

OVERCOMING NIHILISM: METAPHYSICAL REVOLT AND THE JUDGE PENITENT IN UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING

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ABSTRACT

Sartre posited that freedom must be accompanied by an act of nihilation/negation which aids the construction of an original structure of consciousness. The establishment of a neutralized locus of subjectivity, fortified against all contestations of time and space, must be accompanied by the act of delimiting, and disfiguring all associative constituents of conscious thinking. However, re-examining the history of the philosophical drive towards negation, from Turgenev to Camus, challenges the notion of axiomatic constructedness in determining the outer limit of a particular body. Negation appears to be a discursively substantive act, enmeshed in the specificities of individual feelings, cognition, and intellectual conditioning. Lastly, the implication of the discursive nature of negation is observed in the evolution of the structures of feelings in Kundra's novel "Unbearable Lightness of Being. What stands pivotal to attaining a discursive prowess of consciousness, is the idea of "metaphysical revolt", a stance of disagreement or disunity with our basic reflexes of thinking, leading to a trajectory of sustained investigation into the discursive roots of our "anomalous" thinking process, embodied by the concept of the "judge penitent."

1. INTRODUCTION

Nihilism derives from the latin "nihil" which means "nothing". The aim of this paper is to trace the hermeneutical origins of the word from the most important epoch in which it gained popularity, which is the climate of political insurgency in Europe, especially Russia and onto the contentions posited against its popular meaning in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche. Nihilism was re-envisioned as having the political vitality to prioritize investigation of the psychical idiosyncrasies of the reflective cogito, an act that resulted in the alienation of an individual from the totalizing political masquerades of the greater community. Lastly the paper would end by examining the implications of the changed definition of nihilism in the evolution of sensory phenomena in Milan Kundra's novel, the Unbearable Lightness of Being.

2. HISTORY OF NIHILISM AND ITS PHILOSOPHICAL CRITICISM

Written at the height of an insurgency in capitalist Russia, Turgenev's Father and Sons defines a nihilist¹ as a person who does not respect or condition himself to reconcile to any guiding principle of life on faith, no matter how much valuation might be placed upon it by the society. Nihilism represented a philosophical architecture of the mind which was radically exclusionary in its aim to negate all pre-existing moral values and the traditional ritualized sentiments, perspectives, impressions out of which they arose.

Preliminary to understanding nihilism in its philosophical context, a background in understanding the mechanisms of the human consciousness is imperative. The human consciousness reacts to the stimulus of external impressions through the positing of several interconnected, chronologically spatial stream of ideas, impressions, and images that arise in response to their respective environment and help in realization of and articulation of meaning and language as one knows it.

However, the procedure of synthesizing the different interrelated ideas and impressions in terms of which the consciousness, makes sense involves a corollary act of negation, which mutilates, subverts, disfigures, and dismisses all alternative possibilities of registering extraneous sense impressions. In this regard, every single image and idea which constitute the great stream of consciousness is objectified, standardized, and neutralized by being accompanied with a conjoined act of negation, which eliminates the possibilities of assigning any greater valuation to the impression than has already been computed by the spontaneous assertion of the thinking mind.

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Capitalising on the significance of the act of negation involved in the constitution of consciousness and all conscious reflexes of the mind, Stanley Rosen defines nihilism as an act of arbitrary assertion; an act that proceeds *ex nihilo* or defines its significance by a spontaneous assertion that can be negated with equal justification. (Preface xii). Further, Geoffrey Clive adds to Rosen's assertion when he defines nihilism as "belief in nothing on instinct". Nihilism emerges as a firm belief in "Nothing" out of the constraints presented to thinking, rationalizing, and comprehending faculties of the mind of finding true, immutable moral facts that are not subject to perspectival changes, or to the manipulation of dominant authorities of the society. As a result, Clive argues that truth or factuality is interpreted as a product of time, social status, and ideological power and manipulation which renders unpredictability and inconsistency in normative moral behaviour justifiable. (Clive qtd.in Hocutt 14.)

According to Nietzsche, nihilism was not the result of actual moral degradation, or the accumulation of facts that eliminated all possibilities of finding greater knowledge, establishing "Nothing" as a divine attribute or necessary consequence of all true attempts at enlightenment. Rather Nietzsche viewed the extreme faith in the impossibility of discovering extraneous forms of knowledge in addition to those which have already been established as a fundamental defect of the thinking tendencies and inclinations of the human mind. He argues that nihilism emerges as a psychological condition when man imagines that there is a "wholeness, a system, even an organization to all that occurs so that the mind revels in the general idea of a supreme form of governance and administration. ". The propensity of Christian morality to conclude all its intellectual enterprises and imaginative efforts in the creation of some supreme values that are fortified against all incursions of ulterior time and space is highly responsible for fomenting the spirit of nihilistic meaninglessness. The unity of the human consciousness according to him is predicated on the result of careful deselection of some forms of knowledge that are institutionized as harmful, redundant, or otherwise worthless by the popular guardians of morality such as Church, the state, the society, etc.

Writing decades later at the heart of phenomenological debates in France, Sartre, theorized consciousness, as the perception of the essence of an existing object in the external world which establishes itself through a series of appearances, a series of associative objects that are determined in their range of shapes, sizes, and extent of evolution of time. This results in the creation of a "topological map" in which pathways are traced to and among objects in accordance with the potentialities and resistances of objects in the world. The process of constituting consciousness through the positing of registers of meaning in a chronological order expresses the condition of the individual mind's encounter with the broader world, the technical term for which was "being—in the world". Hence, the importance of objects and their potency to affect the psychological quality of human emotions, perceptions, memory, and understanding was at the heart of Sartre's enterprises on phenomenology. In his play, *No Exit*, the cartographical domains of hell or purgatory is similarly constituted of an assemblage of everyday objects, such as doors, mirror, and walls. Garcia, noticeably laments the absence of humanitarian necessities like bathrooms ...signifying the latent presence of a dark humour within Sartre's decision to draw analogies between the representational dimensions of a space created for extra-terrestrial punishment and the mundane regularity of the everyday world of living. The analogy points to a literary tactic for teasing out the extraordinariness of the ordinary dimensions of reality. The living world with its neatly categorized and hierarchized positioning of the rank, order, nature and essence of objects, individuals and the imaginative reflective powers of the human mind often hides a greater subterranean noumenality which emerges as the nature of conscious intellectual engagement with the external world changes under conditions of pressure. The condition of existentialism occurs precisely when attempts at synthesis of ideal unities fails, ruptures, or overflows their designated boundaries into a concealed realm of unexplored possibilities typifying a condition as "angst". Barnes defines the condition of existential angst as a situation where "things overflow all the relationships and designations that one can attach to them resulting in the awareness of the fact that existence itself is gratuitous, contingent, unjustifiable, and meaningless.

Existential philosophers like Nietzsche, Camus and Sartre classified suffering and the potency to

confront the absurdity of subterranean possibilities lurking beneath the existence of tightly coordinated categories of meaning and sense impressions to be the fundamental antidote to nihilistic meaninglessness.

Camus diagnoses Nietzsche as having practised “methodical negation” instead of” methodical doubt “. The crumbling down of pre-existing foundations of faith is the starting point on the path to the development of a new consciousness. However disintegration does not imply complete erasure .,To live completely secure in the faith of absolutely fortified diagnosis of social inequities and their necessary antidotes, results in the evasion of greater responsibilities regarding the nature of social conditioning, how evils originate through a nexus of interconnected deficiencies in an individual social atmosphere, capacity of mental reflection, emotional imbalances, etc.. He further argues that If nihilism is the inability to believe, then its most serious symptom is not found in “atheism, but in the inability to believe in what is, to see what is happening, and to live life as it is offered. This infirmity is at the root of all idealism. Morality has no faith in the world. For Nietzsche, real morality cannot be separated from lucidity.”.

3. THE CONCEPT OF THE JUDGE PENITENT

Alienated subjectivity, suffering conscience. In his critique of Dialectical reason, Sartre argues that the individual conscience escapes being objectified or ghettoized into categories precisely by refusing to become as mechanical force reproducing historically and socially ordained dictates of epistemology. To this effect, Sartre argues that subjectivity, prior to its revolt, appears as in its abstraction as the verdict which compels freely and through ourselves the sentence that a developing society has pronounced on us and which defines us a priori in our being”. The alienated subjectivity refuses to be turned into an instrument for reproducing totalizing movements or cultural inclinations pre-ordained of the society. The alienated subjectivity, offers resistance, to the totalizing demands of the society and instead discursively substantiates its reasons for negating the external strictures and demands incumbent upon it. Sartre calls the free actions, vagabond and authorless, which are generated by the alienated consciousness in its quest to escape being turned into mechanical force as having the power to overturn pre-existing society or its dead institutions. Thought perceives itself as a dialectical movement of constant thorough going interrogation and investigation of all investigative specimens of knowledge, the socio-cultural environment in which they are incubated, the pedagogic training and modes of interpretative training to which an individual consciousness has been conditioned over the course of time. (Sartre, 24) Dialectical reason therefore is not a universal postulate; it creates itself. There is no ad-intra assertion of a rational fact having appeared magically out of nowhere without having followed a clearly demonstrable movement of rational speculation emerging out of associated forms of induced reasoning which in turn are grounded in the context of their social, historical, philosophical speculations, and so forth.

The concept judge penitent, first elaborated in Camus’ s *The fall*, refers to the dynamics of the alienated subjectivity and its corollary the suffering conscience. An insightful passage from the novel, sheds light on the protagonist, sense of aversion of the incumbent moral systems of his society, his refusal to compromise his sense of intellectual autonomy to secure agreement with the established patterns of reasoning and the sense of foreboding despair that makes him ponder upon his greater justifications, arguments, and reasons for his greater alienation. The idea of a being a “judge” in the metaphysical sense of the term is to recreate a locus of decentred subjectivity that becomes the catalyst for invoking the specificities of altered cognitive analysis and different gradations of personal historical conceptualization.

In solitude and when one is fatigued, one is inclined after all to take oneself for the prophet. When all is said and done, that is what I am, an empty prophet for shabby times, ...my hands raised in threatening imprecation at lawless men who cannot suffer judgement. He who clings to a law does not believe in the judgement that puts him within an order h3 believes in.

In his *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus argues that man needs his freedom passion and revolt to survive the deadening bleakness and uncertainty of existence. He describes the ability to not let thought, reason

and rationality to not congeal itself into narrow categories of value judgement but to retain its reflectiveness, in the face of all opposing evidence as the supreme mark of the absurd man. The absurd man is an artistic creator. Since the discursive nature of his consciousness allows for greater reflective and cognitive prowess, commonsensical rationalizations can, then, for him develop greater insight into their respective social cultural and historical contexts out of which they evolve. Absurdity enables human beings to develop greater insights the cultural and political forces manipulating the production of the knowledge of our most basic ideas and sense impressions.

Nihilistic rage, revolt and suffering in Unbearable lightness of being:--- Kundra references Nietzsche's concept of the eternal recurrence for the purpose of articulating the tendency towards strict categorization of our everyday impressions that creates a sense of fatalistic repetition of thoughts, emotions, and valuations. The concept of the eternal recurrence is predicated on the premise that our consciousness reproduces certain impressions, ideas, trivial certainties minor satisfactions, in a tightly coordinated sequence of succession that often leads to feelings of entrapment, meaninglessness, defencelessness and futility regarding the notion of voluntary agency that the individual holds over one's life. The eternal recurrence was a nihilistic consequence of the faith in God and of the fear and awe generated by a placating belief in the esoteric mechanisms of how natural forces operate, beyond the range of human intellect and comprehension and invincible in opposition to both of them. Nietzsche summarizes the dreadful hold that the idea of God has over the human consciousness in *Ecce homo*: ---

The concept of "God" invented as a counter-concept of life? everything harmful, poisonous, slanderous, the whole hostility unto death against life synthesized in the concept in a gruesome unity! The concept of the "beyond," the "true world" invented in order to devaluate the only world there is? in order to retain no goal, no reason, (qtd in Ridley 21).

The eternal recurrence symbolized a deadly sterility encroaching upon the free movement of the human imagination. Imagination was beset, enthralled, and controlled by transcendental fantasies. Emotions, values, and sense impressions became shackled by the conflicting necessity of trying to morph or crystallize into some socially acceptable perspective on the right form of existence in a community. Kundra highlights how the deadly fatality of the eternal recurrence characterizes the sensual emotions of Tomas and Teresa towards each other. Tomas suffers from pangs of sexual jealousy in imagining the fact that Teresa's Body was perfectly coupled with any other male body. Teresa in turn, suffers from fits of jealous outbursts in imagining Tomas in the arms of other women. The imagination of both Teresa and Tomas are involved in the reproduction of fantastic and delusional images and ideas about the other. Each in their head conceives an image of the other that is coeval with the repetition of a fixed succession of habits, temporary tensions, satisfactions, certainties regarding the other's personality and mannerisms. Barthes in the lover's discourses references this act of conceiving the other as an operation conducted in cold and astonished fashion. The paralysis arising out of the inability to conceive the other through extraneous possibilities, through emotions and feelings diverging from this strictly coordinated pattern of rhythmic regularity, results in arousal of nihilistic rage, frustration, and despair. Tomas and Teresa's relationship appear strained, tightly drawn and always perched precariously on the brink of shuddering breakage. The claustrophobic dimensions of the relationship point towards an oedipal drive that characterizes the consciousness of both Tomas and Teresa. Tomas compares Teresa to a forlorn "child", using her infantile physiognomic proportions to trivialize the necessity and responsibility on his own part of evaluating her emotions, capabilities, dreams and desires in a broader and more contextualized light than he actually does. The novel makes references to Oedipus, in an essay written by Tomas which critics have construed as laying the emphasis on the of his theory of history focuses not on what did happen but on what should have happened, the necessity of responsibly acknowledging guilt and the consequences (Pichova and Rhine, 75.)

What enables Teresa to break out of the cycle of nihilistic frustration is her unique ability to suffer. As already opined by Camus, the sole path towards negating the nihilistic cycle of repeating emotions and frustrating glitches in the creative enterprise, is to practise methodical negation instead

of methodical doubt. Teresa reprises firm faith in an order of consciousness, constitution of conscious emotions ideas and opinions that emerge out of instinctual comprehension, of the magic of feeling rather than being based solely on institutionalized reason. To this effect that, Teresa confesses that though she is aghast at Tomas betrayal and infidelity yet she is unwilling to detract faith from his innate goodness, she wishes to keep imagining redemptive possibilities for him. The theoretical dynamics underlying Teresa's redemptive faith has been aptly described by Ridley as the onset of the life altering realization that "transcendental consolations are no longer possible".

Teresa's emotional valuations with regards to Tomas are not merely superficial because they are not merely based on attraction to specific components of the physiognomy but rather stem from the appraisal, valuation of deeper character traits, sentiments, ideas, and other mouldings of the mind shared between them. Kundra refers to this art of affective affiliation as stemming from the penchant for deepest suffering. He writes, "to have compassion (co-feeling) means not only to be able to live with the other's misfortune but also to feel with him any emotion—joy, anxiety, happiness, pain, kind of compassion (in the sense of *souc/r, wspotczucie, Mitgefuhl, medkansia*) therefore signifies the maximal capacity of affective imagination, the art of emotional telepathy."

The unique nature of lovemaking, which Kundra calls "shared sleep" rather than a desire for bestial copulation, bears reference to the nature of intellectual camaraderie that exists between them. Emphasis is laid not on the obsessional oedipal craving for a fixed framework of pleasures but rather on the interactional exchanges and resultant concatenation of lived moments, differing in the quality of emotions offered and memories awoken. Accordingly, Tomas concludes that "Love does not make itself felt in the desire for copulation (a desire that extends to an infinite number of women) but in the desire for shared sleep (a desire limited to one woman) (Kundra, 15)."

Hence, the unique nature of Tomas and Teresa's love is that resists the sundry repetition of vapid emotions and passions, confined only to the perusal of each other's body. The evolution of their feelings, affections, and content of knowledge about each other is not geared towards any transcendental goals, it is rather tremulously rooted in the contingencies, the temporality, the embodiment of moments spent in the present, the "weight of the present shades the lightness and certainty of their love and affection for each other. Teresa and Tomas are not able to negate or confidently erase doubts and speculations that each has regarding the other. The doubts and speculations are imbued with strong refractive potential for impelling them to reconstitute the entire framework of repeated process of meaning making, the inherited order of preconceptions that each sex has about the other, the synchronized pattern of actions that one expects the other to behave, etc...Hence, Kundra describes the stimulating potency for subversion that their consciousness and imaginative minds possess when he writes, They were not born of a mother's womb; they were born of a stimulating phrase or two or from a basic situation.

Barthes encapsulates the power of love to outwit nihilistic repetition and banality, when he writes that "trivialities, incidents, setbacks, minor vexations have the potency to reconfigure the human will, and enable its escapade from landing in a desert of stagnant reflections, ideas and conceited opinions through the power of sustained reflections.

4. CONCLUSION

The constitutional moulding of mind that enables an individual to escape nihilistic fatality is revolutionary in nature. Tomas resists the ideological certainties of Communism, when he accuses them of not knowing everything. In consequence, Tomas's rejection of Communism as an ideological force, is in effect a reflection of his internal proclivity to resist social and cultural and political conditioning geared towards reproduction of certain stagnant impressions, minor satisfactions that create a false god, a sense of power held over human agency by the dictates of social tradition and not by innate human agency as such.

Instead through his faithlessness in any kind of unifying principle for life, Tomas upholds the unique ethos of suffering. His love for Teresa though, life affirming, is nonetheless drawn out protracted, and drawn out over a territory of confused emotions, unresolved doubts, pangs of jealous misgivings,

refractions, trivialities, and detours. These divergent modes of thinking always augment the unfolding of possibilities and reconfigurations regarding their inherited legacies and systems of evaluating the behaviour, personality, and mannerisms of the other. An insightful passage from the novel highlights, the protracted nature of suffering that characterized their relationship.

His love for Teresa was beautiful, but it was also tiring: he had constantly had to hide things from her, sham, dissemble, make amends, buck her up, calm her down, give evidence of his feelings, play the defendant to her jealousy, her suffering, and her dreams, feel guilty, make excuses and apologies. Now what was tiring had disappeared and only the beauty remained. (Kundra, 99).

Hence, in light of all the discussions made in the essay, the unique nature of Kundra's novel, the unique paradox of light and weight being intertwined with each other is precisely, as Ridley explained, the condition of having to live one's life without transcendental guarantees, relying instead on the revolt of heightened consciousness and the suffering of responsibly analysing the meaning ramifications, hidden intentions and pre-suppositions of one's actions.

END NOTE

1. For more discussions on the precise nature of nihilism and negation in Turgenev, consult chapter 10 of the novel, *Father, and Sons*. Bazarov's negation of traditional structures of reasoning is stringently materialistic in nature. He devalues, delimits the worth of all things as being axiomatically constructed and not as enmeshed in the procedures of generational conditioning. As a result, one life for him holds the exact same potential and life force as another and the value, range, and lifespan of all living things on earth can be syllogistically gauged by measuring coordinates bequeathed by scientific progress. The novel argues heavily against Bazarov's mechanistic brand of negation and nihilism. A sharp criticism of "principles" whether predicated on scientific premises or artistic is demonstrated throughout the novel. Scientific principles, rational, ethical, and moral standards and guides are all demonstrated as capable of being further investigated and dissected under the patronage of a free-thinking subjectivity that is in alignment with the emotional impetus of its cultural understanding and can hence undertake serious reorientation of all past legacies of strategic thinking.

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