

Creatures of the Nihil

Keith Ansell Pearson and Diane Morgan (eds.), *Nihilism Now! Monsters of Energy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000)

Gary Banham and Charlie Blake (eds.), *Evil Spirits: Nihilism and the Fate of Modernity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000)

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'A nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist'.¹

'Nihilism is that historical process whereby the dominance of the "transcendent" becomes null and void, so that all being loses its worth and meaning'.²

Is nihilism on the upsurge? Are we about to be buried beneath a torrent of nay sayers howling abuse at the world? The recent publication of two books on the topic which share a third of the contributors in common brought forth hope in the heart of this reviewer that perhaps this was the public announcement of a nihilist cabal which had for several years been writhing away at the heart of academia.³ Such hope being temporarily

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1968), §585(A) (references are to section numbers). Abbreviated hereafter to 'WtP'.

² Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volume 4: Nihilism*, trans. by Frank A. Capuzzi, in Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes Three and Four* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 4.

³ Each book consists of a dozen papers, with four authors (Joanna Hodge, Diane Morgan, Howard Caygill, and Daniel Conway) appearing in both volumes.

fanned by the DeleuzoGuattarian glee with which the editors of *Monsters* ask: 'Is it possible to save thought from its current degenerative and vegetative state at the hands of a smug and cozy postmodern academicism? Can we still invent new concepts?' (p. viii).

Hovering over any contemporary discussion of nihilism are, of course, two figures: Nietzsche, whose analysis of nihilism in *The Will to Power* arguably opens up more questions than it answers, and Heidegger, with his massively influential reading of Nietzsche's claim that nihilism is the devaluation of the highest values as 'the fundamental event of Western history, which has been sustained and guided by metaphysics'.⁴ This to be followed by a revaluation of values in which rather than a simple reversal, the very place of values is redetermined. What Nietzsche and Heidegger also have in common is the conviction that nihilism is somehow a defining feature of modernity.

Ansell Pearson and Morgan's 'desire in this volume is to inspire a return to the energetics of Nietzsche's prose and the critical intensity of his approach to nihilism' (*Monsters*, p. ix). Consequently, it is no surprise that all the papers, with one exception, engage with Nietzsche to a greater or lesser extent, and that several of these engagements are mediated via Heidegger.⁵ Given the nature of the contributions from Ansell Pearson and Morgan to both volumes, there is no doubting their enthusiasm for their stated task.⁶ However it is not the desire of all their contributors.

Additionally, Keith Ansell Pearson, the co-editor of *Monsters*, has a paper in *Evil Spirits*.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volume 3: The Will to Power as Knowledge and Metaphysics*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh, David Farrell Krell, Frank A. Capuzzi, in Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes Three and Four* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 203. Nietzsche's claim may be found in *The Will To Power*, §2.

⁵ The exception is a paper by John Protevi: 'A Problem of Pure Matter: Fascist Nihilism in *A Thousand Plateaus*' (*Monsters*, pp. 167-188). Protevi is careful to begin by distinguishing Deleuze and Guattari's use of nihilism in *A Thousand Plateaus* from Nietzsche's, not least because the former is linked to Nazism. Protevi's engagement with 'nihilism now' consists of a very careful exegesis of Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of fascist nihilism and the currents of microfascism out of which it still arises in the present day. However, as an added bonus, he also supplies an astonishingly clear and concise summary of Deleuze and Guattari's use of the concept of the body without organs in *A Thousand Plateaus*, which cannot be recommended highly enough (*Monsters*, pp. 169-172).

⁶ Both Morgan's pieces are eminently readable accounts of highly idiosyncratic characters read through Nietzsche: 'Provoked Life': Expressing Nihilism' is a consideration of 'Gottfried Benn — doctor for skin afflictions, venereal diseases and

Richard Beardsworth, for one, appears to have very little sympathy with nihilism.⁷ His paper comprises a close reading of *On the Genealogy of Morality* with a view to showing that Nietzsche's text 'disperses nihilism', and is all the better for it (*Monsters*, p. 63). This might come as a surprise to some readers, and would surely surprise the author, who styled himself 'the perfect nihilist'.⁸ Obviously one does not have to take Nietzsche at his word, but Beardsworth's claim appears to be that, rather than coming through the event of nihilism as he believed he had, it is the failure of Nietzsche's project which shows that nihilism is a mere phantasm. As such, it is worth looking at in a little more detail.⁹ He seeks to demonstrate that whilst Nietzsche's explanation of value in the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality* collapses everything into a field of forces rather than being determined by absolute morality, there is still the risk of 'anthropomorphising the differentiations of energy between the human and its *Umwelt* in terms of a purely human force that stands outside its constitutive relation to technical, economic and social forces'

expressionist poet' (*Monsters*, pp. 142-166 (p. 143)). Here she attempts to read Benn's apocalyptic transhumanism against his attempts at collaboration with Nazism, to show that his 'error' was to temporarily abandon eschatology for teleology. In 'An Angel On All Fours': 'Inverts' and Their Dogs', she returns to Nietzsche and the Nazis, considering questions of becoming in both the Nazi purification program and, in contradistinction, via a consideration of transsexuality in Djuana Barnes's novel *Nightwood* (*Evil Spirits*, pp. 89-106).

In 'Spectroipoiesis and Rhizomatics: Learning to Live with Death and Demons', Ansell Pearson considers what happens to attempts to think communion with the dead outside of a Freudian Oedipal context (*Evil Spirits*, pp. 124-145). Drawing upon Deleuze and Guattari and Derrida, he then presents a critique of Simon Critchley's recent book *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy and Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), based around the latter's failure to understand the possibility of affirming death, not as a personal experience, but rather as an event of repetition which produces the spectral.

⁷ Richard Beardsworth, 'Nietzsche, Nihilism and Spirit', *Monsters*, pp. 37-69.

⁸ 'He that speaks here, [...] [speaks] as the first perfect nihilist of Europe' (WtP, Preface, §3).

⁹ Another author who does not take Nietzsche at his word is Daniel Conway, whose paper 'Revisiting the Will to Power' sets out to show that Nietzsche 'is not yet the 'perfect nihilist' he takes himself to be' (*Monsters*, p. 118). Conway makes this claim in the light of a consideration of the possibilities which nihilism offers to transhuman philosophy, notably as an attack upon teleology and the concept of an absolute moral order. Following a close reading of relevant sections of *The Will to Power*, Conway concludes, in contradistinction to Beardsworth, that whilst Nietzsche inevitably fails to bring the transhuman project to its conclusion, he opens up the project to those, perhaps more perfect nihilists, who come after him.

(*Monsters*, p. 47, original italics). He makes this claim because he thinks that the opposition between active and reactive forces breaks down in the second essay.¹⁰ This occurs because the two are anthropomorphically complicated via Nietzsche's discussion of promising and memory, notably the claim Beardsworth finds therein that 'the specificity of the human in contrast to other animals lies in its ability to *make promises*' (*Monsters*, p. 48, original italics).¹¹ For Beardsworth, this means that the deferral of force is specific to humans, and so they 'can *never* be purely active' (*Monsters*, p. 49, original italics). Promising, linked as it is to an act of memory, removes spontaneity and so goes beyond the notion of purely active force. Beardsworth's claim is that it is not therefore possible to dismiss the categories, as they 'are located here *within the formation of memory*' (*Monsters*, p. 50, original italics). 'Categories' being Nietzsche's name for the highest values.¹² The strong claim here being that a revaluation of values is not therefore possible and, contra the nihilist 'phantasm', the world is in fact how it ought to be.

The fact that the passive forces of memory are always at hand means that, for Beardsworth, the purity of concepts which he reads as binary oppositions (such as 'Roman' and 'Christian') is destroyed in that each is implicated in the other. This seems to indicate that he reads the revaluation as a simple reversal of the binary. It is not possible either to do justice to, or thoroughly engage with the argument here, but one cannot help but wonder how Beardsworth would respond to Joanna Hodge's assertion, in the essay immediately following his own, that such

¹⁰ This opposition is most famously brought to the fore by Deleuze in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (London: Athlone, 1983). Beardsworth admits that 'one of the aims of this chapter is to complicate the way in which a Deleuzian type reading of force locates force within its immanent determinations' (*Monsters*, p. 64, n. 1). This is a point which will be returned to below.

¹¹ 'To breed an animal *which is able to make promises* — is that not precisely the paradoxical task which nature has set herself with regard to humankind? is it not the real problem of humankind?' (Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. by Carol Diethe, ed. by Keith Ansell Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 38). There is only enough space to note in passing that Nietzsche does not appear to be saying that *all* humans can make promises. Additionally, he opposes promising to active forgetting, thereby making that too a 'specificity of the human'. This is something which Beardsworth does not consider.

¹² See Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volume 4*, pp. 36-42.

distinctions cannot partake of an original purity as that would be incompatible with the thought of the eternal return.¹³

Of course, anybody with even a cursory knowledge of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* will recognize the move being made here.¹⁴ Rather than simply 'complicating' Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche, it would be more accurate to say that Beardsworth is seeking to bring Nietzsche closer to Hegel; a fact that he is fairly explicit about when he claims to read the economies of force in *On the Genealogy of Morality* 'within an historical economy of spirit' (*Monsters*, p. 63). This raises two questions: Firstly, what does Beardsworth mean by the Nietzschean conception of spirit? In a long footnote, he seeks to clarify this and justify why he restricts the concept 'to the neuronal complex and its historical avatars' (*Monsters*, p. 65, n. 4). Unhappily it is far from clear what is at stake here, and a claim that the terms of the debate are becoming clarified in the light of work by, amongst others, Maturana and Varela, fails to help elucidate it any further. It would perhaps have been apposite if Beardsworth had indicated what aspect of these works was clarifying the debate. In a further footnote, he claims that he prefers terms such as spirit and spiritualisation over will to power and eternal return, because the former are 'more historically rich and flexible, less homogenising in their articulations of difference' (*Monsters*, p. 68, n.14). If one were being uncharitable, one might like to say that what this actually means is that they are more nebulous.

The second question is why drag Deleuze into this at all, given that it is generally agreed that he supplies a (to say the least) 'strong' reading of Nietzsche.¹⁵ If Nietzsche's project fails in the manner which Beardsworth claims, it should stand or fall on its own merits rather than being read through Deleuze in order to then be re-read back through Hegel. Unfortunately one is left at the end wondering what the point is. It would have been just as relevant, and perhaps more interesting, if Beardsworth had presented his reading in the light of other Hegelian

¹³ Joanna Hodge, 'The Monstrous Rebirth of Nihilism', in *Monsters*, pp. 70-85 (p. 75).

¹⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), esp. pp. 111-119.

¹⁵ In fact Nick Land hits the nail on the head when he claims that *Nietzsche and Philosophy* is 'solely about Deleuze'. See *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism (An Essay in Atheistic Religion)* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 155.

interpretations of Nietzsche, such as that of Walter Kaufmann, for example.¹⁶

Like Beardsworth, Banham and Blake, the editors of *Evil Spirits*, are not looking to a return to the critical intensity of Nietzsche's approach to nihilism. Rather, they purport to investigate the repressed relationship 'between nihilism, fate and modernity under the aegis of the demonic' (*Evil Spirits*, p. 1). Modernity here being defined as a project of measurement based upon the assumptions that the nature of the world allows itself to be investigated calculatively, and that the relations to be discovered by such an investigation are linearly causal. Banham and Blake think this leads to determinism and 'purposes are, as a consequence, expelled from the world' (*Evil Spirits*, p. 2). This is apparently 'based upon a transformation of *techne* into an exact and exacting mechanism' (*Evil Spirits*, p. 1). What *techne* has been transformed from is not at all clear, but it seems that for Banham and Blake modernity represents the culmination of a teleological process (hence 'project') which ends in the collapse of all teleology, or at least teleological explanations, leaving causality 'bereft of ultimate references [as] the economy of existence is reduced to base repetition. This repetition is what has come to be named nihilism' (*Evil Spirits*, p. 3).¹⁷ The upshot of this is that religion is displaced from its place as ultimate referent leading Banham and Blake to draw a political conclusion which is so surprising that it is worth quoting in full:

If the subordination of religion to the state is paralleled by the final authority on the fate of each individual necessarily residing with the sovereign than there is a practical aspect to nihilism in the supremacy of executive will even over the will of God (a political 'death of God'). This practical aspect of nihilism limits the possible scope in which political decision is comprehended. It permits intrigue as a normal aspect of relations and sanctions in principle (if only in conditions of emergency) total mobilization and a cult of the state. The meaning lost in the cosmos is restored in politics but its condition of restoration is a displacement of

¹⁶ Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4th edn. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974).

¹⁷ It is unfortunate that they fail to explain what they mean by 'base repetition', as it is far from clear why the collapse of ultimate references for causes which are being explained in terms of immanent linearity should lead to repetition at all. This is not to say that it may not, but the necessity for such a move is not at all apparent.

religious hope and fear into the machinery which makes possible war. This second aspect of nihilism is therefore connected to a second change in the nature of *techné*. Political evil may be understood as a consequence of the fate which governs modernity (*Evil Spirits*, pp. 3-4).

What this appears to be saying is that the subsumption of religion to state (or, indeed the eradication of religion) means that as there is no longer a set of transcendent moral laws (hopefully linked to a telos of 'just deserts'). Evil stalks the modern world in the guise of political states which are completely unchecked in their blood lust as, when questioned about the nature of their actions, they simply appeal to the fact that if they are investigated thoroughly, it will be seen that they were determined to act as they did by way of a linear chain of causal forces which Banham and Blake label 'fate'.¹⁸

As an antidote to all this, they propose that philosophy needs to think in terms of forces which are not entirely subsumable under the terms 'human' and 'nature'. To this end, they suggest that modernity needs to be also thought in terms of spirits; notably demons and angels. Derrida's influence can readily be discerned by the number of spectres who crop up throughout the book.¹⁹ These labels are to be thought in very loose

¹⁸ It would be simply too tedious to trot out the obvious counter arguments, although, given the fact that Blake in particular has course to refer to him, it would be interesting to orientate such a move around Bataille's analysis of Aztec sacrifice (Georges Bataille, 'Consumption', trans. by Robert Hurley, in *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, I (New York: Zone, 1991), pp. 45-61). It is, however, worth mentioning that Spinoza's *Ethics*, one of the most brutally necessitarian materialist philosophical systems ever developed, carries none of the conclusions which Banham and Blake point to (Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. by Edwin Curley, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza Volume I*, ed. by Edwin Curley (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 408-617).

¹⁹ Not all the spectres are Derridean, however. Anthony Easthope provides a sympathetic consideration of Freud in the light of the disjunction between Freud's claims for psychoanalysis as a science and the spectral nature of his writings. Unsurprisingly, the text which Easthope privileges for this purpose is 'The Uncanny' (trans. by James Strachey, in Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature*, ed. by Albert Dickson, Penguin Freud Library, 14 (London: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 335-376). One of Easthope's avowed aims is to rescue Freud from Deleuze and Guattari by showing that he is more demonic than they make him out to be in 'One or Several Wolves?' (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Athlone, 1988), pp. 26-38). This he

terms, as Blake makes clear when, following on from a discussion of the physicist Frank Tipler's theory of the Omega Point, he considers the possibility of communication outside of linear temporality 'with such entities as we may (for there is no scientific or philosophical reason not to), describe as the angels or demons who dwell at the end of time'.²⁰ Whether there are scientific or philosophical reasons not to use such descriptions is a moot point, but what should be abundantly clear by now (and as Blake is well aware), is that the decision to use these labels is a political one, and it is not at all certain that all the contributors to this volume are doing so for the same political reasons. This is not necessarily a failing however as it allows the one to read the papers off against each other perhaps giving one a clearer understanding of what is actually at stake in each case.

In conclusion, despite there being shared points of reference and having so many contributors in common, the respective tones of these two volumes are quite distinct, with *Monsters* taking a more materialist approach to questions of nihilism and modernity, although this is not exclusively the case. In both volumes the papers are varied enough to attract quite a wide audience, although the focus appears slightly tighter in *Monsters*. Should one wish to choose between them it would have to be on the grounds of philosophical taste rather than a scholarly distinction. Given the theological overtones of demon and angelologies, an immanent philosophy might want to stick to creating monsters.

manages to do, but the reading of Deleuze and Guattari's critique of Freud which he supplies is viciously reductionist.

²⁰ Charlie Blake, 'The Gravity of Angels: Space, Time and the Ecstasy of Annihilation', *Evil Spirits*, pp. 52-71 (p. 68).