

Hope Coming On: Reflecting Nihilism¹

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Where there is no hope, it is incumbent on us to invent it.
– Albert Camus

You the people have the power to make this life free and beautiful,” proclaimed Charlie Chaplin. This Jewish barber disguised as the Great Dictator tried to back out of speaking, but his friend nudged him saying that it was their only hope. Hope, he repeated, and then he stood up to deliver a riveting speech, that has become the Tramp’s famous last words. At different times, leaders have stood up to deliver exhortations about hope, freedom, and progress. These have been politicians, clergy, and artists, people visible enough to have a readymade audience for their message. Flipping this around *Hope Coming On*, a performance conceived and curated by Lanfranco Aceti,² utilized unknown persons to juxtapose hope in front of a hopeless painting. We watched about twenty boys enter and gaze upon a painting of a slave ship. Joseph Mallord William Turner’s *The Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)* shows the chaos and tragedy of throwing humans into the water, during a storm.

In this paper, I will use the performance of *Hope Coming On* as a catalyst to talk about the relationship between hope and nihilism. These seemingly opposed concepts rely on one another, in a sense, for their meaning. If everything was perfectly wonderful with the world, we could not be tempted with nihilism. But we would also not need hope, which is the desire for something better. Alan White has proposed three stages of nihilism, which I will discuss by associating three kinds of hope with some examples from the literary arts. Change occurs eventually, if we continue striving. Despite the absurdity we may experience,

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we have to choose hope, if we want to discover any meaning in our existence. This performance illustrated the truth that art is one of the ways—an important way!—to instigate hope. Hopelessness is one theme of a painting about people being thrown into the sea, but the performance of *Hope Coming On* contrasts hope-filled voices in front of the sublime tragedy. Before entering the dialectic of hope and nihilism, I want to give a brief description of the performance that led to these reflections.

The Performance

A soft voice began to pierce the subtle white noise of Gallery 251 in Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The room’s design made the soft voice enter and exit each person. This tiny sweet voice enveloped us. And slowly, this young boy weaved through the people, making his way toward the slave ship. He circled the older boys, already standing before the painting. Joining their voices to his, this group proclaimed amazing grace, freedom, and hope.

There wasn’t a famous person among them. They used melodic words: Amazing Grace, Wade in the Water, and Libertatum. And the performance lifted the crowd beyond these words as their voices from different backgrounds demonstrated harmony. People’s voices united could create hope and beauty, even in front of a violent image—Turner’s *Slave Ship*. It was fitting that these were boys and not grown men; youth is a better image of hope. Everything seems possible to children.

These children reminded us that we cannot remain calm as long as a typhoon of injustice and inequality continues to threaten and sacrifice people. We can only feign calmness for so long as some people’s voices are overthrown, and certain “prestigious” or “important” voices try to subdue our hope and turn it into something divided. The experience of their unified voices was a provocative reminder that together we really can create a beautiful world. And this is a reason to hope.

The boys finished with Libertatum, daring us to live in freedom, if you’re gonna live. Then, the songs stopped, and they turned back toward the slave ship. More than 130 slaves were silenced on the original ship. And silently they exited, leaving us to face the slave ship.

Nihilism and God (or Not)

Nihilism is commonly associated with Nietzsche. While this makes sense, since he popularized the term, nihilism as a concept has conceptual roots further back, even to Socrates. But I’ll start in the later Middle Ages. William of Ockham, a philosopher and theologian, did not believe that the ways of God could be contained by reason.³ Other medieval philosophers, notably, Thomas Aquinas, maintained that God was *limited* by logic and his nature. In other words, God cannot perform contradictory actions or ones that go against his nature. For example, if God is loving, then he could not do anything that goes against love. Contrarily, Ockham was not satisfied with this idea; he believed that God must be completely unconstrained, which, for him, meant that nothing could limit God. Nothing could prevent God from asserting that murdering children is wrong one day, and then the next day command that everyone must murder children. Ockham, by default, believed in the irrational God, though he likely would not agree with the term “irrational.”

Following on the heels of Ockham, Descartes posits an all-powerful deceiver—possibly in response to Ockham’s irrational God. Descartes asks how we could know mathematical truths, if this great deceiver can suddenly change the rules. And he famously admits that he could possibly be deceived about everything, except the fact of his existence. I doubt; therefore, I must exist in order to doubt. Nolen Gertz comments, “Descartes knows of his predicament, but knowledge of his situation is not enough to help him escape from it.”⁴ Descartes accepts his doubt, while holding onto his beliefs about reality and God. These two brief examples—Ockham and Descartes—illustrate a development of nihilism in a religious context, which helped contribute to the future of nihilism. While I’m not suggesting we have to accept these versions of God and the world, I’d like to set up the question about what could ground hope, and how art plays a critical role in it. If these extreme views of the relationship between God and the world were true, then could people still have hope? Or if there is no God, could people still have hope? If there is a God, and everyone is certain about this fact, then these issues would not arise. We could simply have hope that this God will fix everything someday.

The question of life’s meaning became acutely prominent during the 19th and early 20th centuries. If God is dead and we are left in the repetition of rolling the rock over and over again, could life have meaning or purpose? And if it has no purpose, can there be hope? Albert Camus began his exploration of *The Myth of Sisyphus* with the statement, “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.”⁵ Whether life is worth living—forget whether we examine it or not—is the fulcrum on which everything else moves. While a lack of hope is often associated with nihilism, rarely do people work with a fuller understanding of what nihilism means, more likely settling for simple or popular definitions. And with that, I’ll begin with the first of the three stages of nihilism.

Religious Nihilism – Faith Precedes Hope

Rather than seeing a world without any value, the nihilist might comprehend some absolute values but realize that they are far too lofty to ever realize in the current state of affairs. Instead of losing heart or giving up, the religious nihilist maintains that there is some future time—either in this world or beyond it—where the absolute values will be realized (eventually!). Despite the title of this stage, it does not necessarily have to involve religion. It involves something that is beyond. This might be interpreted as beyond this world (hence, religious), but it could also involve the belief that a future state of affairs will bring about the desired values (i.e., beyond the present).⁶ When Nietzsche criticizes the utopian philosophies of anarchists, Christians, and Socrates as ‘nihilism,’ he expresses his own dissatisfaction with their pictures of the world. He finds them in conflict with his own desires and wants concerning life in the here-and-now.⁶ By holding those beliefs, Nietzsche thought they were proclaiming this world or current state to be meaningless.

In this stage, the nihilist believes that the values are indeed real; they are just not realized yet. While everyone might not, perhaps, realize them, at least some people will. Many Africans, for example, did not live to see their freedom in America; especially illustrative are those depicted in Turner’s *Slave Ship*. But the religious nihilist posits the valueless nature of the world in its current position, and this position is different from the

belief that the world is simply becoming. Without the external source of value, the world in itself would not be valuable. Any value the world has depends on the other- and future-worldly value. This might be, in part, what Nietzsche means by saying that the values devalue themselves.

As an example of religious nihilism we can turn to Flannery O’Connor’s story “The River.” Water symbolizes both life and destruction. We see its destructive power in Turner’s slave ship painting. Its life-affirming power is often utilized in religious contexts, e.g., Christian baptism. O’Connor describes a young boy who is taken off by a sitter for the day; she explains to the mother who is ill (with a hangover) that she’ll take the boy to a baptism in the river. Shortly after their arrival, the boy hears the preacher talking about leaving one’s pain in the healing river. The boy agrees to be baptized because he wants to matter. He returns home and doesn’t see anything changed, so he goes back to the river alone to find the Kingdom of Christ. He submerges himself into the river and drowns. The religious nihilist is always looking for the future kingdom (or heaven) to experience the absolute values that are missing from this world. This de-values the ‘values’ of this world. The water in this story was both destructive and—according to theology—redemptive. The boy died, but his soul would enter into the kingdom.

What hope can come on this view of the world? An unknown New Testament author proclaimed that faith is the substance of things not seen. If something external to the world gives it value—eventually!—then it must require faith to hope in it. Per this definition, the hope must be placed in this thing that cannot be seen. Otherwise, we could hope in something visible, and, perhaps, present. But this hope is necessarily future-looking. Whether Nietzsche explicitly said so, the religious nihilist must have faith in God, in a political system, or in some other future condition. The world in its current state is not whole, but it will be good one day. It may even become perfect, though that is not essential for the religious nihilist.

Radical Nihilism – No Faith, No Hope

Nietzsche wrote: “*Radical nihilism* is the conviction of an absolute untenability of existence when it comes to the highest values that are acknowledged; added to this, the *realisation* that we have not the slightest right to posit a beyond or an in-itself of things which would be ‘divine’, which would be morality incarnate.”⁷ Here, Nietzsche shows that rather than giving hope, the attempt to posit the highest values actually makes life here unbearable. Radical nihilism is the closest stage to what many imagine when they hear the term ‘nihilism,’ especially in its most melancholy forms. But the radical nihilist still wishes for the highest values, but knows that they are not possible. In fact, many of the early Russian nihilists wanted to ruin the political system, but they didn’t have anything to replace that system. But they believed destroying the system was still the first step.

This knowledge of the division between the values and the world translates into everything being meaningless. As Camus wrote: “A nihilist is not one who believes in nothing, but one who does not believe in what exists.”⁸ The radical nihilist is the only one out of the three stages that recognizes himself as a nihilist. The other two—religious and complete—do not see themselves as nihilists. To reiterate, the radical nihilist doesn’t reject the highest values, but finds nothing in the world that corresponds to them.⁹

This level of nihilism consists of a leveling of values, to borrow a term from Kierkegaard. However, leveling for Kierkegaard involves suppressing the individual, so that no value is left. The radical nihilist, on the other hand, asserts the nonexistence of these values from the beginning, without denying them outright. In a sense, you might say the radical nihilist posits their nonexistence because it makes more sense out of human experience.

In the novel and film *Deliverance*, most people have heard about the ‘infamous scene,’ involving two men from the woods forcing sexual acts on two of the four men from the city. These four men wanted respite from the hectic lifestyle of the city. Defending their friends, the other two city men killed one of the men from the woods, and the other one ran off. The four discussed what to do, whether to report this killing to the authorities or not. Drew (played by Ronny Cox) insists that they must turn themselves in because it is a matter of the law. Lewis (played by Burt Reynolds) yells out, “What Law?” Lewis has some other worries about defending himself in front of the dead man’s family, but he also implies that there is a different order in those woods. In the same way the radical nihilist believes that people can never reach the absolute values. Lewis protests that the same societal values are not reachable in those woods.

Hope cannot survive on this stage of nihilism. There would be nothing on which to place hope. The very notion of attempting to hope would be meaningless, like Sisyphus wanting to find rest. The radical nihilist can have *ideas* of absolute values and begin to judge the world according to those ideas, but everything comes up short. Everything is condemned. “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.”¹⁰ Radical nihilism appears to be something that needs to be overcome.¹¹ This might be the stage at which many people would be prone to commit suicide. If life is devoid of the highest values and one cannot hope to achieve them, then it is useless to continue. If the very nature of the world is immoral, then human beings can’t have hope.

This stage of nihilism must be overcome. One overcomes by “denying that the world requires ‘purpose,’ ‘unity,’ or ‘truth’ of the sort affirmed by religious nihilists.”¹² It is through this denial that one devalues the highest values and returns to the original state of innocent becoming. This leads to the third stage.

Complete Nihilism – Hope Precedes Faith

After religious and radical nihilism, the third stage is complete nihilism. In some ways this stage seems like a moderate position between the other two stages. As the religious nihilist finds the justification for the world beyond the world in its current state, the radical nihilist searches for the justification but judges the world to be condemned. The complete nihilist, however, moves into a third position. “One must be beyond the demand for justification, and when one is beyond that, one no longer condemns the world as defective.”¹³ Something can only be defective when there is a standard by which to judge it. But if there isn’t a standard (or we cannot know the standard), then we cannot make the judgment that it is defective. The question concerning the world’s justification is confronted with a spirit of resignation. The complete nihilist resolves not to think this mystery is something that needs to be solved. It’s not even a mystery. This is why we might think of this stage as *completed* nihilism.

The nihilist moved through these stages from locating the highest values in something beyond the world to believing the values are unattainable. Now, the complete nihilist decides that the question itself is not worth asking. Overall, it seems to be a very pragmatic position. By ignoring the question of the highest values, the complete nihilist lives a life filled with trying to find whatever value he or she can acquire. The complete nihilist values the present in a way that neither of the previous two stages do. The religious nihilist looks to the future, and the radical nihilist finds no value. But valuing the present does not preclude being concerned with the future. It means that the complete nihilist is not continually waiting for the next state of affairs; this nihilist finds value in the current state as well. Neither present nor future is automatically more or less valuable for the complete nihilist.

Two ideas from literature help to bring out the idea of the complete nihilist. First, among a group of people in Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*, they are discussing what could give life meaning, if there isn’t a God. And it is recounted that Myshkin had said that beauty will save the world. While one could see this as a future beauty only, it can more easily be read as beauty in the present as well as a possibility for the future. Beauty has a way of giving value (and meaning) to life in the current moments, even when they involve suffering. But we do not have to persevere until we transcend the present to another world or state of affairs.

Second, the sea can be an overwhelming presence when you cannot see across it, or if you are trying to swim in it. Turner’s painting highlights this overwhelming aspect as people are being thrown into it. However, the same sea can also be a respite from the absurdity as illustrated in Camus’ *The Plague*. Ravaged by exhaustion from the plague, Tarrou and Rieux go for a swim, a harmless pleasure. Commenting on the decision to swim, Tarrou remarks, “Really, it’s too damn silly living only in and for the plague.”¹⁴ With that comment, Tarrou managed to sum up the general attitude of the complete nihilist. There might not be an ultimate meaning or purpose in this life (let alone a meta-narrative), but we can live for other things. Even if life is meaningless and absurd, we can still find small pleasures and hope in simple things, like swimming.

Hope and Nihilism

We can see that nihilism might not be as far removed from hope, as it is commonly mischaracterized. The popular understanding presents nihilism as the belief that there is no ultimate value. Very crudely, some might say it is the belief *in nothing*, that nothing really matters or gives meaning to life. There could be no hope in a nihilistic framework. But this isn’t quite accurate. Nihilism comes in different forms, or as Alan White claims, three stages. The nihilist can believe, quite vehemently, in some kind of absolute value. This ‘religious’ nihilism has a “high risk/high reward” kind of hope—sacrifice it all to gain a better life. Radical nihilism has no hope—we cannot reach the highest values. Lastly, complete nihilism has an incremental hope—people achieve values and pleasures in differing degrees across the span of their lives. The problem, therefore, isn’t a lack of hope or value, but whether the chasm between that value and our lives can ever be breached. Hope remains intimately tied to nihilism in each of its forms, as an opposing mode of thought.

A careful analysis of the core nihilist thinkers—which was well beyond the scope here—produces a different picture than our popular stereotypes. Rather than denouncing value, nihilism is better understood as the human response to the inability to reach those values. It's not difficult to imagine the frustration of an artist who feels that his or her work never quite achieved a particular vision. Most people feel as though they didn't accomplish everything they wanted. Plus, anything that seems good has the potential to be taken away or destroyed (or at least tainted), but there is a deeper, existential crisis at work here. People *want* to experience some kind of ultimate truth, goodness, or beauty. The world, however, prevents this from happening, and art pushes hope back into our lives. While the world will never be as we think it should be, we have the power to make it beautiful and better.

Alan White posited three stages of nihilism—religious, radical, and complete—in his “Nietzschean Nihilism: A Typology.” While nihilism seems like an odd framework in which to talk about hope, through a contrast with these stages, a dialectical notion of hope emerged. Hope plays a different role for each of them, so we might even consider this as an interpretation of three kinds of hope, which we could tentatively call future hope, hopelessness, and present hope, which hopefully has become clear.

Conclusion: Art Inspires Hope

With these three stages, we can see that hope finds its basis in change, which is tied to chance. I want to believe, like the *religious* nihilist, that one day there will be something that makes sense of everything. It's like the man who approached Jesus in the Biblical story, and he declares that he believes but asks for help overcoming his unbelief. It's an interesting typology of the conflict here. Solving the question of the ‘meaning of life’ is not necessary. Trying too hard to figure it out might actually be counter-productive and lead to the second stage, radical nihilism. Putting all your eggs into the basket of a given ideology could cause extreme disillusionment, if an occurrence (or lack thereof) suggests that the ideology is not correct. What do we do here in this life? Maybe the answer is illustrated by boys singing in front of *The Slave Ship*; we defy—not ignore—the conflict between the world and values.

The complete nihilist looks to moments in the present to make life worth living, to give it some meaning through pleasures. We have some basic pleasures that seem pertinent; for example, friendship, knowledge, and aesthetic experience. These are things that people actively seek in their lives, albeit in some very different ways. People enjoy companionship and learning new things. The beauties of art and nature are also fundamental pleasures that people exert effort to experience. And this is part of the value that art brings to our lives. Standing in Gallery 251 at MFA, Boston, people were united by the pleasure of beautiful voices before a beautiful painting. The sound echoed off the walls and the light allowed color to radiate. It was not enough to overcome the events that inspired Turner's painting, but it reminds us, like the complete nihilist, that we can still find pleasure and hope in the present.

Many things could be said about the benefits or value of art, since art is not static. But I suggest that one of the main things is hope. Chaplin claimed that if he had known how

terrible the concentration camps were that he could not have made *The Great Dictator*, but his film took some of the power away from the real dictator. It was a risky film that created a little hope, a brief respite from the confusion and fear. People are engaged in the continuous experiment of creating works of art for a variety of purposes that bring a kind of hope that respects the complete nihilist, even if these works also attempt to push for something beyond like the religious nihilist. Returning to the slave ship, those enslaved people that eventually made it to America had to then deal with the horrors of slavery. And one thing that helped them endure was their music. “If we think of African music as regards its intent, we must see that it differed from Western music in that it was a purely *functional* music.”¹⁵ Perhaps, as a function, art helps us to invent hope.

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Notes

¹ Thank you to Crispin Sartwell for helpful suggestions on a draft of this paper.

² *Hope Coming On* was performed on September 28, 2016 at Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

³ The idea that nihilism has connection to Ockham comes from Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁴ Nolen Gertz, *Nihilism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019), 20-21.

⁵ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and other Essays*, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1983), 3.

⁶ John Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing: Humor as a Response to Nihilism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003), 72-73.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, edited by Rüdiger Bittner, translated by Kate Sturge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 205.

⁸ Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, translated by Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage International, 1984), 69.

⁹ Alan White, “Nietzschean Nihilism: A Typology,” in *International Studies in Philosophy*, 19:2 (1987), 31.

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, translated by Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 318.

¹¹ White, 33.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 34.

¹⁴ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, translated by Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage International, 1975), 256.

¹⁵ LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999), 28.