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## Nihilism in Seamus Heaney

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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Nihilism in Seamus Heaney

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I WISH TO BEGIN WITH THE WORDS of Nietzsche's madman as he makes his famous appearance, running into the crowded marketplace in the bright morning with his lit lantern in his hand, crying out his proclamation of the death of God: "'Where has God gone?' he [cries]. 'I shall tell you. We have killed him—you and I. We are all his murderers.'" He calls out in despair to the bemused and indifferent crowd his rhetorical questions:

How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained the earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? <sup>1</sup>

These words of the madman express the abyss of despair experienced on the realization that God is dead, the state of desolation which articulates what Nietzsche himself understood to be the consequences of the triumph of the Enlightenment. But these words of despair sum up more than that; they sum up the underlying problems of Nietzsche's age, and indeed our age: the basic mistrust of all previously held systems of value; the collapse of all ordering principle; and the erosion of the authority of tradition. In other words, reason has revealed the inadequacy of tradition, and has itself lost the ability to provide us with **[End Page 405]** any reliable means of evaluation—since any such evaluation must be based on the very principles which are themselves under attack.

This stark realization of the absence of all sense of meaning in values previously held to be true leads to the condition that Nietzsche calls "nihilism," (Latin *nihil*, "nothing"), the condition that he considered to be the central problem of Modernity. This condition, Nietzsche believed, is brought about by the realization of three factors: first, the loss of faith in what he calls a "'meaning' in all events," a loss which contributes to an experience of aimlessness; second, the realization that there is no inherent pattern to the world or to history that can lend universal coherence; and third, the loss of faith in the existence of a stable world of being which can be evaluated according to steadfast, enduring principles. The rejection of these three categories, which Nietzsche terms "aim," "unity," and "being," leads to an experience of a world that appears "valueless," in other words, the experience of nihilism. <sup>2</sup>

Nietzsche, whose thought was considered by Heidegger to be the "final thought of Western metaphysics," <sup>3</sup> is seen as a heralding voice of postmodernism. <sup>4</sup> In this respect, Nietzsche's "death of God" can be seen to be about the death of modernist philosophical presuppositions, the death of the logocentric metaphysics of presence. But, parallel with the notion of crisis that Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God expresses and the ensuing critique of "metanarratives" which his thought has helped to give rise to, <sup>5</sup> Nietzsche's declaration of crisis can also be seen as a statement of faith. His interpretation of the problems of our age, while on the one hand "negatively" proclaiming the death of God and denying the possibility of shared meaning—or in Lyotard's terms "the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable" (p. 81), can, on the other hand, be viewed in a more "positive" light. The term "nihilism" itself, as Nietzsche has shown us, is ambiguous, comprising both the concepts of what he termed "active nihilism" and "passive nihilism," which involves a complex interplay between the dual forces of affirmation and negation (*WP*, p. 22).

As the Italian philosopher, Gianni Vattimo, points out, the most general distinction between these forces can be seen in terms of "strength of spirit," where nihilism is considered as both "a sign (*Zeichen*) of the strengthened power...

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by IRENE GILSENAN NORDIN

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