MODERNISM AND NIHILISM

Shane Weller

palgrave
macmillan

CONTENTS

Introduction: Modernity, Modernism, Nihilism 1

Part I: Philosophical Modernism and Nihilism 15

1. From the French Revolution to Nietzsche 17
2. Nietzsche's Long Shadow 42

Part II: Aesthetic Modernism and Nihilism 75

3. From Flaubert to Dada 77
4. Kafka and After 102

Part III: Postmodernism and Nihilism 137

5. Our Only Chance? 139

Bibliography 166

Index 177

INTRODUCTION: MODERNITY, MODERNISM, NIHILISM

In the field of modernism studies, it has long been the accepted practice to consider modernism primarily, if not exclusively, as an aesthetic phenomenon. As Roger Griffin argues in *Modernism and Fascism* (2007), however, there are also philosophical and political forms of modernism, and if one wishes to move towards a more comprehensive understanding of the movement, then one has to analyse all three forms in a manner that takes account of their relation to one another. The second major claim made by Griffin in his work on fascism is that modernism in this broader sense is to be understood as a reaction against a modernity that is seen to have passed from a revolutionary, progressive phase in the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century, to a decadent and ultimately nihilist phase in the later nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. In short, modernism is a 'revolt against decadence', an attempt both to destroy that which, in the realms of philosophy, politics, and aesthetics, no longer effectively bestows shape and meaning on experience, and to find 'new sources of meaning, spirituality, and communality' (Griffin 2007: 52). At their most fundamental level, all forms of modernism, be they philosophical, political, or aesthetic, are committed to the idea of palingenesis, to the rebirth of culture in a form that is uncontaminated by the spiritual sickness besetting modernity.

As David Harvey remarks, however, modernism is 'a troubled and fluctuating aesthetic response to conditions of modernity produced by a particular process of modernization' (Harvey 1989: 98). These fluctuations are nowhere more evident than in the history of modernism's relation to the concept of nihilism. If one is to begin to grasp in its complexity the relationship between modernity, modernism, and nihilism as a whole, then, as we shall see, the conjunction

of modernism *and* nihilism has to be understood in two, seemingly antithetical ways: on the one hand, modernism *versus* nihilism, and, on the other hand, modernism *as* nihilism. Before one can begin to analyse the various, historically specific ways in which modernism and nihilism are thought as being opposed to, or identical with, one another, however, it is of course first necessary to establish preliminary definitions of our three key terms.

Modernity

Although the debate concerning both the nature and the historical parameters of modernity is far from having been settled, for the purposes of the present work modernity is to be understood as that epoch in which the dominant values are those of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, with the core value being reason. Griffin offers the following helpful list of the principal elements constituting modernity, including the crucial role played by technology therein:

> the spread of rationalism, liberalism, secularization, individualism, and capitalism, the cult of progress, expanding literacy rates and social mobility, urbanization and industrialization, the emergence of the urban middle class (capitalist) and the working (rural and proletarian) classes from a feudal structure of society, the growth of representative government and bureaucratization, revolutionary developments in communications and transport, geographical discoveries and imperial expansion, the advance of secular science and ever more powerful technology and technocracy. (Griffin 2007: 45–6)

According to Fredric Jameson, modernity thus conceived may be described as a 'catastrophe', since it 'dashes traditional structures and lifeways to pieces, sweeps away the sacred, undermines immemorial habits and inherited languages, and leaves the world as a set of raw materials to be reconstructed rationally' (Jameson 1994: 84). This conception of modernity derives in large part from that of the Frankfurt School, and, in particular, from Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). As Jameson observes of this key work of philosophical modernism, in which modernity is submitted to the harshest of dialectical critiques: 'the scientific ethos of the *philosophes* is dramatized as a misguided will to power and domination over nature, and their desacralizing program as the first

stage in the development of a sheerly instrumentalizing world-view which will lead straight to Auschwitz' (Jameson 1998: 25). According to Horkheimer and Adorno, modernity finds its consummation in Nazism as a form of radical nihilism the origins of which lie in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which, they argue, embraces both Kant and Sade. While modernity may have undertaken 'the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy', it has also led inexorably to a world that 'radiates disaster triumphant' (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 3). But if, on the one hand, the Holocaust can be seen as the consummation of the nihilism of *modernity*, it can, on the other hand, also be seen as the consummation of the nihilism of *modernism* as a reaction against the very conditions of modernity. This latter view is the one taken by Griffin, who sees the Holocaust as an extreme consequence of the logic of 'creative destruction' to which fascism (as a form of political modernism) committed itself (Griffin 2007: 182).

As for the commencement of the epoch of modernity, most commentators date this to the late eighteenth century in Europe and to what Griffin terms the emergence of 'the reflexive mode of historical consciousness which legitimated the French revolutionaries' fundamentalist war against tradition' (51). There are, however, those – among them some of the key deployers of the concept of nihilism in their modernist critique of modernity – who locate the origins of modernity much further back. Indeed, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Friedrich Nietzsche, who is undoubtedly the most important figure in the history of the deployment of the concept of nihilism, divides the history of the West into two principal epochs: the 'tragic' age of pre-Socratic Greek culture, and the 'modern' age that commenced with Socrates as the first embodiment of 'theoretical man', committed to reason as the sole means to achieve an understanding of the world. Martin Heidegger, whose thinking of the nihilism of modernity is profoundly indebted to Nietzsche, makes a similar distinction between two epochs: pre-Socratic Greek and modern.

If the origins of modernity are a matter of dispute, the same is also true of its end. The most widely accepted view is that a transition from modernity to postmodernity occurred in the mid-twentieth century, with the end of the Second World War, and in particular the disclosure of the facts of the Holocaust, marking the epochal border, the moment when what Jean-François Lyotard terms the 'grand narratives' of Enlightenment modernity were no longer sustainable

(see Lyotard 1984). Robert Eaglestone, for instance, argues that 'postmodernism in the West begins with thinking about the Holocaust' (Eaglestone 2004: 2). As we shall see, however, when one considers their respective relations to the concept of nihilism, any clear distinction between modernity and postmodernity, or between modernism and postmodernism, is rendered highly problematic.

Modernism

As a critique of modernity, Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* belongs to a tradition of philosophical modernism the origins of which Griffin locates in the second half of the nineteenth century, after the various failed revolutions of 1848. It was at that time that modernity, which had until then generally been seen as progressive, moving in the direction of an ever more enlightened future, began to be seen as a failed project (see Griffin 2007: 45). And this sense of failure was only reinforced by the experience of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1. While this view of the modernist reaction to modernity tends to sideline romanticism as the first major critique of modernity, and thus to obscure to some extent the connections between romanticism and modernism, Griffin is arguably right to claim that, with the publication of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* in 1872, the modernist critique of modernity goes 'beyond the sphere of aestheticism and contemplative philosophy to the realm of cultural criticism and metapolitics, the antechamber of social and political action' (94). This turn to metapolitics does not leave the aesthetic behind, however, since Nietzsche's critique of the modern age privileges art as 'the highest task and truly metaphysical activity of this life', and insists that 'it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*' (Nietzsche 1967: 31–2, 56). In the aftermath of the First World War, and in no small part on account of the growing influence of Nietzsche in Western Europe, the urgency of the modernist critique of modernity increased considerably across the philosophical, political, and aesthetic fields. The sense of modernity as desacralization, or as what Max Weber termed 'disenchantment' (*Entzauberung*), resulted in the interwar years in a range of resacralizing modernist projects, ranging from the various European avant-garde movements, to the fundamental ontology of Martin Heidegger, to Italian fascism and German Nazism.

As for aesthetic modernism, 1857 stands out as a decisive year, since it saw the publication of both Charles Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Both of these works were generated in part by what Jameson describes as a 'new and unadorned experience of time' – that is, time conceived both in its measurability (the working day) and as 'the deep bottomless vegetative time of Being itself, no longer draped or covered with myth or inherited religion' (Jameson 1994: 44). Following in Walter Benjamin's footsteps, Griffin identifies Baudelaire as 'one of the first Europeans to combine the description of modernity as a world that has lost its ordering principle and mythic centre – a world of "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent" – with the recognition that the artist's task is to wrest from it a sense of transcendence: "the eternal, the immutable"' (Griffin 2007: 92). As we shall see in the second part of this book, the privilege accorded by Baudelaire to the aesthetic in the struggle against the desacralizing tendencies of modernity recurs in various forms in philosophical, political, and aesthetic modernism in the first half of the twentieth century, and above all in conceptions of modernity as nihilist.

Although there are undoubtedly many reactionary and anti-modern elements in specific manifestations of philosophical, political, and aesthetic modernism, conceiving of modernism as a reaction against modernity does not mean that the former has necessarily to be understood as essentially reactionary in nature. Modernism as a whole is a highly complex phenomenon, combining progressive and reactionary elements and being orientated both to the past and to the future, while also insisting upon a new sense of the present. Furthermore, there are modernisms of the Left and of the Right, the differences between them often being far from easy to identify, and certainly more complex than is suggested by Walter Benjamin's distinction in his celebrated essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (1936–9) between the aestheticization of politics (fascism) and the politicization of art (communism) (see Benjamin 2003: 207).

While he sees all forms of modernism as sharing a critical attitude to modernity, Griffin distinguishes between two principal modes: programmatic and epiphanic modernism. Whereas programmatic modernism looks to remake the world, epiphanic modernism withdraws from it. As Griffin puts it, in programmatic modernism 'the rejection of Modernity expresses itself as a mission to change society,

to inaugurate a new epoch, to start time anew. It is a modernism that lends itself to the rhetoric of manifestos and declarations' (2). Epiphanic modernism, on the other hand, is characterized by 'the cultivation of special moments in which there is *Aufbruch* of a purely inner, spiritual kind with no revolutionary, epoch-making designs on "creating a new world"' (62). Put in the temporal terminology used by Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), these epiphanic moments are those 'in which the soul-destroying *chronos* of "waiting time" magically gives way to *kairos*, "a point in time filled with significance, charged with meaning derived from its relation to the end"' (Griffin 2007: 63). Griffin identifies Nietzsche as the paradigmatic figure in programmatic modernism, and Franz Kafka as Nietzsche's counterpart in epiphanic modernism. While this disposition of roles might seem to suggest that programmatic modernism finds its fullest expression in philosophy, and epiphanic modernism in art, the history of modernism suggests no such neat symmetry.

The distinction between two primary modes of modernist response to modernity can certainly help to clarify important differences in approach to the perceived nihilism of modernity, but the too rigorous application of the programmatic/epiphanic distinction leads inevitably to distortions. As Griffin points out, there are modernists who pass from the programmatic to the epiphanic mode, an example being the German poet Gottfried Benn, who in 1933 committed himself to Nazism and, after having been deeply troubled by Hitler's murderous purge of certain elements in the Party on the so-called Night of the Long Knives in the summer of 1934, 'returned to the safe haven of apolitical poetry' (65). Other major figures whose trajectory arguably carries them from programmatic to epiphanic modernism include Ernst Jünger and Martin Heidegger, both of whom came to take positions that, while not apolitical, were less obviously aligned with the extreme Right in the years immediately following the collapse of the Third Reich. Beyond such shifts from one mode to another, however, there are also instances of modernism where the distinction between the programmatic and the epiphanic does not hold, and, as we shall see, there are moments when this is the case in the work of both Nietzsche and Kafka.

Within the sphere of philosophical modernism, Nietzsche is paradigmatic above all because his critique of modernity exerts an influence greater than that of any other philosopher of the period, and because it was he who deployed the concept of nihilism to capture

the essence of modernity. There is no small irony in the fact that this influence was owing principally to the posthumous publication of *The Will to Power* (1901; enlarged edition 1906), a work that bears no resemblance to the one that Nietzsche announced under that title, but which his editors put together from material in his 1880s notebooks and the first part of which was given the title 'European Nihilism'. Key figures in philosophical and aesthetic modernism whose critiques of modernity are profoundly marked by Nietzsche's diagnosis of modernity as nihilist include, to name but a few, Hugo Ball, Gottfried Benn, Ernst Jünger, Martin Heidegger, Wyndham Lewis, Theodor Adorno, Albert Camus, Maurice Blanchot, and E. M. Cioran. If Nietzsche's influence on these figures is evident in their conception of modernity as nihilist, it is no less evident in their privileging of the aesthetic, in one form or another, as what, in a May–June 1888 notebook entry that was included in *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche terms the 'only superior counterforce' to nihilism (Nietzsche 1968: 452, 1999b: xiii. 521).

What is it about art that it should be accorded this privilege in the modernist struggle against nihilism? And can a clear distinction be made between the turn to art and the turn to myth in philosophical, political, and aesthetic modernism? It has often been claimed that the modernist critique of modernity is essentially a critique of *logos* in the name of *muthos*, and that just such a turn to myth is to be found in Nietzsche's championing of the Dionysian. Myth here would serve to bestow meaning and order on experience, to effect a transcendence of the temporal as meaningless time (*chronos*). Guy Debord, for instance, sees fascism as 'a violent resurrection of *myth* which demands participation in a community defined by archaic pseudo-values: race, blood, the leader' (Debord 1983: section 109). Griffin maintains, however, that fascism has also to be seen as modernist in its orientation towards the future; that is, in Germany, the dream of a new, thousand-year Reich characterized by health, vitality, strength, racial purity, and national unity. Fascism, he argues, 'expresses a quintessentially primordial human drive to resolve the unprecedented socio-political and *nomic* crisis through which European history was passing after the First World War by constructing a new order which would provide "healthy" Italians and Germans with a new homeland, both material and mythic' (96). As a politically modernist response to modernity, fascism evidently combines the regressive and the futural. Indeed, modernism in its philosophical,

political, and aesthetic forms is arguably characterized by just such a combination of opposing drives, and is never purely reactionary or progressive, nostalgic or forward-looking.

Furthermore, it would be a mistake to see the modernist turn to myth as necessarily identical with the privileging of art. One of the most important recent debates concerning Heidegger's thought, in which the concept of nihilism plays a decisive role from the mid-1930s onwards, is whether his understanding of art collapses the distinction between art and myth. According to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, for instance, Heidegger's readings of the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin and Georg Trakl are 'remythologizations' in which the essence of poetry (*Dichtung*) becomes *muthos* (see Lacoue-Labarthe 2007: 33). One has also to take account here of Kermode's distinction between fiction and myth. According to Kermode, 'Myth operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were; it is a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures. Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions are the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent' (Kermode 1967: 39). Crucially, fictions 'can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive', and, according to Kermode, anti-Semitism is just such a 'degenerate fiction' (39). The distinction between fiction and myth is, however, scarcely a hard and fast one, and the slippage from the former to the latter is apparent in the work of a large number of modernists on the political Right, including Richard Wagner, Ernst Jünger, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, Ezra Pound, and Wyndham Lewis.

Nihilism

Within the sphere of aesthetic modernism, the concept of nihilism has been deployed both by the champions of modernist art, including some of the artists themselves, and by those critical of aesthetic modernism. Adorno is among the most influential champions of 'radically darkened' modernist art as the only fitting response to the nihilism of a modernity governed by the principle of identity, a nihilism that leads ultimately to genocide as the 'absolute integration' (Adorno 1973: 362). In direct contrast, Georg Lukács attacks

both the avant-garde and high modernism as themselves nihilist. On the one hand, then, aesthetic modernism is seen, and sees itself, as the counterforce to the nihilism of modernity, while on the other hand it is identified as the embodiment of nihilism. And this situation is complicated further by some champions of the avant-garde celebrating that movement for its nihilism – as, for instance, Marcel Duchamp does when reflecting on Dada. In the interwar years in particular, one finds recurrent appeals to a nihilism that will clear the ground for a new cultural beginning.

In the extensive critical literature on modernism and modernity, the term 'nihilism' is generally used in a manner that implies its meaning is clear and circumscribable, and that no labour of interpretation or conceptual genealogy is required. To give just a few salient examples of this tendency: in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's widely read collection of essays *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890–1930* (1976), modernism is described as being 'an extraordinary compound of the futuristic and the nihilistic' (Bradbury and McFarlane 1976: 46); in *Modernism* (2000), Peter Childs asserts that modernism combines 'nihilism and fanatical enthusiasm' (Childs 2000: 17); and in *Modernism and Fascism*, Griffin repeatedly uses the term in relation to both modernity and modernism. On the one hand, this reliance upon the term seems fully justified, given its repeated use by many of the most influential figures in philosophical, political, and aesthetic modernism, including Bourget, Nietzsche, Spengler, Jünger, Kafka, Heidegger, Hitler, Benjamin, Adorno, Camus, Cioran, and Blanchot. What such a reliance tends to leave out of account, however, is that, with each major deployment of the concept of nihilism in the modernist critique of modernity, its meaning shifts. As Jean-Pierre Faye puts it in *L'Histoire cachée du nihilisme* (2008), nihilism is a 'variable' (Faye and Cohen-Halimi 2008: 295). In short, there is no nihilism *as such*.

With this variability in mind, one of the principal aims of the present book is to chart the nature and the implications of some of the most important redeterminations of the concept of nihilism within the spheres of philosophical and aesthetic modernism. Since its introduction into the discourse on modernity at the time of the French Revolution, targets for the charge of nihilism have included atheism, Christianity, Judaism, rationality, metaphysics, ontology, transcendental idealism, logocentrism, deconstruction, technology, democracy, Nazism, fascism, socialism, bolshevism, humanism, and

anti-humanism. It is one of the main methodological contentions of the present book that the concept of nihilism – which, as we shall see, lies at the very heart of the modernist critique of modernity – should be approached within the context of specific discourses. While it is undoubtedly owing to the influence of Nietzsche, and above all to the posthumous publication of *The Will to Power*, that the concept of nihilism occupies a central place within the modernist critique of modernity in the interwar years in particular, and while Nietzsche's influence remains the most important within the history of the thinking of nihilism in the postmodernist era, his determinations of nihilism – for there are more than one – have to be distinguished from those of many of the major figures in the history of the thinking of nihilism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. To repeat one of the underlying arguments of the present book: there is no nihilism *as such*; there are only specific deployments of the term, each of which has to be considered in its specificity, which means in its discursive context, including its relation to earlier determinations.

Some recent works on nihilism offer suggestive discriminations between various forms of nihilism. For instance, in *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism* (1988), Donald A. Crosby distinguishes five distinct kinds: political, moral, epistemological, cosmic, and existential. Political nihilism he sees as embodied by the Russian nihilists of the second half of the nineteenth century. Moral nihilism takes three forms: amoralism ('the rejection of all moral principles and the determination to live without morality altogether'); moral subjectivism ('the theory that moral judgements are purely individual and arbitrary and admit of no rational justification or criticism'; and egoism ('the view that the sole obligation of any individual is to himself' (Crosby 1988: 11). Crosby finds examples of amoralism in the outlook of the character Wolf Larson in Jack London's novel *The Sea Wolf* (1904), moral subjectivism in the chapter on 'Science and Ethics' in Bertrand Russell's *Religion and Science* (1935), and egoism in Max Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own* (1845). Epistemological nihilism takes two main forms: 'The first makes claims to truth entirely relative to particular individuals or groups, while the second holds semantic intelligibility to be entirely relative to self-contained, incommensurable conceptual schemes' (Crosby 1988: 18). Crosby identifies Nietzsche as the prime epistemological nihilist, with another important figure being Fritz Mauthner, who in his *Contributions to a Critique of Language* (1901–2) proposes a radical

linguistic relativism. Cosmic nihilism 'asserts the meaninglessness of the cosmos, either in the absolute sense of denying it any intelligibility or knowable structure at all, or in the relative sense of denying that it gives any place or support to the kinds of valuative and existential meanings to which human beings aspire' (Crosby 1988: 26). Crosby gives Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Russell as examples of major philosophers who articulate forms of such nihilism. Lastly, existential nihilism 'judges human existence to be pointless and absurd. It leads nowhere and adds up to nothing' (30). Crosby finds the mood of existential nihilism most eloquently expressed in Macbeth's speech when he realizes that he will inevitably be defeated by the forces assembled by Malcolm: 'Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player, / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more; it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.' Other writers in whom existential nihilism finds expression would include Schopenhauer, Tolstoy, and Camus. Having distinguished these various forms of nihilism, Crosby goes on to identify what unites them, arguing that, whichever form it takes, the term 'nihilism' always implies negation or denial and that each type of nihilism denies a specific aspect of human life:

> *Political nihilism* negates the political structures within which life is currently lived, as well as the social and cultural outlooks that inform these structures. It has little or no vision of constructive alternatives or of how to achieve them. *Moral nihilism* denies the sense of moral obligation, the objectivity of moral principles, or the moral viewpoint. *Epistemological nihilism* denies that there can be anything like truths or meanings not strictly confined within, or wholly relative to, a single individual group, or conceptual scheme. *Cosmic nihilism* disavows intelligibility or value in nature, seeing it as indifferent or hostile to fundamental human concerns. *Existential nihilism* negates the meaning of life. (35)

Crosby considers all but the first of these forms of nihilism as philosophical in nature, and in his own critique of nihilism takes existential nihilism to be the primary form.

In *The Banalization of Nihilism* (1992), Karen L. Carr offers a slightly different breakdown of the concept, distinguishing between epistemological, aletheiological, metaphysical or ontological, ethical or moral, and existential or axiological nihilism (Carr 1992: 17–18). Carr departs from Crosby principally in her distinction between the denial of the possibility of knowledge and the denial of the

reality of truth (both of which fall under epistemological nihilism in Crosby's schema), and in her conception of metaphysical nihilism as the denial of any independently existing world (this idea not being included by Crosby). Neither Crosby nor Carr considers nihilism in direct relation to the histories of modernity and modernism, however, and both set out to critique positions that they consider to be nihilist. In this, they join a tradition that extends back to Nietzsche and that is characterized by its attempt to diagnose the nature and causes of nihilism, and to point the way towards its overcoming.

The guest and its counterforce

The present work is distinct from previous studies of nihilism in a number of key respects. It aims to provide a critical history of the thinking of nihilism in its relation to both modernity and modernism through an analysis of explicit deployments of the term 'nihilism' in the fields of philosophical and aesthetic modernism. It is neither a critique nor a championing of nihilism, and thereby takes its distance from both the modernist and the postmodernist approaches to nihilism with which it engages. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on some of the major deployments of the concept of nihilism in philosophical modernism. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the deployment of the concept of nihilism in aesthetic modernism and in the critical literature thereon. Chapter 5 focuses on the distinction between modernism and postmodernism in their respective engagements with the concept of nihilism. As Griffin observes, Nietzsche is undoubtedly the 'outstanding incarnation' of philosophical modernism, his importance lying in no small part in his having made of nihilism arguably the key philosophical concept of the first half of the twentieth century, together with his privileging of the aesthetic as the 'only superior counterforce' to nihilism. For these reasons, Nietzsche figures not only in the consideration of philosophical modernism, but also in that of aesthetic modernism. As regards the latter, Kafka occupies a central position because he is arguably, as Griffin puts it, 'the archetypal literary modernist' (375), his importance in the present context owing to his oeuvre's having been the one around which debates concerning the relation between nihilism and the aesthetic have tended to centre.

Ideally, a consideration of aesthetic modernism in relation to the concept of nihilism would include not only literature but also

the other arts, especially painting and film. The films of the Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni, especially *L'Avventura* (1960) and *La Notte* (1961), are just one example of a body of work the critical commentary on which has raised the question of nihilism. For the most part, however, considerations of the relationship between aesthetic modernism and nihilism have focused principally on the literary, and it is to take account of this that the present work limits itself by and large to that realm. If a separate analysis of political modernism in its relation to nihilism is not offered here, this is in part because the concept of nihilism is from the outset political, and both philosophical and aesthetic modernism are political precisely in their engagement with the concept of nihilism.

It cannot be over-emphasized that the present book is not aligned with any of the determinations of nihilism considered therein, but rather considers the nature and implications of these determinations for a thinking of both modernism and modernity. If there is a lesson to be learned from the (selective) history outlined in this book, it is that none of these deployments takes full account of nihilism as what Nietzsche describes in an entry in his autumn 1885 to autumn 1886 notebook as 'this uncanniest of all guests' (*dieser unheimlichste aller Gäste*) (Nietzsche 1968: 7, 1999b: xii. 125). Indeed, the history of the deployment of the concept of nihilism in relation to both modernity and modernism – and to postmodernity and postmodernism – is characterized above all by this failure to make nihilism serve a discourse of critique. What unites almost all of the figures considered in the present work is not only their deployment of the concept of nihilism as part of a critique of modernity, but also their commitment to an overcoming of nihilism, and, crucially, their privileging of the aesthetic in one form or another as (in Nietzsche's words) the 'only superior counterforce' to nihilism.

In an earlier work (2008), I sought to chart the manner in which nihilism, in its uncanniness, returns to haunt the discourses of those philosophers and literary theorists who would make use of it in the interests of critique. In places, the present work returns to arguments made in that book, especially in the sections on philosophical modernism and postmodernism. The detailed analyses required to demonstrate the uncanny return of nihilism, and the manner in which it resists the mastery of those who would deploy it, could not be included in a short monograph the range of which is so extensive – aiming, as it does, to cover a period from the late eighteenth century

to the present day, and including both philosophical and aesthetic modernism. Nonetheless, the uncanniness of nihilism can be seen in the kinds of reversal that are charted in the chapters that follow, reversals that enable nihilism to be directed as a charge against both atheism and Christianity, socialism and fascism, humanism and anti-humanism, the East and the West, logocentrism and deconstruction, the appeal to *logos* and the appeal to *muthos*, modernity and modernism, and, indeed, nihilism itself, for, as we shall see, one form of nihilism comes to be turned against another, even if the distinction between them is anything but clear.

In contrast to my earlier work on the concept of nihilism, the focus in the present book is on the function of that concept within a modernist critique of modernity that is at once aesthetic, political, and philosophical. Particular attention is given here to the discursive and national migrations of the concept: from mid-nineteenth-century Russian political discourse (Pisarev, Nechaev) to its appropriation by Nietzsche in the 1880s, by major figures in the European avant-garde in the early decades of the twentieth century (Hugo Ball, Marcel Duchamp), by conservative revolutionaries in Germany in the interwar years (Ernst Jünger, Martin Heidegger), by 'high' modernists (Kafka, Lawrence, Lewis), by major figures in the fields of philosophy and literature in France in the 1940s (Camus, Blanchot, Cioran), by influential commentators on modernist art in the 1950s (Lukács, Adorno), and by philosophers whose work tends to be aligned with the postmodern turn (Derrida, Baudrillard, Vattimo). For each phase in the concept's migration, it has been necessary, for obvious reasons, to be selective, and I have focused on figures within philosophical and aesthetic modernism who may be considered paradigmatic.