van Tongeren, *Nietzsche & het nihilisme*, CD 6.

⁴¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Menschliches Allzumenschliches II* in *Friedrich Nietzsche, Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1967), <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/VM-22>.

this suffering becomes such a profound problem that an antidote is needed at all. In the same way that the history of nihilism presupposes a beginning of nihilism, this beginning itself presupposes something that came before – a time when life already constituted suffering, and that suffering already meaningless, but when that meaningless suffering was not necessarily a problem to be solved or overcome.

The name Nietzsche gives to the antidote for the meaninglessness of human life – the Christian moral-hypothesis – suggests that this antidote has its source in Christianity, but as for Nietzsche Christianity is merely Platonism made understandable for the people,⁴² it can be said that this antidote finds its inception in the philosophy of Plato and Socrates.⁴³ For Nietzsche, the pre-Platonic Greeks knew that the world was meaningless and that human life as suffering was also meaningless, but they gave this awareness a place in the artwork of the tragedy. Nietzsche identifies the Greek god Dionysus as the suffering god and what he suffered from was what Nietzsche (following Schopenhauer) calls “individuation”⁴⁴: everything that exists must have its inception and also its destruction. The suffering of being born and disappearing again as an individual is repeated endlessly and meaninglessly. Dionysus affirmed this endless suffering and its lack of meaning,⁴⁵ and all tragic heroes are but “masks” of this god of affirmation.⁴⁶ For Nietzsche, this is how the pre-Platonic Greeks knew how to experience the meaninglessness of human existence without having to deny it.

⁴² Van Tongeren, *Het Europese Nihilisme*, 96.

⁴³ Plato was Socrates’s student, but because virtually everything that is known about the latter is from his appearance in the writings of the former, the two will be equated in this particular exploration – whenever Plato is referred to, Socrates is also implied in this referral.

⁴⁴ Van Tongeren, *Het Europese Nihilisme*, 96.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, in *Friedrich Nietzsche, Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli andazzino Montinari (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1967), par. 10, <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/GT>.

Nietzsche identifies Socrates's involvement with the tragedian Euripides and their "war"⁴⁷ on the earlier tragedians, most notably Aeschylus, as marking a change from a life-affirming form of art, namely tragedy, to theory and philosophy. The change from tragedy to philosophy meant a change in the attitude towards the meaninglessness of life. The lack of meaning inherent in human suffering was not to be merely experienced in the life-affirming way of Aeschylus's tragedies. Rather, it had to be explained in order to make suffering worthwhile⁴⁸, and a rational theory began to take over the affect and experience of tragedy.⁴⁹ Tragedy's affirmation of the contingency of the world that enabled the pre-Platonic Greeks to live with the suffering that is human life, is replaced by a rationalization of the world, which tries to justify the suffering and render it purposeful. This rationalization springs from an overarching tendency to explain the world by virtue of another world outside of this one, an explanation that takes concrete form in the philosophy of Plato.

The most important notion from Plato's philosophy in this regard is the notion that all that exists in this world does so merely by virtue of the existence of an ideal form of that object or notion in the ideal world. The world we live in is indeed marked by suffering and the change and destruction that cause it, but it is not the *true* world. The actual world, of which this contingent world full of suffering is but a shadow, is ideal and eternal: "The Forms are immortal, always remaining the same, eternally exempt from any sort of change."⁵⁰

Van Tongeren points out the powerful echoes of Plato's philosophy that can be found in Christianity. As mentioned above, Nietzsche conflates the two, calling Christianity

⁴⁷ Ibid., par. 12.

⁴⁸ Van Tongeren, *Het Europese Nihilisme*, 97.

⁴⁹ Nietzsche, "Die Geburt der Tragödie," par. 12.

⁵⁰ Tad Brennan, "Forms, Platonic," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2002, doi:10.4324/9780415249126-A131-1.

“Platonism for the people,” and his grounds for doing so lie precisely in the way in which Plato makes the world around us intelligible in the light of an ideal world, by virtue of which our own contingent world exists. The Christian version of this ideal and necessary world is the divine, or God, and again it is in the light of this eternal world that our contingent world has to be understood.⁵¹ A clear element of this is the Christian belief of an eternal life after this contingent life: it is only by virtue of the prospect of Heaven, in the presence of the divine, that this life is given purpose.

What has been described thus far can be seen as an approximation of the Christian moral-hypothesis, or at least as its metaphysical foundation: the world around us is contingent and marked by suffering, but it is not the true world. The true world exists outside of this one, and it is by virtue of that world that our own world is granted purpose and meaning. Morally, then, we must also aim towards reaching or achieving that which is important in the light of the security that this true world offers, whether it be actual knowledge of the good or of justice for Plato, or attaining the grace of God and a place by His side in Heaven for the Christian. Thus, the Christian moral-hypothesis contains a fundamental denial of our world by referring to a transcendent true world. It will become clear that Nietzsche identifies this denial as a form of nihilism, rather than a valid escape from it.

The error of the true world

Nietzsche identifies this model of a true world outside of our world, and in light of which the latter is to be understood, throughout Western thought and culture. Van Tongeren points to an important text in this regard, found in *Götzendämmerung*: “Wie die “wahre Welt” endlich zur Fabel wurde – Geschichte eines Irrthums.” This text gives a numbered account of the development of the notion of this transcendent, true world as identified in Plato,

⁵¹ Van Tongeren, *Het Europese Nihilisme*, 40.

Christianity and beyond. The first two fragments refer to exactly these two systems of thought respectively. Plato presents the true world as “attainable for the wise one,”⁵² knowable by the philosopher. This true world becomes Christian at some point – it becomes a world not yet attainable, but promised to the wise one, to the “sinner who repents.”⁵³

The next stage of the true world is found in Kant’s philosophy. For Kant, knowledge of the true world is unattainable; we only know the world around us insofar as we experience it and, in that experience, (re)structure it in order to fit our understanding.⁵⁴ Furthermore, Kant refuses to base his moral philosophy on anything outside of that experienced world – he develops an autonomous ethics, which consists in the imperative to do one’s duty, and which does not refer to or depend on a divine entity for justification or foundation.⁵⁵ Knowledge of such an entity, Kant argues, would be unattainable. However, because being a moral and dutiful person in our own world usually means a life of suffering, even Kant could not do without at the very least the idea of a world where our toils would eventually be rewarded.⁵⁶ In other words, the true world, while not knowable or promised, lives on in Kant’s philosophy. It has “become sublime, pale, northern, *Königsbergisch*,” but it is still the same old sun⁵⁷ (a potent symbol for the true world in Plato’s work). The denial of our world as it is, in favour of a transcendent world in light of which the contingency and suffering of the

⁵² Nietzsche Friedrich, *Götzendämmerung*, in *Friedrich Nietzsche, Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1967), <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/GD-Welt-Fabel>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Critchley, *Continental Philosophy*, 17.

⁵⁵ Van Tongeren, *Het Europese Nihilisme*, 107.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, in *Friedrich Nietzsche, Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1967), par. 125, <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/FW-370>.

former may be placed and understood is still present in Kant's philosophy – even though it is unknowable, it nonetheless grants us reprieve from our suffering.

Nietzsche explores this fundamental denial of the actual physical world in a different way in Paragraph 370 of book 5 of *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*. He identifies the Platonist, the Christian, and the Kantian as those that suffer from the impoverishment of life, whose art and knowledge serves to grant them “calm, silence, a smooth sea, salvation from themselves” or perhaps “intoxication, spasm, anaesthesia, madness.”⁵⁸ They need the “mild, peacefulness, the good [...] where possible a god that would actually be a god for the sick, a saviour/redeemer.”⁵⁹ A further escape for them would be logic, a way to make the world intelligible through reason, which would have a calming effect: a circumscription of the world that works to ward off fear, within an “optimistic horizon.”⁶⁰ In short, the ones that suffer from the impoverishment of life need an overarching framework that assures them that their suffering serves a purpose.⁶¹ This framework is precisely the true world that is posited in a denial of the actual world in which to live is to suffer meaninglessly.

Fragment 4 identifies the moment when this true world is put into question: “The true world – unattainable? At any rate unattained. And as such *unknown*. Consequently also not consoling, redeeming, obligating: to what could we be obliged by something unknown?...”⁶² The development of the true world from something that is knowable and attainable, to something promised, to something unknowable, means that this world has no actual value for us – it cannot be known, so why should it matter? This is the onset of positivism, of the

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Van Tongeren, *Het Europese Nihilisme*, 129.

⁶² Nietzsche, *Götzendämmerung*.

empirical sciences, where what we can see and experience is the truth, and nothing beside or outside that.

The will to truth

Still, why should the Christian moral-hypothesis, which posits this true world by virtue of which our lives and the world we live in were given purpose and meaning, be torn down in the first place? The catalyst to both the creation *and* the destruction of the true world as posited by Plato and Christianity is what Nietzsche calls the will to truth. This will to truth is the notion that a human that lives in a world that is contingent, ever-changing, and marked by suffering, will want to seek reprieve in something that is certain, stable, and purposeful.⁶³ As Nietzsche says: “Humans seek ‘truth:’ a world that does not contradict itself, that does not change, a true world – a world where there is no suffering.”⁶⁴ Additionally, the experience of the world as purposeless is an experience of the senses. This experience is often confusing, vague, or contingent in nature; therefore it has to be corrected by reason. This means that the “most non-sensuous ideas [i.e. those ideas that are not given to us by the senses] must be closest to the ‘true world’.”⁶⁵ This equation of the most non-sensuous with the true also works in reverse: truth is that which is not contingent, not marked by suffering – thus, the world that we experience as suffering, must be false.⁶⁶ However, as stated above, the will to truth is not only that which enables the creation of the Christian moral-hypothesis, but also acts as the catalyst for its destruction. The will to truth eventually discovers that the ‘true world’ that was

⁶³ Van Tongeren, *Het Europese Nihilisme*, 101.

⁶⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, “NF-1887,9[60],” in *Friedrich Nietzsche, Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1967), [http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/NF-1887,9\[60\]](http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/NF-1887,9[60]).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Van Tongeren, *Het Europese Nihilisme*, 101.

invented in order to grant meaning and purpose to this contingent one filled with suffering, is itself a fiction.⁶⁷

The rest of “Wie die ‘wahre’ Welt endlich zur Fabel wurde” indulges in sketching the onset of positivism and its unmasking of the Platonic and Christian denial of the actual world in which we live as the triumph of science over superstition and the beginning of a progression into absolutely free inquiry and freedom of morals. Reality, however, is much bleaker for Nietzsche: “extreme positions [i.e. the positing of a true world outside of this one] are not substituted by moderate ones, but again by extreme ones, yet reversed versions of the former.”⁶⁸ The unmasking of the Christian moral-hypothesis does not lead to reasonable, moderate thought, but to the radical reversal of the system now uncovered as false: “*One* interpretation was brought down, but because it stood as *the* interpretation, it seems as if there is no meaning to being whatsoever, as if everything were *in vain*.”⁶⁹ This reversal, in turn, does not lead to a solution of the problem. Humanity had invented a ‘true world’ in order to free itself from its suffering and the meaninglessness of the actual world. Just because this ‘true world’ has been torn down and values such as meaning, purpose, and order have been unmasked as lies, this does not mean that this desire to be free from suffering is gone as well. The world is still characterized by suffering, yet humanity is without a viable antidote.⁷⁰

The uncanniest of all guests

What makes the consequences of nihilism so horrific is the self-reflexive nature of the will to truth. Nietzsche gives a definition of the nihilism that comes into view when the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 103.

⁶⁸ Nietzsche, “Der Europäische Nihilismus.”

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Van Tongeren, *Het Europese Nihilisme*, 104, my translation.

Christian moral-hypothesis has broken down in this way: “what does nihilism mean? *That the highest values devalue themselves.*”⁷¹ This means that the highest values, such as truth, purpose, and meaning, are not torn down because they are outdated or irrelevant and it is time for a triumphant new beginning, as Simon Critchley argues in his *Short Introduction to Continental Philosophy*: “Nietzsche is not claiming that the highest values are devalued through criticism.”⁷² Instead, “all transcendent claims for a meaning to life have been reduced to mere values [...] and those values have become incredible.”⁷³ The will to truth is a self-destructive process and eventually leaves humanity in a world full of suffering, with no antidote or protection against the realization of this fact. It still leaves a desire to believe in this antidote, although we cannot. Van Tongeren characterizes the paradox in this way: “It is the will to truth itself that scrutinizes the constructions of the will to truth and eventually rejects them.”⁷⁴ Unmasking the falsity of the ‘true world’ itself implies a belief in truth: we are still faithful to the concept of truth in our discovery that truth does not exist.⁷⁵ We cannot live without the desire for truth, but through this desire we have discovered that we live in a world which is devoid of the truth that we so desire, and in this discovery itself we still hold on to truth.

An escape from this paradox is offered in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. This work explores a literary manifestation of such an escape. Following the publication of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche attempts to address the problem of truth in various other works, among which *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*. He asks a number of questions: “What in us actually

⁷¹ Nietzsche, “NF-1887,9[35].”

⁷² Critchley, *Continental Philosophy*, 80.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

⁷⁴ Van Tongeren, *Het Europese Nihilisme*, 105.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

wants to get to the truth? [...] Why not rather untruth?"⁷⁶ These questions seem to constitute an attempt to address this problem philosophically, but they also appear to fall short. In asking them, Nietzsche paradoxically confirms the value of truth – questions, after all, can be argued to require answers that are true. This paradox is structurally similar to the paradox inherent in nihilism; the denial of nihilism is inherent in nihilism itself. This makes it into the terrible and destructive development that it is, a development whose ending is immanent, but not at all or hardly conceivable.⁷⁷ Instead of Nietzsche's later theoretical attempts at exploring an overcoming of nihilism, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* gives expression to such an overcoming not on philosophical, but on primarily literary terms – an approach that seems to be a more viable option than a theoretical attempt, which will inevitably fall back into the paradox explored above. This literary exploration will be the focus of the following chapter, in which a number of metaphors will be distilled from the book and analysed.

⁷⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, in *Friedrich Nietzsche, Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli andazzino Montinari (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1967), <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/JGB-1>.

⁷⁷ Van Tongeren, *Het Europese Nihilisme*, 105.

Chapter 3: *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

The end of the previous chapter has attempted to make clear that, in Nietzsche's perspective, the overcoming of nihilism is an incredibly difficult, if not impossible task. Nietzsche saw humanity as being trapped in the vicious circle of the will to truth, an escape from which would seem to require the ability to live without the values that have made the world bearable and meaningful – values which have collapsed in on themselves under their own weight. The present chapter will characterize this collapse as the “death of God.” It will further be argued that it is unclear what an overcoming of nihilism – in the form of the *Übermensch* – might look like, but that an analysis of the themes and metaphors that Nietzsche uses in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, serves to elucidate how an escape from nihilism might take shape. A number of the themes and metaphors that are pertinent to the analysis of Lewis's play and its position within the Nietzschean framework of nihilism in the next chapter will be explored here: loyalty to the earth, flight and its impossibility, the master/disciple relationship, and solitude.

The Death of God

The self-destruction of the Christian moral-hypothesis and the “true world” as outlined in the previous chapter is characterized by Nietzsche as the death of God. The radical, self-reflexive nihilism discussed in the final section of the previous chapter follows this self-destruction, and it is the realization of and reaction to this death. The death of God is most famously expressed in Paragraph 125 of *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, which is named “Der Tolle Mensch” – “The fool,” or “The madman.” The setting of this short text is a market square populated by “many of those who did not believe in God.”⁷⁸ A man enters the square, carrying a lantern, and announces his search for God. Those present scoff and laugh at him,

⁷⁸ Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, par. 125.

finding him ludicrous, at which point the man accusingly looks them in the eyes and announces what has happened: “We have murdered him [God], - you and I! We are all his murderers.”⁷⁹

The collapse of the Christian moral-hypothesis is an inevitable, but not a joyful occasion, as was stated in the previous chapter. Equally in this case, the death of God means much more than is the case at first glance. Rather than seeing it as the collapse of religiosity, or the freedom of a belief in the divine, it is the collapse of the entire system of truth that granted the world of suffering purpose and meaning. Ananda Abeysekara rightly characterizes the death of God as not only an attack on the Christian religion, but an attack on the “edifice of [...] morality and civilization.”⁸⁰ The previous chapter has made clear that the Christian tradition is in line with the philosophical idea of truth from Plato onward⁸¹ – the world of our experience is given meaning by virtue of a different, transcendent world. Thus, the death of God denotes much more than simply the onset of unbelief, secularism, or atheism – it is, as Abeysekara points out, not a “celebration of secularism’s disenchantment with, and indeed its gradual triumph over, religion in the West.”⁸² Instead, it is a signifier of the collapse of that entire world that humanity had created for itself and in light of which everything was given purpose and meaning.

A string of metaphors follows this announcement by the madman, all designed to make clear the sheer terror of this event: “How have we emptied the seas? Who gave us the sponge to wipe out the horizon? What did we do when we disconnected the earth from its

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ananda Abeysekara, “Desecularizing Secularism,” *Culture and Religion* 7, no. 3 (2006): 206, doi:10.1080/14755610601056892.

⁸¹ Van Tongeren, *Het Europese Nihilisme*, 106.

⁸² Abeysekara, “Desecularizing Secularism,” 207.

sun? [...] Is there still an above and a below?”⁸³ Everything that granted our world sense, purpose, or perspective is gone. Furthermore, God has not been done away with by a mere falling away of belief (or, as Critchley states: “popped his clogs, quietly slipped out the back door of the universe without telling anyone”⁸⁴), but he has been actively murdered by us. This is an echo of the self-destructive nature of the will to truth as outlined in the previous chapter: the same thing that gave God life (as the truth in light of which our world made sense and was granted stability and intelligibility), namely the will to truth, also makes this God collapse in its discovery that His existence is a lie. As was made clear previously, the will to truth continued to exist after this event, resulting in the radical nihilism with which the previous chapter ended.

Zarathustra’s first speech: two possibilities

The prologue to *Thus Spake Zarathustra* presupposes the death of God. Zarathustra, a prophet-like character, ends his solitude of ten years and comes down from his mountain bearing gifts for humanity. The first person he encounters is an old holy man leading the life of a hermit in the forest. When Zarathustra asks him why he is there, the holy man responds: “I make hymns and sing them; and in making hymns I laugh and weep and mumble: thus do I praise God.”⁸⁵ Rather than admonishing the holy man and ridiculing his enduring belief in a God, Zarathustra takes care not to take that belief away from him. This fact, along with Zarathustra saying to himself afterwards: “Could it be possible! The old saint in the forest

⁸³ Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, par. 125.

⁸⁴ Critchley, *Continental Philosophy*, 80.

⁸⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common (Mineola: Dover Publications Inc., 1999), 3.

hath not yet heard of it, that *God is dead*,”⁸⁶ seems to indicate that the gift that Zarathustra bears is not the news of the death of God, but something different.

What Zarathustra’s gift is becomes clear when he starts preaching to the people in the marketplace. He presents two possibilities for the future in light of the death of God and the collapse of the world of truth: the *Übermensch* (or “Superman”⁸⁷) and the “last man”.⁸⁸ The second of these shall briefly be treated first, in order to then more adequately elaborate on the first possibility. The last man is presented as a despicable kind of being, whose only wish is to be free of pain and burden. He becomes indifferent to everything and dies with indifference, who, as Lampert writes, lives in the “comfortable, calculated self-interest made possible by the modern technological mastery of nature.”⁸⁹ Zarathustra’s use of this last man to appeal to the people’s shame can be seen as an expression of the “Nietzschean refusal to remain content”⁹⁰ that Abeysekara identifies in several of Nietzsche’s texts.

The *Übermensch*

Zarathustra’s intended gift is the *Übermensch*. Many authors have speculated, or even assumed, that the *Übermensch* is a human transformed, overcoming the herd conformity of

⁸⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 3. The translation of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* used in this study translates the German *Übermensch* as “Superman.” What is important and what will hopefully become clear, is that the *Übermensch* is not some physically and intellectually superior type or race of human being, but something that literally over-reaches the human being. To stay loyal to the translation, *Übermensch* will be rendered “Superman” in direct quotations, but otherwise the German *Übermensch* will be used in order to stay truer to what is arguably its actual significance. The word may most accurately be translated as “Over-human”.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁹ Lampert, Laurence, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” in *A Companion to Friedrich Nietzsche: Life and Works*, ed. Paul Bishop, 205. New York: Camden House, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.cttn332r.19>.

⁹⁰ Abeysekara, “Desecularizing Secularism,” 208.

the masses and becoming a superior human. This view of the *Übermensch* is widespread, as evidenced by, for example, David Misselbrook, who characterizes the *Übermensch* almost exactly as described above – for him, the notion of the *Übermensch* means that humanity will transform into “a new nobility in which the strong assume their natural dominance over the weak”.⁹¹ Babette Babich gives a useful overview of all the ways in which this view pervades throughout our present culture. Even though we no longer openly endorse that which we “know [...] Nietzsche means”⁹² when he writes of the *Übermensch*, namely the “evolutionary apex of human development”⁹³ (or, as Babich puts it, “Hitler’s fantasy”),⁹⁴ we still seem to be enamoured by and preoccupied with the idea of evolution into something greater: “we nonetheless await the phantom du jour of [the] transhuman.”⁹⁵ We even tend to “assume we are (already) the transhuman [...] or overhuman or posthuman.”⁹⁶

It can be argued that the main error in this assumption is that humanity can in some way *become* the *Übermensch*. Zarathustra never precisely makes clear what the *Übermensch* is, exactly, but what is continually expressed in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is that the *Übermensch* is not human. Zarathustra presents the *Übermensch* in the Prologue as a

⁹¹ David Misselbrook, “An A-Z of medical philosophy: U is for *Übermensch* – why care?,” *British Journal of General Practice* 64, no. 626 (2014): 470, doi:10.3399/bjgp14X681469.

⁹² Babette Babich, “Becoming and Purification: Empedocles, Zarathustra’s *Übermensch*, and Lucian’s Tyrant,” in *Nietzsche and the Becoming of Life*, ed. Vanessa Lemm, 253, New York: Fordham University, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1287gbd.19>.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 256.

“surpassing”⁹⁷ of humanity, and humanity itself as a “rope stretched between the animal and the Superman.”⁹⁸

The Fourth Part gives another clear indication of the distinction between human and *Übermensch*:

The most careful ask to-day: “How is man to be maintained?” Zarathustra however asketh, as the first and only one: “How is man to be *surpassed*?”

The Superman, I have at heart; *that* is the first and only thing to me – and *not* man: not the neighbour, not the poorest, not the sorriest, not the best. –

O my brethren, what I can love in man is that he is an over-going and a down-going.⁹⁹

Zarathustra’s question is not how man is to be maintained, how humanity is to be kept alive in this world without meaning, but how humanity is to be surpassed. This humanity is at the same time an “over-going and a down-going,” when it is “over-gone” or over-reached by the *Übermensch*, humanity will “go down,” it will be no more.

Metaphors and themes

Despite the establishment of what the *Übermensch* is not, its inverse, the exact nature of the *Übermensch*, is never made lucidly clear in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. What may be said, however, is that whatever the *Übermensch* may turn out to be, it is crucially an “antidote to the old teachings [Zarathustra] discredits,”¹⁰⁰ a being that may flourish in a world without

⁹⁷ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 3.

⁹⁸ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 5.

⁹⁹ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 204.

¹⁰⁰ Lamper, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” 206.

meaning. The *Übermensch* is an overcoming of humanity¹⁰¹, and an overcoming of the nihilism set out in Chapter 2. Zarathustra makes clear on multiple occasions that the world is to be prepared for the *Übermensch* and that humanity is to be instrumental in this preparation and therefore in its own surpassing. The speech to the people gathered in the marketplace contains an injunction to “live in a way that prepares the coming of the Overhuman.”¹⁰² In a similar vein, the First Part contains these lines that Zarathustra speaks to his disciples: “Ye lonesome ones of today, ye seceding ones, ye shall one day be a people: out of you who have chosen yourselves, shall a chosen people arise: - and out of it the Superman.”¹⁰³ Additionally, the Fourth Part presents Zarathustra coming out of solitude to find the “higher men” that might foreshadow or bring about the coming of the *Übermensch*. The way this foreshadowing is to take shape is not expressed in a theoretical way, but in a number of themes and metaphors, which will be further explored here. These literary themes will be pertinent to an analysis of nihilism in *Enemy of the Stars*.

Loyalty to the Earth

The notion of loyalty to the earth returns repeatedly throughout the *Zarathustra*, such as in his first speech to the people gathered at the marketplace: “I conjure you, my brethren, *remain true to the earth*, and believe not those who speak unto you of superearthy hopes! Poisoners are they, whether they know it or not.”¹⁰⁴ When Zarathustra has understood that the people will not listen, he moves on to find disciples of his own, and to them he preaches

¹⁰¹ Van Tongeren, *Het Europese Nihilisme*, 85.

¹⁰² Lampert, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” 205.

¹⁰³ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 49.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

precisely the same thing. He urges his disciples to “Remain true to the earth, my brethren, with the power of your virtue! Let your bestowing love and your knowledge be devoted to be the meaning of the earth.”¹⁰⁵

This injunction to remain loyal to the earth can be understood in light of the death of God. Chapter 2 has made clear that nihilism consists in the knowledge that the transcendent world in light of which this earthly world was granted sense and purpose is no more, but that the belief in some sort of truth or transcendence can still not be relinquished. Zarathustra urges his disciples to forsake this belief nevertheless and instead to stay loyal to this earth in favour of the other world that has collapsed – the *Übermensch* is said to be “the meaning of the earth,”¹⁰⁶ in contrast to those transcendent worlds that granted the earth meaning from outside itself. As Lampert states: “[Zarathustra] issues this [injunction] as the imperative for a new age because “God died” and loyalty to anything transcendent has become meaningless.”¹⁰⁷ Thus, in preparation for the *Übermensch*, “the whole array of human beliefs and practices must be centred on the new principle of loyalty to the earth.”¹⁰⁸

Zarathustra gives an image of this loyalty in the First Part, stating: “As the ox ought he to do; and his happiness should smell of the earth, and not of contempt for the earth. As a white ox would I like to see him, which, snorting and lowing, walketh before the ploughshare: and his lowing should also laud all that is earthly.”¹⁰⁹ The image of the ploughshare seems to be contradictory to Zarathustra’s (and arguably Nietzsche’s) aims to effect a change from the old world, which can no longer last, to the new. Duncan Large states that “Agriculture [...]

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 49.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰⁷ Lampert, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” 205.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 79.

connotes constancy and reliability, the unchanging, unheroic life of the farmer rooted in a “native soil”, in other words precisely the kind of domesticated existence that would appeal to a later ideology of “blood and soil”, and the very opposite of the liberation Nietzsche wishes it to portray.”¹¹⁰ However, the ploughshare might also be read as an implement of change: “It is a subversive weapon, an implement for digging down and overturning [...]; its function resembles that of Nietzsche the “solitary mole” in the Preface to *Daybreak* [*Morgenröte*, 1881], the “subterranean man’ [...] who tunnels and mines and undermines”.”¹¹¹ This way, the ploughshare becomes an image of how the earth is overturned and what was hidden below it now comes to the surface. The human who wishes to participate in the preparation for the *Übermensch*, then, must be like the ox that pulls the plough: an agent of change and new beginnings.

This contrasts sharply with what could be called the ‘wrong’ type of love for the earth. In paragraph XXXVII, called “Immaculate Perception,” Zarathustra calls out those who love the earth “like the moon.”¹¹² This would consist of being “happy in gazing,” to “want nothing else from [the earth], but to be allowed to lie before [it] as a mirror with a hundred facets.”¹¹³ This, Zarathustra says, “shall be your curse,”¹¹⁴ because “ye shall never bring forth.”¹¹⁵ In other words, those who would “gaze upon life without desire, and not like the dog, with

¹¹⁰ Duncan Large, “Nietzsche’s Helmbrecht – Or: How to Philosophise with a Ploughshare,” *NietzscheSource – Studia Nietzscheana*, 2014, par14, <http://www.nietzschesource.org/SN/d-large-2014>.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, par. 22.

¹¹² Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 82.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

hanging-out tongue”¹¹⁶ will never change anything, and desire nothing but the eternal, abstract beauty of the earth. Rather than ploughing the soil and getting their hands dirty, as it were, they only desire the abstracted eternal beauty of the earth. Zarathustra accuses them of having hung “A God’s mask [...] in front of you,” of making the earth into an abstraction in the same vein as the transcendent world that has collapsed, and against which Zarathustra actively preaches. Love of the earth is not a contemplative love for its beauty, but a creative love for what its rich soil may bring forth.¹¹⁷

Flight and the spirit of gravity

Preaching loyalty to the earth seems to stand in direct contrast with another element of Zarathustra’s teaching, which is flight. Flight consists, among other things, in “slay[ing] the spirit of gravity,” through whom “all things fall.”¹¹⁸ Zarathustra succeeds in this task in the battle with this spirit (his “devil”¹¹⁹), during which the spirit attempts to drag Zarathustra down, and presents him with the futility of his endeavours. Graham Parkes makes clear that the spirit “derides Zarathustra’s aspiration by pointing to the end of all his striving – death: being mortal, his exertions wear him out in the end.”¹²⁰ This is a clear allusion to the idea that human toil on this earth is meaningless and will always find its end in death, echoing

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ An interesting text in this respect is *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* par. 370, where those who suffer from the overabundance of life are described in terms of “rich, fertile” soil (see also Chapter 2).

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 24.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Graham Parkes, “Nietzsche on Rock and Stone: The Dead World, Dance and Flight,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 21, no. 1 (2013): 33, doi:10.1080/09672559.2012.746273.

Schopenhauer (see also chapter 2). This means that the spirit of gravity is not only the weight of Christianity and Platonism,¹²¹ but also that which oppresses mankind after the transcendent world of the Christian moral-hypothesis has fallen down.

Zarathustra defeats the spirit of gravity by affirming his life as he has lived it up until then: “Courage, however, is the best slayer, courage which attacketh: it slayeth even death itself; for it saith: “Was *that* life? Well! Once more!””¹²² The affirmation of life by wishing it to happen again at the point of death is what should eventually teach Zarathustra to fly. This also shows how the injunction to fly does not necessarily contradict the injunction to stay loyal to the earth. The latter mainly teaches to reject the transcendent world of the Christian moral-hypothesis, while the former means a rejection of nihilism in the face of meaninglessness and suffering, which seems to be the only possibility after the breaking down of that transcendent world, and which was highlighted as such at the end of chapter 2. In this way, flight is not the flight to some transcendent world (“Let [your knowledge] not fly away from the earthly and beat against eternal walls with its wings!”¹²³), but a metaphor for the freedom that results from forsaking the values connected to the Christian moral-hypothesis and for the affirmation of the inherent meaninglessness of life.

The difficulty, or even impossibility, of this affirmation is alluded to throughout the book. Zarathustra himself learns of this difficulty only gradually – early on in the First Part he states “I learned to walk; since then have I let myself run. I learned to fly; since then I do not

¹²¹ Ibid., 34.

¹²² Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 107. This is one way of presenting the thought of eternal return of the same, an elaborate discussion of which is not necessarily pertinent to the present study, but which is a powerful image of the affirmation of life, and the rejection of the transcendent.

¹²³ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 49.

need pushing in order to move from a spot.”¹²⁴ However, as was made clear above, it is only later that he learns to defeat the spirit of gravity. This is reflected in his teaching: “above all did I learn standing and walking and running and leaping and climbing and dancing. This however is my teaching: he who wisheth one day to fly, must first learn standing and walking and running and climbing and dancing: - one doth not fly into flying!”¹²⁵ Even the higher men he has gathered around himself at the end of the book have not learned to fly yet: “Have ye already flown high enough? Ye have danced: a leg, nevertheless, is not a wing.”¹²⁶ Two symbols for the combination of loyalty to the earth on the one hand and flight on the other are the two animals that Zarathustra keeps: the eagle and the snake. The nature of these animals is described as not to “at present exist on earth,”¹²⁷ only to make clear once more the difficulty of the combination. This incredible difficulty of flight in the way described here will be analysed further in light of the character of Arghol and his experience of the world around him, and in particular of his murder by Hanp, in Lewis’s play.

Learning and the Master/Disciple relationship

What becomes clear in the *Zarathustra* is that, despite tremendous difficulty, the combination of flight and loyalty to the earth can be learned, or at least, through learning, approximated. The higher men, who have not yet learned to fly by the end of the book, are still encouraged by Zarathustra: “Ye higher men, the worst thing in you is that ye have none of you learned to dance as ye ought to dance – to dance beyond yourselves! What doth it matter that ye have failed! How many things are still possible! So *learn* to laugh beyond

¹²⁴ Ibid., 24.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 136.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 230.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 192.

yourselves!”¹²⁸ Parkes highlights this ability of humanity to learn beyond themselves: “Being embodied, we mortals are always brought back down to earth in the end. Being ensouled, we are animated as will to power through various levels of intensity: and so we can ‘stand and walk and run and jump and dance’ – and finally, even fly.”¹²⁹

It is clear that the way towards a state in which one is ready to prepare oneself for the coming of the *Übermensch* is a difficult one, but attainable through learning. This leads to the importance of the relationship between the master and the disciple. The prophet Zarathustra gathers disciples or similar figures around him throughout the book in order to convey to them his teachings and help them in their preparation. He serves as master and teacher, but each time there must come a point where the disciples are left to their own devices, before their education is complete. The First Part ends with Zarathustra taking leave of his disciples:

Verily, I advise you: depart from me, and guard yourselves against Zarathustra! And better still: be ashamed of him! Perhaps he hath deceived you. The man of knowledge must be able not only to love his enemies, but also to hate his friends. [...] Now do I bid you lose me and find yourselves; and only when ye have all denied me, will I return to you.¹³⁰

Neither his disciples in the First Part, nor, as stated above, his “higher men” have completed their teaching by the end of the book. The significance of this incompleteness is that Zarathustra can serve as a master to them up to a point, after which they must teach themselves. This is further exemplified by the fact that Zarathustra himself is also still a student: Zarathustra’s

¹²⁸ Ibid., 211.

¹²⁹ Parkes, “Nietzsche on Rock and Stone,” 38.

¹³⁰ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 50.

progress was one of learning, first to stand, then to walk, then to run, to climb, and to dance, to eventually perhaps learning how to fly.

One last element connected to the process of learning and the necessity of leaving the master behind is the fact that this learning must, at least in part, take place in solitude. The book begins with Zarathustra coming out of solitude after spending ten years in the mountains.¹³¹ As Zarathustra takes leave of his disciples at the end of the First Part, he states: “I now go alone, my disciples! Ye also now go away, and alone! So will I have it.”¹³² Additionally, he urges solitude in his various speeches and he returns to solitude at the end of the Second Part in order to continue his learning: “And there was spoken unto me for the last time: “O Zarathustra, thy fruits are ripe, but thou art not ripe for thy fruits! So must thou go again into solitude: for thou shalt yet become mellow.” – [...] In the night, [Zarathustra] went away alone and left his friends.”¹³³ Zarathustra’s own solitude is particularly significant, because it allows him to convey his teachings to others. Steven Stolz, in his article on Nietzsche as an educator, states that “despite the loneliness and suffering which afflicted him, the mistakes he made, Zarathustra shows us how the experience transformed him and made him capable of teaching his vision of the *Übermensch*.”¹³⁴

Whereas a theoretical attempt at tackling nihilism would result in an inevitable vicious circle of reasoning, the literary approach at an escape from nihilism of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* allows for a glimpse at the overcoming of the paradox of the radical nihilist position sketched in chapter 2 by offering an affirmation of that paradox. This affirmation consists in the coupling of the metaphorical elements of loyalty to the earth on the one hand,

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 50.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹³⁴ Stephen Stolz, “Nietzsche on Aesthetics, Educators and Education,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* (2016): 11, doi:10.1007/s11217-016-9529-0.

and flight or the victory over the spirit of gravity on the other, as has been shown above. This new notion of the earth is to be both taught and learned. In addition to the previously discussed themes of loyalty to the earth, flight, and heaviness, the relationship between the master and the disciple and the significance of solitude will return in the analysis of the relationship between the main characters in Lewis's *Enemy of the Stars*.

Chapter 4 – *Enemy of the Stars*

This last chapter will provide an analysis of Wyndham Lewis's play *Enemy of the Stars* by discussing the similarities and differences between the play and the elements of an escape from the vicious circle of nihilism as presented in the previous chapter. The play itself was published in the first issue of *Blast* magazine, in 1914. It details the narrative of the two protagonists Arghol, a wheelwright in his uncle's workshop outside the city, and Hanp, ostensibly his friend and disciple. Arghol has come back from a life in the city, which has left him disillusioned and suspicious of social life, whereas Hanp is most of all interested in learning about social interaction and life in the city. Despite Hanp's efforts to persuade Arghol to tell him of the city, Arghol instead consistently holds to his personal misanthropic philosophy, which will be the focus of a later section in this chapter. Eventually, Arghol rejects Hanp as his disciple, which enrages Hanp – they fight, and in the end Hanp murders Arghol out of rage, which in turn prompts him to commit suicide.

The play is considered to be a prime example of the Vorticist movement, initiated by Lewis and Ezra Pound – Michael Beatty considers the play to belong “entirely to the author's Vorticist phase.”¹³⁵ The introduction has indicated that Lewis's and Pound's Vorticism was a programmatic attack on the sentimentality of English culture and art at the beginning of the twentieth century, but a number of authors, among whom Scott Klein and Joel Nickels, identify the relationship of the play to the Vorticist movement as ambiguous. Whereas they have placed this ambiguity in the context of Lewis's political or theoretical leanings, the present study will explore it within the Nietzschean framework of chapters 2 and 3.

¹³⁵ Michael Beatty, “Enemy of the Stars: Vorticist Experimental Play,” *Theoria* (1976): 41, <https://ru.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1312121205?accountid=11795>.

This chapter will consist of a reading of the play in light of the previous chapters. The master/disciple relationship will be central to the first section, to highlight a way the relationship between Arghol and Hanp may be equated with that of Zarathustra and his various disciples. The sections after that, however, will make clear that Arghol may be interpreted as an inversion of the character Zarathustra, and that his philosophy is essentially paradoxical. His position can most accurately be described in light of the paradoxical nature of nihilism as presented in chapter 2. Finally, the impossibility of escape from this paradox will be explored with reference to Hanp and his murder of Arghol.

Arghol the Master/Hanp the Disciple

A similarity between *Enemy of the Stars* and *Thus spake Zarathustra* may be found in the master/disciple bond that takes a central place in both Nietzsche's book and Lewis's play. The relationship between Arghol and Hanp is explicitly made clear to be that of master and disciple. The play gives a description of Arghol as a "pseudo-rustic Master," where Hanp is referred to as the "focussed disciple."¹³⁶ This relationship is at first glance very similar to the relationship between Zarathustra and his various disciples, especially when its development throughout the play is taken into account. While Arghol despises Hanp, which will be discussed further below, he does seem to insist on speaking with him. Even though Arghol confesses that he does not actually speak to Hanp, but to himself ("I think it's a physical matter – simply to use one's mouth"¹³⁷), he does admit to wishing to "make [Hanp] my self."¹³⁸ This, however weakly, echoes Zarathustra's will of teaching his disciples that which

¹³⁶ Wyndham Lewis, "Enemy of the Stars," *Blast* 1 (1914): 71.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

he first had to learn himself. Arghol has divined a truth about the world and wishes to convey it to his disciple Hanp.

Furthermore, Arghol's mastery over Hanp comes at an end when Arghol rejects him as his disciple. Similarly, Zarathustra takes leave of his disciples at the end of the First Part of the *Zarathustra*, telling them to go into solitude and learn to hate him: "The man of knowledge must be able not only to love his enemies, but also to hate his friends. [...] Now do I bid you lose me and find yourselves; and only when ye have all denied me, will I return to you."¹³⁹ Arghol seems to respect the way Hanp finds himself: he is "relieved at the sound of Hanp's voice [...] and felt better disposed towards him."¹⁴⁰ The obvious difference between the two works in this respect, however, is that Zarathustra's disciples are unhappy to see their master go, but let him go willingly, whereas Hanp is furious at his rejection by Arghol, and experiences no resistance in learning to hate his former master: "Amazement had stretched the disciple's face back like a mouth, then slowly it contracted, the eyes growing smaller, chin more prominent, old and clenched like a fist [...] Hanp sprang out the ground, a handful of furious movements: flung himself on Arghol."¹⁴¹

The similarities outlined above seem to be largely formal, but this reversal of Zarathustra's methods provides a precursor to the differences between the contents of Arghol's and Zarathustra's teachings. The first reversal concerns the role of solitude. As was established in chapter 3, both Zarathustra and his disciples will have to retreat into solitude in order to complete their learning. Zarathustra himself first had to spend ten years in solitary contemplation and discovery before he could descend to the people to teach them what he had learned. Arghol, on the other hand, learns what he has to teach in the city, among the people,

¹³⁹ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 50.

¹⁴⁰ Lewis, "Enemy of the Stars," 74.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

and returns to solitude. There, he finds Hanp, whom he despises, but who nevertheless becomes his disciple.

A second reversal of the master/disciple relationship found in *Zarathustra* is that Zarathustra's disciples wish to learn from him how to act in the face of the crumbling of the old world, whereas Hanp's desired object of learning is precisely that which Arghol does not want to teach. The Fourth Part describes Zarathustra gathering the "higher men." An example of this is the "old pope," who "served that old God until his last hour."¹⁴² The old priest now wishes to learn from Zarathustra what to do in the face of the death of his god. Hanp, on the other hand, wishes to learn from Arghol that which Arghol despises and why he came into solitude in the first place – he wants to know what the city is like: "Somehow, however, the City had settled down in Arghol. He [Hanp] must seek it there."¹⁴³ Arghol has come from the city, where he learned to despise the notion of the ego and the humans that employ it (which will be discussed later), but now Hanp searches in his teachings for precisely that which Arghol hates.

A final reversal may be seen in Arghol's attitude to the world, which is radically different from Zarathustra's teachings. Joel Nickels points out that Lewis himself likened Arghol to a Socrates-like character: "Lewis establishes a parallelism between Socrates and Arghol by depicting Socrates as a strangely modern man among the masses."¹⁴⁴ Similarities between this image of Socrates and Zarathustra may be found – they are both teachers, who have come to bring a teaching of a new way of living to humanity. Looking back on the Nietzschean history of nihilism explored in chapter 2, however, it should be clear that these teachings of Socrates and Zarathustra are different. It is the downfall of the Christian moral-

¹⁴² Ibid., 183.

¹⁴³ Lewis, "Enemy of the Stars," 72.

¹⁴⁴ Nickels, "Anti-Egoism and Collective Life," 353.

hypothesis, which was precisely set in motion by Socrates through his rationalization of the meaningless suffering of life and all its consequences discussed in chapter 2, which makes it necessary for a figure like Zarathustra to appear and teach *against* the way in which Socrates initiated the rationalization of the tragic experience of the world. Arghol's attitude and teachings will reveal a denial of the actual world similar to that of the Christian moral-hypothesis.

Arghol the nihilist

Arghol's attitude and his experience of his environment throughout the play is nihilistic in the radical sense that comes into view after the collapse of the Christian moral-hypothesis. Similarly, he sees through the illusions that humanity has erected in order to make sense of the world as described in chapter 2. Firstly, Arghol's relationship to the world around him will be explored, after which two of the aforementioned illusions will be discussed briefly. This discussion in its turn will lead into the next section, where Arghol's paradoxical nature will become clear.

Arghol is very much aware of the hostility of the world, which is expressed in the various descriptions of his surroundings. Lights, for example, are "heavy,"¹⁴⁵ with clouds "press[ing] on into shadows within the hut, in tyrannous continuity."¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, the sky is described to be actually coming down on occasion: the "immense vague infections of night"¹⁴⁷ "plunged gleaming nervous arms down into the wood, to wrench it up by the roots."¹⁴⁸ At a certain point a cloud's "weight passed, with spiritual menace, into the hut. A

¹⁴⁵ Lewis, "Enemy of the Stars," 67.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

thunderous atmosphere thickened above their heads.”¹⁴⁹ All these images seem to express the experience of oppressiveness and hostility of Arghol’s surroundings. David Graver makes this psychological importance of the effects that are meant to be conveyed by the various descriptions clear as well: “The extravagant description of impossible scenery [...] highlights the psychological, rather than physical, importance of objects and milieu.”¹⁵⁰

The oppressiveness of the environment that Arghol experiences can be linked to Zarathustra’s spirit of gravity as described in the previous chapter. The spirit of gravity has been established to be the experience of the futility of human life and of the world in which it exists. In a slightly altered but still quite similar description to the one from *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Zarathustra describes the spirit as a devil pulling him down), Arghol is pressed down by this spirit, exemplified in the oppressiveness of his surroundings.

The connection between Arghol’s oppressive environment and Zarathustra’s spirit of gravity shows that the world Arghol lives in is indeed the world of nihilism after the collapse of the Christian moral-hypothesis. The first light that Arghol sees after being attacked by his uncle is the light of “rough moonbeams [...] Immense bleak electric advertisement of God.”¹⁵¹ Staying within the Nietzschean theoretical framework of nihilism, the moonlight can be argued to be the reflected light of the sun, which may be seen as a symbol for the transcendent world of the Christian moral-hypothesis.¹⁵² Here, the sun has disappeared, but the moon still shows a corrupted reflection of the God that no longer exists – the light

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Graver, “Vorticist Performance and Aesthetic Turbulence,” 485.

¹⁵¹ Lewis, “Enemy of the Stars,” 64.

¹⁵² This is Plato’s sun, see the discussion of “Wie die “wahre Welt” endlich zur Fabel wurde – Geschichte eines Irrthums” in Chapter 2.

“crashes with wild emptiness.”¹⁵³ All of this makes perfectly clear that Arghol can never love the earth in the way that Zarathustra proposes – as a means overcoming and affirming the suffering that is inherent in reality. Arghol is inevitably pressed down by this reality and its meaningless harshness and hostility, and cannot but see the light of the sun that is nonetheless gone.

Arghol’s experience of the world as oppressively hostile and, in the sense of Zarathustra’s spirit of gravity, meaningless, is accompanied by the nihilistic acknowledgment of the illusory ways in which humanity attempted to grant meaning to the world. Although the illusions that Arghol punctures seem to be slightly less lofty than the transcendent world of Platonism and Christianity, they are nonetheless examples of similar truths erected in order to alleviate the contingency of reality. Arghol’s identification of these truths as lies may be seen as the movement of the will to truth.

The first of these illusions can be argued to be the idea of the self. Arghol states that “Men have a loathsome deformity called Self; affliction got through indiscriminate rubbing against their fellows: Social excrescence. Their being is regulated by exigencies of this affliction. Only one operation can cure it: the suicide's knife.”¹⁵⁴ The illusion of a stable and individual self can be argued to give meaning to a world that is fundamentally chaotic and contingent, as described in chapter 2. The oppressiveness of the world discussed above is symbolic for Arghol’s knowledge of the lack of meaning, and in the face of this meaninglessness, Arghol calls out the illusion of the self as something that cannot but collapse: “Self is the race that lost.”¹⁵⁵ Arghol, sees through illusion of the self, which he calls a deformity that has no right to exist and has to be removed.

¹⁵³ Lewis, “Enemy of the Stars,” 64.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

The illusion of the individual self seems to collude with a second illusion that Arghol sees through, and which is captured in the social conventions of acquaintance and friendship. This becomes clear in the dream Arghol has after his fight with Hanp. He wanders through the town and encounters one of his erstwhile friends, who recognizes him. Arghol, however, sees through the façade of friendship: “This man would never see anyone but Arghol he knew. – Yet he on his side saw a man, directly beneath his friend, imprisoned, with intolerable need of recognition.”¹⁵⁶ The mask of the friend imprisons the man’s true identity, an imprisonment constituted by a system drawn up to give structure and order to the contingency of the world.

It is here that the paradox of Arghol’s perception of the world and his criticism of those illusions that are to grant it meaning starts to become poignant. On the one hand he rages against the idea of the individually constituted self as merely a deformity with no right to exist. On the other, he sees through the masquerade of friendship and social acquaintance. What he sees behind the mask, however, is a *true* self, the imprisonment of which is precisely the origin of his criticism of the masquerade in the first place. This brief discussion serves as a foreshadowing of the paradox that is present in the way Arghol attempts to cope with the oppressive meaninglessness of the world, and this is also where his teachings begin to differ profoundly from Zarathustra’s.

Arghol’s solitude and the paradox of his teaching

Arghol’s attempt to resist this oppressive reality is by asserting himself as a solitary being in his actions. This may initially be seen through Lewis’s descriptions of Arghol in relation to his environment. Before the action of the play starts, Arghol is described as

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 78.

“Central as a stone. Poised magnet of subtle, vast, selfish things.”¹⁵⁷ Another example of the way in which Arghol is absolutely separated from the world around him is found in the following description: “The canal ran in one direction, his blood, weakly, in the opposite.”¹⁵⁸ Scott Klein points out the significance of this phrase, stating that it exemplifies the “discontinu[ity]”¹⁵⁹ of Arghol with his environment.

A further way in which Arghol asserts his solitude is by his leaving the city, and the aversion of humanity which prompts him to do so is retained in his aversion to Hanp, which has been mentioned above. Klein makes clear that “Arghol sees in Hanp only a general portrait of homogeneous mankind,” resembling “an indistinct form who merges with all around him.”¹⁶⁰ Whereas Arghol’s dislike of Hanp had been put to the side earlier, in the section on the master/disciple relationship above, in order to concentrate on that bond in itself, it now becomes clear that it is precisely Arghol’s denial of Hanp as an individual person that facilitates their association as master and disciple in the first place. As stated above, Arghol only made Hanp his disciple in light of the notion of talking to himself, and not to a different person. Additionally, he wished to make Hanp not only like himself, but *into* himself.

One last way of Arghol’s self-assertion is how he seems to view his position in his surroundings. For example, he describes himself as a “visionary tree.”¹⁶¹ Furthermore, his response to the abuse that he suffers from his uncle, and Hanp’s proposal that Arghol should kill him, is that he feels he is “too vain to do harm, too superb ever to lift a finger when

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 61.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 64.

¹⁵⁹ Klein, “The Experiment of Vorticist Drama,” 228.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Lewis, “Enemy of the Stars,” 68.

harmed.”¹⁶² Klein takes this to be a sign that Arghol considers himself far superior in his individualism, and interprets Arghol as someone who “rejects all that is not the self as repulsive to the purity of the individual, blaming the other for its gradual destruction.”¹⁶³

Arghol’s self-imposed solitude and actively egotistical attitude must be kept in mind when discussing the content of his personal philosophy, for it is here that the paradox of Arghol becomes clear. It may be argued that whereas his actions are exemplary of egotistical self-assertion, his ideas focus on the denial of the self. Arghol describes the self as a “sacred act of violence, [...] like murder on my face and hands,”¹⁶⁴ and, as stated above, as a “deformity.” In response to his puncturing of the illusion of self as described above, he adopts a teaching of self-denial – he does more than merely make “excursions outside his ego,”¹⁶⁵ as Nickels states, but he denies the justification of the ego entirely.

This is made clear during Arghol’s dream after his fight with Hanp, in which he rejects a copy of Stirner’s *Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum* (1844). Klein describes this work as, “assert[ing] the truth of the self, and attempt[ing] to establish its independence from society’s falsehoods and the limitations of the real by declaring that the self is all-sufficient.”¹⁶⁶ Klein sees the dismissal of Stirner’s work as a rejection of “yet another of the tarnishing influences of the external world,”¹⁶⁷ and he views Arghol as the quintessential egoist, for whom “the self is an ultimate good that can be achieved only by egoistically

¹⁶² Ibid., 67. There is an interesting analogy to be drawn between this statement and Nietzsche’s aversion to Christianity, which would make this type of attitude into a virtue, or a morally good attitude.

¹⁶³ Klein, “The Experiment of Vorticist Drama,” 228-229.

¹⁶⁴ Lewis, “Enemy of the Stars,” 66.

¹⁶⁵ Nickels, “Anti-Egoism and Collective Life,” 353.

¹⁶⁶ Klein, “The Experiment of Vorticist Drama,” 230.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

conserving one's power."¹⁶⁸ He therefore describes Arghol's rejection of Stirner as "puzzling."¹⁶⁹ However, if Arghol's actions and his ideas are kept separate and considered as two distinct factors of his character (as has been done above), his rejection of a book that intellectually asserts a philosophy focussed on the assertion and justification of the ego accurately reflects his own rejection of the ego as a mere façade.

The collapse of Arghol's paradox

The discrepancy between Arghol's practical stance and his theoretical ideas cannot be maintained when a fight breaks out between Arghol and Hanp, as the former rejects the latter: "You are an unclean little beast, crept gloomily out of my ego [...] I wish to see you no more here! Leave at once."¹⁷⁰ Although Klein's assertion that Arghol is himself a full-fledged philosophical egoist contrasts with the position advanced in this study, Klein is correct when he states that "[Arghol's] grudging acceptance of nature" when Hanp attacks "seals his downfall."¹⁷¹ Rather than being torn from his egotistical pedestal (the position Klein seems to hold), however, Arghol is forced into a position where he must let go of his intellectual self-denial and assert himself as a person in order to counteract Hanp's violence. As the play makes clear: "incurable self taught [him] a heroism"¹⁷² – Arghol can do nothing but assert himself.

Arghol's paradox is very similar to the paradox in which the nihilist is caught after the Christian moral-hypothesis has collapsed. Chapter 2 has made clear that the nihilism that

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 231.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Lewis, "Enemy of the Stars," 73.

¹⁷¹ Klein, "The Experiment of Vorticist Drama," 229.

¹⁷² Lewis, "Enemy of the Stars," 74.

emerges at this point of collapse is paradoxical in its core – on the one hand, the ultimately imagined “true world,” which granted purpose and meaning to the contingent world of experience, can no longer be maintained, but on the other hand the world as it is cannot be faced without a desire for truth. Furthermore, the denial of the “true world” as false is in itself a clinging to the concept of truth. Similarly, Arghol sees through the lie of self, a lie which granted humanity a way of existing in the oppressive and utterly hostile reality of the descriptions in the play, but his way of making sense of the resulting meaninglessness of this hostility is to isolate himself in his teaching of self-denial. Eventually, this self-isolation results in the assertion of precisely the concept of self that Arghol theoretically wishes to deny, because he knows it cannot be maintained. Klein’s assertion that in rejecting Stirner’s book “Arghol unwittingly rejects his own selfhood”¹⁷³ must be inverted – Arghol’s rejection of Stirner can only be done in the assertion of himself as an acting ego. In short, in order to hold on to a concept of denial of the self, he must assert himself as a person, in the same way that the nihilist cannot but hold on to a concept of truth in asserting the falsity of that concept.

Hanp’s flight

It has become clear that Arghol cannot escape the nihilism in which he is caught: the two contrasting positions he nevertheless occupies simultaneously cannot be maintained, nor does an escape seem possible. Arghol’s collapse from his transcendent, ego-denying position does not seem to have resulted in his freedom. After all, his dream exhibits precisely the same paradox that he holds throughout the play, as described in the discussion of the two illusions above, and even though he seems to experience a brief moment of enlightenment (“A riddle had been solved”¹⁷⁴), this moment is the realization of his failure: “He had ventured in his

¹⁷³ Klein, “The Experiment of Vorticist Drama,” 231.

¹⁷⁴ Lewis, “Enemy of the Stars,” 80.

solitude and failed.”¹⁷⁵ Crucially, the collapse of his philosophy results in his death at the hands of Hanp.

Hanp’s action in murdering Arghol is the closest the play comes to a conception of flight as outlined in the previous chapter. The moment Arghol rejects Hanp, the latter is freed from the former’s nihilistic influence and attains an agency of his own: “The disciple spoke with his own voice.”¹⁷⁶ Hanp sees through Arghol’s paradox and his hypocrisy of holding on to it nevertheless: “This humility and perverse asceticism opposed to vigorous animal glorification of self. He gave men one image with one hand, and at the same time a second, its antidote.”¹⁷⁷ Hanp’s freedom is even further asserted in his murder of his former master. For a moment, “The night was [...] absurdly peaceful, trying richly to please him with gracious movements of trees, and gay precessions of arctic clouds.”¹⁷⁸ If, for Arghol, the world had been hostile and oppressive in its meaninglessness, Hanp’s act seems to have made it possible for him to affirm that meaninglessness. This affirmation lasts only a moment, however, as “a rapid despair settled down on Hanp.”¹⁷⁹ Hanp does not seem to be able to carry the meaningless world around him for longer than a mere moment – he is “too unhappy for instinctive science,”¹⁸⁰ too unhappy to love the earth – and he throws himself in the canal, resulting in his death.

Thus, whereas Arghol cannot bear the world as it is, in all its hostility and heaviness, Hanp finds a way to escape this heaviness, but this is only possible in a desperate moment of

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 74.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 80.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 84.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 85.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

realization, and the murder of Arghol. Hanp has a glimpse of love of the earth, and having freed himself of that which weighed him down, flies for a brief instance. His framework of meaning (Arghol) having gone, however, he finds himself plummeting down again, and falling into the despair of the nihilist.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Enemy of the Stars might in many ways be interpreted as the expression of an attitude towards the uncertainty and contingency of the early twentieth-century society, culture, and politics. Lewis's reaction to this modern crisis appears to be clear from the essay "Twentieth Century Nihilism" cited in the introduction – he saw the existentialists' rejection of an overarching totality that gives earthly life purpose as outright nihilism. It is a late text, however, and it seems that throughout his writing career, Lewis was uncertain about which stance to take. He abhorred the sentimental tradition on which the English literary tradition was built,¹⁸¹ but both Klein and Nickels point to the ambiguity and indecisiveness with which he reacted to this tradition. Even though Lewis proposed a firm alternative against the "nineteenth-century model of retrogressive excess"¹⁸² that he perceived in romanticism and the Victorian tradition, namely the "revolutionary classicist"¹⁸³ that he at times sought to embody, Klein sees the paradoxical nature of the play itself as "opposed to the manifestos [in *Blast*]." ¹⁸⁴ Similarly, Nickels calls *Arghol* "the perfect emblem of the multi-generic, politically ambivalent work Lewis produced in the late 1920s."¹⁸⁵

This ambivalence arguably makes *Arghol* the representation of "a central crisis of modernity: that all stable foundations of individual subjectivity have become uncertain."¹⁸⁶ The Nietzschean reason for this uncertainty, and ultimately unsustainability, is that these stable foundations belonged to that realm of "truth" that has collapsed, and which can

¹⁸¹ Klein, "The Experiment of Vorticist Drama," 226.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 226.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹⁸⁵ Nickels, "Anti-Egoism and Collective Life," 368.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 354.

nonetheless not be abandoned. The overcoming of this crisis has been interpreted in its literary manifestation as flight in Chapter 3. Arghol's way of attempting to resist the meaninglessness of reality has been shown to result in a paradox – the inevitable assertion of that which he so fervently wishes to deny. For Arghol, to take flight would mean to find a way to escape this paradox. Similarly, for the modern human (using Nickels's and Foray's terminology), who is caught in the vicious circle of nihilism after the death of God and the collapse of the Christian moral-hypothesis, flight would mean the overcoming of the paradox that ensnares humanity by necessity. Arghol's failure might serve as an allegory of how difficult it would be for the modern human, living in a meaningless world, to escape the paradox of nihilism.

If Arghol is a representation of the failure to escape the aforementioned crisis of modernity, placed within the model of the Nietzschean crisis of nihilism, Hanp may represent a momentary escape from this crisis. He manages to free himself from the lie that gave his world meaning, namely Arghol himself and his teaching, and for a brief instance, he feels the oppressive meaninglessness vanish. The moment he experiences his freedom, however, he falls into despair and can do nothing more than to kill himself.

Enemy of the Stars is thus an expression of the uncertainty of how to react to the crisis of modernity, a crisis that involves elements such as desacralization, instability, and the collapse of transcendental ideals in light of which the world could be given meaning. Furthermore, an escape from this crisis seems always to imply its radicalisation. An important concluding point to be made, however, is that the crisis is recognized and acknowledged nonetheless, and attempts to resist or escape it are undertaken, however vain these attempts may be. In the light of this realization, and if *Enemy of the Stars* is particularly a modernist reaction to the crisis of modernity, it might be illuminating to investigate how this response is expressed in other modernist and indeed postmodernist texts. Contemporary British fiction

has seen a resurgence of modernist sensibilities, as was pointed out in the introduction. The editors of *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction* point to the break with postmodernism¹⁸⁷ and present an overview of the various forms of the return of modernism.¹⁸⁸ The interest in the overcoming of postmodernism and a return of (or to) modernism in whichever form it may take has been growing steadily. Researches such as Timotheus Vermeulen, Robin van den Akker, Urmila Seshagiri, David James, and others, have all presented different modes in which to understand this resurgence. The present study offers a beginning of thinking about the relationship of contemporary modernist sensibilities to postmodernism in the context of a Nietzschean conception of nihilism. In this sense it provides a step towards an understanding of how various modernist and postmodernist responses to nihilism take shape, in order to then arrive at a conception of how the contemporary return to modernism might be characterized.

¹⁸⁷ Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble, and Leigh Wilson, introduction to *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*, eds. Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble, and Leigh Wilson (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 16.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 17-19.

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