

The Age of Nothing: How We Have Sought to Live Since The Death of God

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When in 1882 Nietzsche had his mad messenger announce the death of God, he was well aware that he was reporting something of more than merely theological significance. People at the time may not yet have been aware of it, but they were henceforth cast adrift in a meaningless universe, deprived of any sense of direction or of any foundations for morality – and they had brought this calamity upon themselves; it was they who had murdered God, and they who now needed somehow to replace him, effectively themselves becoming gods. Since Nietzsche's time we have continued to live in the shadow – or the light – of that announcement; and it is the reactions to it – reactions from philosophers, artists, novelists, dramatists, poets, scientists, psychologists – that Peter Watson has set about surveying here and synthesising in his own 'master narrative'.

Clearly that is a hugely ambitious aim, embracing as it must diverse material from a range of disciplinary areas – each of which is no doubt carefully defended by specialist interests. So to be clear from the outset, the author has previously worked as a journalist and editor, as well as an intellectual and cultural historian (his encyclopaedic *A Terrible Beauty*, was published in 2000), and he has in my view achieved a quite remarkable synthesis, in a book that is not only informative and instructive, but also interesting, entertaining, and highly readable. It is also bang up to date, with references to recent books and films, and up-to-the-minute articles from both sides of the Atlantic.

Peter Watson has organised his material in three parts, each consisting of eight chapters, with each of these subdivided into a number of headed sections; and the whole follows a roughly chronological order. Part one is on the period before the Great War. Subtitled significantly as 'When art mattered', this is claimed to have been a time when art and literature – including especially poetry – had greater importance than today, and were acknowledged as being secular substitutes in a post-Nietzschean godless culture. It might seem remarkable today that philosophy – any philosophy – could have the remarkable impact that Nietzsche evidently had, his influence perceptible in such diverse areas as dance, naturism, vegetarianism, the German Youth Movement, and the cult of the artist as potential 'superman'. Less surprisingly, philosophy itself was affected, most importantly in the case of American Pragmatism, with John Dewey and Santayana attempting not only to come to terms with a world without absolutes or essences, but also to direct attention to the

practical matter of human betterment.

The scepticism shown by these philosophers towards science and rationality was shared by (or transmitted to) cultural theorists, writers, and artists; and Watson's section on such dramatists as Ibsen, Strindberg, and Shaw emphasises their constructive responses both to cosmic meaninglessness and the mutability of so-called 'reality', and to the existential problem of the self's fragmentation and plurality. In the visual arts too there was concern with such secular matters, with an earlier focus on God and religion replaced by an intense attention to nature (studying the effects of light for instance), and to the place of humans now perceived as being alone in an indifferent universe. Freed from logical or theological constraints, and purveying their own individualistic takes on the world, artists could be seen as no longer even trying to *represent* an external reality, but rather as attempting with their own productions actually to *rival* it.

The aspirations of writers similarly changed. Some, accepting the limitations of science and logic as explanatory tools, as well as the disintegration of any sense of stable personal identities, recommended the acceptance of 'shared fictions' – lies that are acknowledged as such, but that are still needed in the interest of social cohesion; while others sought to replace religion with, more particularly, poetry – the poet effectively becoming priest. Not that there weren't other aspirants to that quasi-theological position: this was also the age of mysticisms, with a veritable 'epidemic of the occult'. Madame Blavatsky's theosophy was but one influential example; spiritualism, mesmerism, and other mystical cults gained wide followings; and such artists as Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Brancusi endeavoured to approach the spiritual through their own techniques – uncovering through abstraction a hitherto hidden reality.

By the end of this part of the book, some readers may already feel bewildered by the huge cast of characters already assembled, but the author manages to avoid the impression of giving nothing more than a multiple-entry cultural encyclopaedia by uniting all within a coherent and well sign-posted argumentative structure, and by appropriately focusing in some detail on those considered exemplary, or for whatever reason most significant.

Part two takes us to what are described as a series of 'abysses' – these starting in 1914 with one world war, and passing through Bolshevism and Nazism towards another. For our descent into these various abysses, a scapegoat has sometimes been found in the person (or philosophy) of Nietzsche. To take the Great War itself, for instance: even the enthusiasm with which the prospect of war was initially greeted can be conveniently blamed on a writer who left a godless universe in which human life seemed deprived of any meaningful purpose. In that situation, war might be seen to offer the prospect of filling a moral vacuum – justifying the cultivation of a race of 'Supermen', and enabling them (and women no less, alas) to re-acquire a positive sense of direction and purpose. (It remains a tragedy that, as Watson interjects, and as has much more recently been witnessed in the case of other conflicts, 'we are still searching for a viable alternative' (p. 197).)

Nietzsche's war-time popularity is yet more directly evidenced by the fascinating fact that *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (together with, more conventionally, the New Testament and Goethe's *Faust*) apparently became the most popular book for literate soldiers (presumably on the German side) to take into battle – though it may be stretching the claims of actual *influence* to hold that text responsible for provoking (or justifying) its owners' (and presumably, again, their less literate colleagues') increasingly demoralised brutality.

Contemporary developments in Russia may similarly not be directly attributable to Nietzschean influence, but Marxism, as a replacement for religion, might be seen as in some sense arising from the death of God, or at least as having attempted to deliver any *coup de grâce* that might have been required. For under Marxism's auspices religious institutions and associated rituals were duly replaced by strictly secular counterparts – factories substituted for churches and machines for altars, with priests, monks, and nuns rendered correspondingly obsolete and killed. And with heaven newly defined as being here on earth, any lingering aspirations to a life after death might be assuaged in the secular terms of an enduring reputation.

Peter Watson goes on to show that elsewhere there were further, less violent, responses to the Nietzschean heritage – as well as to an associated emphasis on 'science'. Thus, Max Weber famously became involved in an enduring search for meaning in what he perceived as a newly rationalized and 'disenchanted' world, and the 'meaning of life' as a secular goal continued to obsess artists and others through the 1920s. 'Religion' in this period was often replaced or displaced by alternative community involvements – these including not only a profusion of mystically orientated cults, but also charity works, sports, and other shared activities. Above all, perhaps, the most enduring response – still clearly with us today – was the pursuit of 'success' articulated in terms of monetary affluence.

The loss of traditional values and the need for their replacement was (and perhaps still is) a central theme in art and literature. Again there is an explicit connection with Nietzsche in the plays of Eugene O'Neill who actually hailed the philosopher as his 'literary idol'; and it is surely significant that O'Neill's characters are shown to be in need of what is referred to as some 'life-lie' – or some foundational set of beliefs even if these turn out to be nothing more than illusions, or fictions. And, as another example of an explicit Nietzschean, there is James Joyce, with his frequent avowal that 'the Absolute is dead', and his insistence on the individual's need to weave his own life's pattern. Those openly avowed Nietzschean characteristics went hand in hand of course with Joyce's own practical literary challenge to whatever seemed comfortably familiar and settled.

Other literary figures included in Peter Watson's account are Rainer Maria Rilke, Robert Musil, and Virginia Woolf – all of whom advocated an 'openness' to experience in hopes and expectations of new perceptions, as well as re-asserting the need for personally constructed life-narratives. Paradoxically (as it seems to me), at the same time in philosophy the shutters might be seen as actually descending. A. J. Ayer, at least, did not so much oppose science and scientific rationalism as embrace them as the only way (however limited) to approach life. Anything that appeared to lie beyond their scope was to be accounted a metaphysical abstraction, and as such was to be banished from meaningful discourse; and although Ayer's work may now look like a rather brief and dated episode in intellectual history, his famous or notorious *Language, Truth and Logic* (1933) was surely perceived for a generation (at least in Britain) as being of greater importance than anything by Nietzsche.

There were, though, even then alternative philosophical responses. Less radical, perhaps, but probably (at least to date) destined for longer life, John Dewey was less inclined to banish supernaturalism, but rather saw the pursuit of scientific understanding as itself a form of 'religious' activity. And Wittgenstein too was far from defining the mystical as meaningless, but recognized its status as being beyond the grasp of language. God, then, was not by any means dead, but was to be defined (however negatively) as that which lay beyond the power of human description – or as the German theologian Karl Barth later asserted, as what was so 'other' as to be beyond what could ever be known by humans.

Part three takes us from the Second World War to the present, focusing first on three enduring effects of the war itself. These are identified as existentialist philosophy, the 'permissive turn', and responses to the Holocaust; and together they implied a need to take responsibility for defining oneself and one's own purpose in life. That requirement conveniently linked with a new emphasis on therapies which focused on individual potential, growth, and fulfilment; and together with renewed attempts to redefine a God who appeared to many to have been singularly absent when most required, this all added up again to a search for

meaning. That quest was the major concern, if not obsession, of contemporary writers and artists – visible most obviously in the work of Samuel Beckett, but also in the numerous attempts to impose order on a recalcitrant world in the visual arts and even dance and music.

The search for meaning also lay at the centre of concerns for members of a ‘counterculture’ who found relief in drugs, music, mysticisms, ‘encounter groups’, and other remedies for modern man’s (and woman’s) human condition. Peter Watson’s discussion of these social experiments and psychotherapeutic treatments brings us to ongoing attempts to define such terms as ‘happiness’ – seen sometimes now as a secular replacement for salvation or redemption; and an important section highlights critiques of a ‘therapy culture’ in which a search for self-esteem and individual self-fulfilment may well be found to be inconsistent with, and more important than, any concept of enduring love for another – a point conveniently exemplified for me as I draft this review by a celebrity couple’s new-fangled ‘conscious uncoupling’.

More positively, though, Peter Watson himself – who has deliberately focused throughout on *positive* responses to the Nietzschean problem – is more inclined to put an emphasis on the power of poetry to lead us in a meaningful direction. For all their talk of ‘wonder’ as they confront the natural universe, scientists still seem to leave something out; there still seems to be some, however indefinable, loss or existential void left in their wake. So Watson quotes with obvious approval Seamus Heaney, who advocated poetry as an anti-consensual provocation to an alternative and fuller life; a part of poetry’s point is, not only to explore the limits of our known world, but also to get beyond those limits – to aspire to transcend them. And if that involves removing the ‘security blanket’ (of whatever kind) in which we habitually take refuge, so much the better.

Poetry focuses too on the particular – those small individual details to which we can all relate, and it is that approach that is to be recommended. Eschewing the grand pictures of earlier metaphysical speculations, we can concentrate on the immediacy of constructing our own life narratives, always maintaining an openness to such enlargements and new perceptions as may be offered (or just hinted at) by poets and other artists; art needs to be seen ‘to matter’ again.

This brief summary cannot do justice to an extraordinary work of synthesis, but I hope it may suffice to indicate the range – and most importantly the continuing high relevance – of Peter Watson’s writing. That matter of ‘relevance’ – a highly problematic term in the context of the humanities – does here raise some questions of historiography. For it is noteworthy that the author is far from purporting to present a history ‘for its own sake’: on the contrary, he clearly (or so it seems to me) has a purpose – one might say the (albeit unstated) moral purpose of offering some guidance for the future. Watson quotes with approval the Polish poet, Czeslaw Milosz, who has written of the ongoing need for historical consciousness: ‘Humanity will be increasingly turning back to itself, increasingly contemplating its entire past, *searching for a key to its own enigma*’; we may, he believes, recognise our own limitations through examining ‘the manners of feeling and thinking of other epochs’, thereby hopefully seeing how we might make improvements in ourselves and our own societies (p. 461, my emphases).

In the light of that it is worth noting that Peter Watson’s own search starts in a period when, as he describes, ‘*art mattered*’; and we are brought back full circle by the end of his book to the prospect of a future when art should similarly ‘*matter*’ once again. ‘The good life’, as Alasdair MacIntyre has concluded, ‘is the life spent seeking the good life’; and it is the arts that may potentially provide, or at least indicate, the means to extend our searches, and open our hearts – as well as minds – in such a way as to enable us to transcend the confines of our present situations, and enable personal and political improvement in the future.

And as one further historiographical point, the author is clear that his selected representatives were deliberately chosen for the positivity of their various responses to the Nietzschean announcement. That may seem to negate the historian’s supposed virtue of ‘balance’, and it would indeed be interesting to read the other more negative side – the story of those whose reactions were marked, perhaps, by desperation and depression, or outright denial. But that would need another book – and would hardly help our present

situation.

Peter Watson's book might well have been presented as an edited volume, with contributions from a range of academic specialists, but it is all the better for being the result of a single author's vision – with numbers of personal intrusions, assessments and evaluations. Remarkably, too, Watson has succeeded in maintaining a coherent argument through some 600 pages, without (for all his Cecil B. de Mille-scale cast) ever lapsing into superficiality or jargon. It may be periodically frustrating to look for a reference and find it's as quoted in another secondary source (occasionally even by this same author, in a new version of a 'selfie'); but in a work of this extent it would be churlish and unrealistic to expect otherwise.

The blurb claims that this book presents 'the first full story of our efforts to live without God'. Peter Watson himself, I am confident, would make no such claim about any 'full story', since he is well aware that the tale he has told is only partial, still unfinished and unlikely to be completed any time soon; but he has made an extraordinarily successful wide-angled personal snapshot of its current state.

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