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Processing Nihilism: The Struggle for Valuative Supremacy in Javier Marías' *Berta Isla*

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Processing Nihilism: The Struggle for Valuative Supremacy in Javier Marías' *Berta Isla*

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Nihilism is a popular and heavily studied topic which is prominently displayed in Javier Marías' novel *Berta Isla*. In this article, both Nietzschean and Heideggerian concepts of nihilism will be identified and analyzed within the context of Marías's novel. Through textual analysis, the origin of nihilism will be explored as it relates to the will to power and valuative schema of the individual. It will be suggested that nihilism stems from valuative thinking induced by the herd-mentality of a community and that the fulfillment of such is the acceptance of absolute truth grounded in being and becoming.

Keywords: nihilism, Javier Marías, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, will to power

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Processing Nihilism:

The Struggle for Valuative Supremacy in Javier Marías' *Berta Isla*

Javier Marías has been under the critical lens of literary analysts for the last four decades. His novels' success not only in Spanish but in English as well, has led him to be one of the most well-known writers of the New Generation. Having published regularly since his authorial debut in the early 1970s, Marías has been the subject of a large number of studies that involve the contemporary Spanish novel. While his biographical details will not be enumerated or discussed at any point during this essay, his writing preferences and tendencies will be as they provide needed precedence for a theoretical analysis of the nihilism found within his latest novel: *Berta Isla*.

Marías' newest masterpiece is a tale of espionage and mysterious intrigue, but unlike most spy thrillers which follow the spy and his exploits, this book follows the life of the one left behind. As anti-climactic as it may seem to write a spy novel from the perspective of one who is not immediately involved in the work of espionage, it is nonetheless a gripping portrayal of the impact that secrecy and lies have upon the life of the spy and those closest to him. Though the novel is largely from the perspective of one Berta Isla, the figure that drew my attention was the spy himself: Tomás "Tom" Nevinson¹, Berta's husband. Because Nevinson is physically absent from the majority of the novel, he is omnipresent in the fact that his choices and the consequences of such are the source of the conflict and action within its pages. In spite of Tom's importance to the story, even book reviews from reputable sources place the weight of their

¹ There will be a vacillation between Tom and Tomás throughout the duration of this essay. Though this dichotomy between the Spanish and the English names of the same character can be taken symbolically to represent the opposing natures of the individual and institutional pressures placed upon him, the switching between the two names in this essay is merely to alleviate the constant repetition of one or the other and has no intentional bearing on the implications of this present study.

analysis on Berta: the central figure of the novel (Langley). Accordingly, the deep, philosophical themes that are explored within the confines of Marías' work are largely evaluated from Berta's perspective. Michele Leber opines that the book is about "a marriage imbued with secrecy" (Booklist). Indeed, the back cover of the Vintage Español edition of the novel shores up Leber's assertion as it plainly expresses that Marías' tale is "un profundo examen del matrimonio basado en secretos y mentiras." However evident the theme of secrecy and marriage is in the novel, it did not capture my attention enough to devote an entire study to it. My aim was more abstract because I believe, as César Ferreira does, that the novel is a "tool to explore the many nuances of human nature" (Ferreira).

Human nature is, admittedly, a large topic—one that countless concourses of philosophers have dedicated their lives to understanding. Therefore, there will be no attempt at a comprehensive analysis on the totality of human nature. Instead, my aim will be to analyze one single aspect of the human experience through the lens of Mr. Tomás Nevinson: nihilism. In a thoughtful review of *Berta Isla*, UCLA research librarian for the Humanities, Richard M. Cho broached upon the nihilism found within the pages of the novel. He explained that "Marías's novels impart his own notion of nihilism" in that "our actions and choices matter infinitesimally little; cosmic meaninglessness triumphs over everything else" (Asymptote Journal). However, Cho also claims that Marías' nihilism in *Berta Isla* differs from Nietzschean nihilism, which couldn't be further from the truth. Using evidence provided within the novel I will show the Nietzschean nature of the nihilism of Tom Nevinson by highlighting his fulfillment of the Nietzschean nihilistic process and, by so doing, indicate the shifting of power between individual and institutional valuative supremacy that was so characteristic of Nietzsche's philosophy of nihilism.

Understanding Nihilism

Nietzsche observed that historically, “humans have found many different ways to convince themselves to continue living, to persist in the face of inevitable suffering and meaninglessness” (Brennan 178). Therefore, according to Nietzsche, it is natural for men to seek meaning or purpose behind their suffering because, as Kate Brennan explains, “a belief in the existence of a metaphysical realm is an effective way of detaining us in this life, of making us go on living” (Brennan 178). In the past, men have turned to the divine (divinities, nature, and empire) to find meaning and joy in their meager existence. It is in man’s construction of higher meaning that internal moral fiber finds its birth. The values that men have come to cherish and the values they have come to scorn are valued because of their historic purpose in a divinely minded society. Friedrich Nietzsche explained that the highest values are those that promote the herd-mentality, community over self, whereas the lowest values are those that promote the individual (“Natural History” 260-4). Nihilism is defined as, and occurs when, “the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer” (*Will to Power* 3). In Nietzsche’s philosophy, it is when men discover that “God is dead” that nihilism takes root, because everything that man had once valued has been found to be hollow and empty. For man, it is easier to will not to be than to will nothingness, or to not will: a feeling that this secular devaluation of the divine exacerbates (“Ascetic Ideals” 452).

In his volumes concerning the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger postulated that nihilism is the “process of devaluation whereby the uppermost values become valueless” (14). Heidegger’s distinct interpretation begs further explanation, as at first glance, it sounds rather counterintuitive that values can become valueless. However, upon applying the Heideggerian concept of values, it is plain that the very cause of man’s sense of nihilism is his

determination to interpret himself and the world around him in valuative forms. Though Nietzsche might have attributed the cause of man's despair to the imposition of the metaphysical on all human understanding, according to Heidegger he fell short of the mark when he determined that the antidote to nihilism is the positing of new values determined by each individual's will to power. Therefore, owing to the fact that "power and *only power* posits values, validates them, and makes decisions about the possible justifications of a valuation," values and valuative thinking have no power to remedy man's nihilism because it is an imposition of a foreign and exterior will upon others (Heidegger 14). This, Heidegger reasoned, made completely ineffectual Nietzsche's theory that the positing of new values in one's schema counteracts the effects of nihilism.

Having reached the Heideggerian conclusion that values and valuative thinking are the cause and catalyst of nihilism, man realizes that much of what seems to be external and transcendental is merely a reflection of an individual's will to create the world in his own ideological image (Heidegger 7). Upon receiving such a startling epiphany, men begin to understand the impotence of "every transcendent element under which [they] might want to shelter themselves" and begin to feel the despair of meaninglessness as "every effort and pursuit, every enterprise and activity, every stride on life's way, every proceeding, all processes—in short, all becoming—achieves *nothing* [and] attains nothing" (Heidegger 8, 32). It is again necessary to make the distinction between Nietzsche and Heidegger. Whereas Nietzsche felt that becoming was the way to overcome nihilism through the application of new values and ideals, Heidegger felt that becoming inhibited an individual's ability to escape the oppression of valuative thought. Simply put, Heidegger's philosophy is that becoming is nothing and that nothingness is the embodiment of nihilism. Heidegger explained that "in its literal sense,

‘nihilism’ surely says that all being is *nihil*, ‘nothing,’ and presumably a thing can only be worth *nothing* because and inasmuch as it is already null, a nothing in itself” (Heidegger 18). Nihilism or the despair of the nothing, then, is the second part of the three-step process² toward nihilistic fulfillment; for after the highest values have undermined their own power, the recognition and acceptance of the nothingness of being (nihilism) is the only logical next step one can take. The final step of the Nietzschean nihilistic process is the positing of new values (Markov 47). Thus, the three-step process of nihilism is first: the devaluation of the highest values, second: the death of one’s valuative schema as it relates to institutionalized dogma, and third: the placement of new values designed to remove the individual forever and irrevocably from within the presence of the they-self. The fulfillment of this process, then, is the fulfillment of nihilism in that nihilism is the despair that man feels when he contemplates the nothing. The true nihilist is he who embraces the nothing because he realizes that he and all those around him are “desterrado[s] del universo” (Marías 288).

Finally, there is the concept of truth which must be defined in order to complete the following analysis. As the son of a philosopher, Javier Marías was naturally inclined to contemplate the human experience with a professional interest. Indeed, many scholars agree that his works incorporate heavy philosophical themes within their pages, the most prevalent among these being knowledge and truth (Mollejo 162). In his series *Cuando fui mortal*, Marías through his protagonist concludes that the complete knowledge of everything and everyone is the ultimate source of despair and suggests that lies and deception are essential characteristics of mortal existence that provide protection against the despair of human existence (Mollejo 171).

² This three-step process of nihilism was explained by Boris Markov to be the three stages of nihilism which are the implanting of values, the removal of said values, and the positing of new values in the stead thereof (Markov 34). For the purpose of this essay, the three stages of nihilism will henceforth be referred to as the three-step process of nihilism.

Though this conclusion that ignorance is bliss has its merits when looking at the arguments of *Cuando fui mortal*, in his last novel, Mariás seems to be saying the opposite: there is no peace in lies.

Though it may seem precocious and out of place to include a discussion of truth in an analysis of nihilism, it is nevertheless essential because the nihilist stands as the Platonic figure of truth, whose sole purpose is to correctly identify the distorted shadows on the wall of the cave as false similitudes of a living reality. In essence, what a nihilist does is identify the truths of reality without placing arbitrary judgment as to its value (i.e. good and bad). Truth as seen by Nietzsche is merely the acceptance that the only transcendental element there is in life is the individual's will to power. In Nietzsche's mind, truth was the great antidote for the deceptive concept of morality which, he reasoned only "prevented man from despising himself as man [and] from taking sides against life" (*Will to Power* 4). Nietzsche's view of truth was the springboard off of which Heidegger based his theory of *aletheia*. For Heidegger, the truth is not transcendental because there is no singular truth. In Heideggerian philosophy, truth is the full disclosure of every and all situations. Only by revealing the truth from out of concealment and correctly seeing that it has been fully disclosed can an individual reach an idyllic state of being (Grahovac 244-45). Therefore, it stands to reason that transcendent elements, at least in terms of Nietzschean and Heideggerian philosophies, do not exist except as a schema that each individual creates to promote a more bearable paradigm of the world. Therefore, it is by discovering and disclosing the truth that one experiences the devaluation of the highest values and, eventually, comes to fulfill the process of nihilism.

In the ensuing essay, both philosophers' theories concerning nihilism and its processes will be included to analyze its presence and impact in the life of Tom Nevinson. I will show that

nihilism is less a concept than it is a process by which an individual sheds the values placed upon him and learns that any and all values are merely external reflections of an inner will to power. Furthermore, I will show that it is only by embracing the nothing that man can find peace and, in turn, contemplate others with genuine concern and empathy.

Processing Nihilism

Tomás Nevinson's nihilism is apparent from the very onset of the novel. From the beginning, Berta described her beloved Tom as one who "rehuía la introspección y hablaba poco de su personalidad y de sus convicciones" (Marías 19). She supposed that he felt that it was a waste of time, a child's game, a narcissistic exercise, or because Nevinson had already figured himself out (Marías 19, 543). However, these assumptions about Tom's lack of self-characterization skate around the heart of the matter. Tomás did not waste time characterizing himself in a valuative sense because he realized that those character traits that one uses to describe themselves are limited to the valuative interpretation of the community. Whether Nevinson was prideful, arrogant, or bright, it was not for others to decide how to classify him. Tomás' attitude can only be understood in the light of Nietzschean nihilism which says that the highest values of society devalue themselves once man realizes that "there is no objective order or structure in the world except what we give it" ("Nihilism"). Thus, we understand from the beginning that the nihilism of Tom Nevinson centers itself upon the idea that the individual must understand the world and others for himself through his own experiences³.

Tom certainly exemplified this nihilistic mantra of self-valuation in his studies at Oxford University. Having come from Franco's Catholic Spain, the radical youth movement of the late

³ The use of the masculine grammatical subject is employed because the subject of discussion is male. This, however, does not exclude its pertinence from women and / or gender-neutral individuals. This observation, though presented in masculine terms, is equally as applicable to women as it is to men. The same holds true for the entirety of this article.

sixties encouraged him to experiment and live his own life. This he did, mainly, through his casual relationship with a local girl named Janet Jefferys. In contrast, it would seem, to his relationship with Berta, Tom's relationship with Janet was one of "entretenimiento recíproco, algo superficial" (Marías 94). Their "entertainment" consisted in seeing each other every few days to participate in "efusiones un poco maquinales y utilitarias... [de] sexo higiénico y sin elaborar, sexo prescrito porque hay que tenerlo cada pocos días o a lo sumo semanas y quien no lo tiene es un paria" (Marías 78). Tom's engagement in this loose relationship was indicative not only of the decade in which it took place, the 1960s, but also of a nihilistic psychological mindset that "everywhere on earth nothing mattered" (qtd. Dostoevsky, Turner 375). Nothing mattered because there seemed to be no right and wrong. In England, there was no dictator to enforce Catholic morality upon Tomás Nevinson. In Spain, Tom knew exactly what he was expected to do and to become. But in England, Tom could feed his nihilism and discover what he valued. Nothing mattered for Tom in Oxford because the only thing he earnestly felt like he had chosen was Berta, his beloved *madrileña*. From the time of his separation from Berta, "the 'why?'" of Tom's actions "receives no answer"—meaning that in the absence of a higher value, the motives behind each action cannot justifiably be ascribed to anything other than the individual's will to power (qtd. Nietzsche, Heidegger 14). Put plainly, nihilism affirms that the most readily recognizable force behind each action can, indeed, be "I just felt like it" (Pippin 518). In Tom's case, his interactions with Janet were precisely because he felt like it and, though he recognized that each visit was not worth it in the end, he admitted his own powerlessness to deny his inner will to power. He remarked in his musings after his last encounter with Janet that, "sentí la urgencia, pero la verdad es que bien podría habérmelo ahorrado' ... Y a la vez uno sabe que eso no es cierto: si pudiera volver atrás sentiría de nuevo la urgencia y seguiría adelante"

(Marías 79). His experimentation with a casual relationship further convinced him of his nihilistic creed because even social status and sexual pleasure could not entice him to succumb to the herd-mentality of evaluative thought.

Though Tomás had proven himself able to maintain his individuality amid the tempest of adolescent influences via his ever-strengthening nihilism, his resolve to stay true to his schema of values would soon be tested and then destroyed by wills and powers stronger than those he then possessed. The first test of his nihilistic ideal that the individual will should be his only master came in the form of his mentor at Oxford, Professor Wheeler. Having observed Tom's aptitude for linguistics and verbal imitations, Wheeler suggests that he, Tom, use his skills to serve in the British Secret Service (henceforth BSS). He preceded his suggestion with the following nihilistic observation: "es que a todos nos influye el universo sin que nosotros podamos influir en él lo más mínimo" (Marías 65). Far from being troubled at the pronouncement of this and other similar statements, Nevinson continued the conversation with logical precision void of emotions. Whereas Wheeler sought to frighten Tom with the oppression of nothingness or encourage him with the hope of achievement, Tom expressed that his only desire is to return to Spain to live his own life. This desire produces a dualism within his nihilism; for his refusal to join the BSS indicates his understanding that there is no higher value than his own will and that a dwelling⁴ man seeks to let himself, others, and the world be and be seen for what and who they are. Nevinson recognized that should he join the BSS he would, indeed, be forcing the world around him to follow the ruling of an entity that is governed by higher values that have lost all meaning. Try though he might, Professor Wheeler could not convince Tom to violate his nihilistic creed of total autonomy.

⁴ Dwelling in this context refers to a late Heideggerian concept of Being in which a Being exists in a state of Being-with others and Being-towards-the-world mindset outside the realm of evaluative thought (Turner 380).

Once Tom refuses his mentor's offer, his will to remain autonomous is further tried when Captain Morse interrogated him for the murder of his friend Janet. When presented with the sheer amount of convincing, circumstantial evidence, the young Nevinson enters a state of panic that shatters his will to power. In other words, Tomás is presented with a genuine threat to his individually constructed moral schema: remain autonomous by refusing to join the BSS and possibly be imprisoned for the rest of his life or join the BSS and betray his most cherished belief that the values of an individual should come from within rather than without. Understandably, Tom chooses to serve and, by so doing, gives up his will to power to be consumed by the will to power of the BSS. Nevinson's unification with the BSS is symbolic of what Fyodor Dostoevsky deduced was the cause of Western nihilism⁵: "the deindividuation of people, their lostness into the they-self⁶, and the volitional sacrifice of their own personal freedom to recognize right and wrong" (Turner 383). By working for the BSS, Tom sacrifices his own personal freedom because it would not be him who would make the decisions about who he was or who he wanted to be. To the contrary, his leaders would decide everything for him: where he went, what he did, and who he was. By comparison, a true nihilist would not allow any force or entity to exert power over them because they recognize that "the Being that succumbs to fallenness is inauthentic in the sense that its Dasein is not owning up to its existence resolutely, but rather accepts its position within the they-self" (Turner 383). However, because Tom fails to assert his will to power, he acknowledges the existence of a power superior to his own, one that has the right to tell him what is right, what is wrong, and what is reality.

⁵ Western nihilism derives from Western traditional modes of valuative thought and absolute truth. In traditional logic and philosophy, the truth was based on the Platonic notion that there exists a perfect form in the metaphysical realm and that everything seen, felt, and experienced is only a shadow of the true form of the phenomenon.

⁶ This is what Heidegger referred to as herd-mentality where the individual is swallowed up in a group that reflects the will to power of the dominating authority: Christian faith, national identity, etc. In the herd-mentality, a Being is converted from a Being-in-the-world state to a Being-with-others.

Going forward, it is important to understand the gravity of the role of the BSS as it is the key to understanding the fulfillment of Tomás' nihilistic journey. As an organization specifically dedicated to protecting the British state, its primary function is to identify threats to national security using a tight network of highly trained spies. The deceit these trained agents employ is based on the notion that the matter of highest importance was the security of the state. However, the idea of national security is founded on the idea that one country's affairs supersede that of another. Herein lies the quasi-divinity of the BSS in that it metes out judgment according to its own statutes of right and wrong. Thus, the BSS with its godlike nature equates each secret agent as an apostle whose only duty is to spread the gospel of national security which requires them to report everything they see, hear, and experience to their superior, effectively calling to mind the Catholic tradition that the saints and apostles are closer to God's ear. With the eyes and ears of their agents everywhere, the BSS effectively becomes omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. Therefore, when Tom joins the BSS, he not only becomes a secret agent, he is also baptized into the holy church of the MI6 and takes the communion of his oath which ensures that his new god is always with him.

Young Nevinson's breach of his will to power is indicative of the assertion that nihilism is a process. Boris Markov explains Nietzsche's point further when he theorized that "nihilism goes through three stages. The first is the implanting of values, the second is their removal, and the third is the positing of new values" (47). Though Nietzsche had intended⁷ for the implantation of new values to be a reflection of an individual's will to power, the actual transfer of values in Nevinson's life became a reflection of the will to power of a foreign and exterior entity. As has been outlined above, Tom Nevinson had already completed the first two of the

⁷ This conclusion of intent is drawn from personal investigation on Nietzsche's philosophical works.

three nihilistic stages before the reader gets to know him. The third stage is outlined in the scenes immediately following Tom's agreement to serve the BSS: outlined, not explained. However little detail we receive about the specific new values that are being implanted into his life, the reader can nevertheless divine the presence of a higher power in the life of Tom Nevinson. This great change that has been wrought upon him is first described not by Nevinson himself, but by his wife, Berta.

Upon his return to Spain, Berta realizes that the carefree, easy-going youthful Tom has been replaced by a man who she says had become ten years older in his time away (Marías 152). At first, Tom tries to blame his sudden change of character on his sense of heightened responsibility: "No [es] nada en absoluto... Supongo que es el hecho de haber terminado a carrera. De que la fiesta haya tocado a su fin, y la irresponsabilidad" (Marías 153). Notwithstanding his assurances that everything is fine, Berta notices the weight that some unknown force had placed upon her beloved husband. In her musings about the past, she recalls a night in which she woke up to find her husband beside her, smoking and brooding. She remembers that, "sentía la respiración de alguien en vela, de alguien que cavila o que maldice su suerte en silencio, con la conciencia siempre alerta emanando una mezcla triste de insatisfacción y resignación" (Marías 147). Upon reflection, Berta is finally able to view a small portion of Tom's inner nihilism rooted in the horror of eternal recurrence with no hope of escape. This horror of eternal recurrence is usually caused by a feeling of abandonment by a divine or higher power (Markov 42). However, in Tomás Nevinson's case, his horror is caused by an all-pervading authority that stood outside of his own autonomy—an institutional authority that did not allow him to be his own master (Markov 60). It is necessary to point out that though Berta recognizes the staggering weight pressing down on her husband, she does not know its cause.

Unfortunately for her, she will never know exactly what that weight is. She will only know what Tom tells her: “tengo la sensación de que... yo no he escogido tanto como se me ha escogido a mí” (Marías 155). Cryptic though this phrase must have been for her, it is the closest she will ever get to knowing what had befallen him. This is not because he does not wish to tell her, but because he has been forced to remain silent by the BSS. Thus, they have effectively become Tom’s new god: mandating who he is, where he goes, and what he believes.

The placement of a new higher power in Tom’s life is indicative of his regression along his nihilistic journey. We understand this regression because of the forced silence that the BSS imposes on Tom who, in turn, imposes it on his wife. This silence is not only important because it is a realistic portrayal of what is required of a spy, but because Tom’s silence is the essence of nothingness. While ‘nothing’ is most commonly linked with the concepts of ‘being’ and ‘existence,’ Nietzsche links ‘nothing’ with the act of evaluation: “a belief in the idea that something is truth... [that] is associated with people’s belief in what they see and lack of belief in what they do not see” (Markov 40). Similarly, Heidegger argues that, “on closer inspection, the nothing turns out also to be the *negation* of beings. Denying, naysaying, nullifying, negation—all that is the opposite of affirmation. Both negation and affirmation are basic forms of *logos apophantikos*” (Heidegger 20). This connection between nihilism and revelation is readily found in Tom Nevinson during his talks with his wife. Unlike the Nietzschean nihilist whose goal is to reveal the world as it is, Tom opts for diversions and concealment. In refusing to answer Berta’s questions or even to acknowledge his work outside of Spain, Tomás steps backwards on his nihilistic journey as he conceals the reality of existing beings, acts, and forces and reveals only what it is permitted for him to reveal. “Lo que quiera que ocurra no habrá sido por mí, porque quienes participamos en esto estamos pero no existimos, o existimos pero no

estamos” (Marías 234). The mere fact that Tomás refuses to see the world how it really is and, instead, opts to promote the metaphorical dancing shadows he sees as reality, cripples his ability to fulfill the cycle of nihilism. For the nihilist, specifically in Heideggerian terms, correctly seeing the world and revealing the truth from amidst the chaos of concealment (*aletheia*) is of paramount importance if one wishes to remedy their deep-set nihilism (Grahovac 244-45).

Tom’s nihilistic regression is further highlighted by Berta’s divination of the external force whose mandate controls him. The first evidence of Berta’s divination comes just after her dangerous encounter with the Ruiz-Kindelán couple. For the sake of clarity, it is necessary to provide a bit of background information about the nature of Berta’s relationship with Mary Kate and Miguel Ruiz-Kindelán. Berta first met Miguel and Mary Kate one morning while at the Sabatini Gardens. They seemed perfectly cheerful and harmless at first, just an older couple without children of their own. After their first encounter, the Ruiz-Kindeláns began to appear there with increased frequency, finally making enough contact to speak in the informal “tú” to each other. Once their friendship and familiarity with Berta had reached the point that they were allowed into Berta’s home, the couple finally revealed who they were and for what purpose they befriended and targeted her. In their final meeting with Berta, they told her that they worked for Ireland’s military intelligence and that they had reason to believe that her husband “Thomas” worked for MI6, the British Military Intelligence. Shocking as this revelation must have been for Berta, it was nothing to the subtle threat to her son, Guillermo’s, life. When Berta could neither confirm nor deny what the Ruiz-Kindeláns were insinuating about her husband, Miguel began to refill his lighter with lighter fluid and “accidentally” spilled some on the sleeping infant before lighting his drawn cigarette. After retrieving Guillermo from his basket, she ordered the couple to leave, which they do after reminding her that they had said at the beginning of the meeting

that, “¿lo ves, querida Berta, como teníamos razón? Que después de hoy no nos querrías volver a ver” (Marías 197).

Though she may have had her suspicions before the fateful final meeting with the couple, afterward she knew with certainty that someone, or something, perhaps the BSS, did have control over her husband. Once the initial shock had begun to wear off, Berta makes a keen observation: “‘Cuán fácil es creer que se sabe y no saber nada’, pensé. ‘Cuán fácil estar en la oscuridad, o es nuestro estado natural. En ella, seguramente estará también Tomás, no sólo yo, no sólo yo’” (Marías 217). Shortly after making the previous comment, she further displays her understanding of the profound control that this foreign power has over her husband when she argues that he has no idea for whom he is working (Marías 233). Though Nevinson attempts to convince his wife otherwise, it is clear to the reader that Berta’s observations are correct. His ignorance is due to his own fear which prevents him from fully understanding the spurious circumstances that surrounded his induction into the BSS. Tom’s acquiescence to the offer of the BSS demonstrates, in reverse, what Nietzsche explains about a nihilist. According to Nietzsche, a nihilist is not one who gives into external pressures because they recognize that “the force within is infinitely superior” and that “much that looks like external influence is merely its adaptation from within” (*Will to Power* 41). When Tomás accedes to Mr. Tupra’s proposal, he reveals that his was the weaker will—one that does not have the fortitude to penetrate the veil of deception that Mr. Tupra had so masterfully created. Thus, being deceived, Tom commences his deindividuation into the they-self which return him, again, to a pre-nihilistic state where valuative supremacy is dictated by an external force who posits new values as a way of blinding those of weaker inner fortitude.

These new values are not meant to be blinders to those that espouse them but, rather, an enabler to help them see the world as it is and let it be (Turner 388). In the case of Tom Nevinson, however, his new values blinded him from seeing the world in any other way than how it was presented to him. From the beginning, Tomás is aware of the external imposition of reality, but he chooses not to fight it. Instead, he embraces it and, in his words, becomes a fanatic about the world view with which the BSS has provided him (Marías 432). He reasons that it is the best course of action for one such as he who is obligated to enforce a foreign will on other people. In becoming so fanatical, Tom not only consigns himself to servitude but to being an intelligent puppet with no individualized volition. Though he could not recognize this at the time, his wife could easily see through the farce and recognized the hand of the puppeteer that controlled him. Just after her husband returned home from a long absence, during which time the Ruiz-Kindelán episode occurred, Berta is barraged by a series of patriotic declarations that seemed out-of-character for her husband. Following Tom's dogmatic discourse in which she notes a heavy use of the pronoun 'nosotros,' Berta reflects "[no] esperaba oírle un discurso así, tan convencido y cargado de razón, en el fondo tan impropio de él, que había sido distraído y sin interés por conocerse, casi indescifrable para sí mismo y para los demás" (Marías 242). Distressing though this display of patriotism may have been for her at first, she soon sees through the fragile façade of conviction enough to distinguish the controlling presence of a pervasive force upon her husband. Indeed, the force of her perception startles her so much that had this exchange happened in a different time, she would have called an exorcist to exorcise the power that held sway in Tom's mind (Marías 288). This confrontation between Tom and his wife demonstrates a failed attempt at the positing of new values. Whereas the nihilist as described by

Nietzsche finds freedom from exterior forces upon the acquisition of new values, Tom finds nothing but mind-numbing control and a more stable position within the they-self of society.

Indeed, Tomás Nevinson becomes so convinced of his newly inculcated values that he betrays his original belief that nothing and no one influences the world. It is easy to locate evidence for the younger Nevinson's nihilistic creed, as he plainly explains just before Professor Wheeler suggests that he serve in the BSS. When asked by the latter "¿Qué moldea el mundo?", Tom responds, "No los actores, ni los profesores universitarios... [tampoco] los filósofos ni los novelistas ni los cantantes" (Marías 64). Tom knew that one day he, like the rest of the world could be "desterrado del universo," but the thought did not fill him with horror, at least at first (Marías 288). In fact, he never contemplated the hopelessness and meaninglessness of human existence until he became disillusioned from the values that the BSS had imposed on him. While under the enchantment of his successful career in espionage, Tom found value in the success of each mission—which value he shared with his wife when she asked why he would ruin his life in Spain to serve England. He told her, "[nosotros] somos las atalayas, los fosos y los cortafuegos; somos los catalejos, los vigías, los centinelas que siempre estamos de guardia... Alguien tiene que estar atento para que el resto descansa" (Marías 242). In so believing his supposed importance, Tomás showed a defined sense of morality⁸ which, as Nietzsche explained, "[prevents] man from despising himself as man, from taking sides against life; from despairing of knowledge: it [is] a means of preservation. In sum: morality [is] the great antidote against practical and theoretical nihilism" (*Will to Power* 4). At the height of his successful career, Tom had not only regressed in his nihilism, he had completely erased it.

⁸ Actions and identity driven from valuative thought.

However, Tom discovered that nihilism is not stationary: it is a process. Not long after war broke out on the Falkland Islands, Tomás was called back to England to, we assume, help with the war effort. Once the war finished, Berta naturally believed that her husband would soon return. But weeks, months, and then years passed and she heard nothing. Nothing from Tom, only the suggestion from his employers that she move on and assume that her husband was dead. Though she could never quite believe that her beloved was dead, Tomás himself believed it. Soon before learning about the farce that had forced him into the BSS, Tom found himself reflecting on his long absence from his chosen life in Madrid. “Lo que ahora sea será para siempre. Seré quien no soy, seré ficticio, seré un espectro que va y viene y se aleja y vuelve. Y sucederé, seré mar y nieve y viento” (Marías 422). In being declared dead, both in England and in Spain, Nevinson became a specter: drifting from place to place with no real identity or individual purpose. In this state, he came to understand what Heidegger explained about existential nihilism: “In its literal sense, ‘nihilism’ surely says that all being is *nihil*, ‘nothing,’ and presumably a thing can only be worth *nothing* because and inasmuch as it is already null a nothing in itself” (Heidegger 18). Tom’s legally being “dead” equated his existence to nothing because nothing he did was ascribed to him and everything he was came to nothing. Only by being “dead” can Tom finally comprehend the “the awfulness or the absurdity of existence” (*The Birth of Tragedy* 41). In short, Nevinson’s nihilism was reestablished by the understanding of the “terrible wisdom of Silenus”: it is better for man not to be or to will nothingness than to face the horror of an existence that amounts to nothing (Brennan 180).

Ultimately, being considered legally dead was not what convinced Tomás that his life was forfeit. Even as a specter, he still had an aim or goal to work towards that helped him anchor himself to life: “el defenso del Reino” (Marías 243). This purpose of serving the British Crown

did not come from within but came as the result of a desire for self-preservation. Nevinson only agreed to align himself with the BSS because of a certain murder conviction—a murder conviction that was not existent because the murder had never occurred. Once he realizes that the threat of prosecution never existed, Tom experiences nihilism in its fullness when the “uppermost values devaluate themselves” (qtd. Nietzsche, Heidegger 14). Everything he had dedicated his life to was built upon the lie that forced him to believe there was something transcendently more important than his life. Upon recognizing the deception that the BSS had employed to force him into their service, Tomás experiences the death of his “god” or the controlling force of his life. For nihilists, the central truth is that of the impotence of “every transcendent element under which men might want to shelter themselves” which transcendence is every seemingly universal concept or ideal is a façade of self-deception (Heidegger 8). For years, Tom was able to assuage his conscience by assigning his guilt to the BSS. Learning that he was ultimately responsible for every action brings him to a state of deepest despair and melancholy from which he is never able to escape. The true nihilism of Tomás Nevinson, then, is this: that everything he thought he was working towards and for was merely a mirage or a concealment of the truth. In the end, “the long waste of strength, the agony of the ‘in vain’, insecurity, the lack of any opportunity to recover and to regain composure—being ashamed in front of oneself, as if one had deceived oneself all too long” is what finally took its oppressive toll on the once carefree Tom Nevinson (*Will to Power* 6). Before this great and final revelation, Tom was living his life subject to the wills and desires of those more powerful than he. His existence was as a shadow projected on the wall of a cave. Once he experiences the moment of *aletheia*, Tom is able to shed the shackles of propriety and ideology to simply be in the world, to see it how it really is, and to let it and those around him be.

All in all, Tomás Nevinson's nihilistic journey of devaluing the highest values, accepting the nothingness of being, and erecting new values can be seen throughout the novel. However, the end result for him was not an antidote, as Nietzsche suggests with the positing of new values, but an enhanced sense of nihilism. In the end, the only hope for him to fulfill his nihilism is to embrace the Heideggerian idea that evaluative thinking is the cause of man's despair. By nature of his broken Nietzschean will to power, he is finally able to let himself and others be and be seen on their own terms in their natural state without the pressing urge to judge and evaluate their potential impact in British society. Without the constant need to assert himself and those he represented, Tom becomes more open and conscious of the needs and limitations of those around him. This can be seen in his procuring his own apartment separate from that of Berta's and his children, in his patience in letting Berta dictate the terms of their new relationship, and in his diligence in fostering a new bond with his children.

When Tomás Nevinson first returns to his family he was met with disdain by his son Guillermo and with fearful silence by his daughter Elisa, and with bitterness from his formerly husbandless wife (Marías 534). It would have been far easier for him to meet their bitterness with anger as he had been tricked into giving up the life he wanted to have. However, with Tom's revelation that he is ultimately responsible for throwing away his life, he is more accepting of his children and wife's less than warm responses to his return. Even before his resurrection, Tom mentally prepares himself for what is sure to be his fate when he comes to reveal himself as a living father and husband: "sé que el tiempo es siempre tiempo y el lugar es siempre lugar y solamente, y lo que es real es real para un tiempo tan solo y para un lugar solamente" (Marías 478). Having accepted that he was at one point both father and husband, he nevertheless proceeds to nurture his relationship with his wife and children "como si en verdad

fuera un intruso llovido del cielo” (Marías 534). This attitude is the heart of Tomás Nevinson’s nihilism and the evidence of his fulfillment of its processes because the true nihilist does not, as Heidegger says, try to shelter himself under seemingly transcendent values. The true nihilist accepts that there are no transcendent values and, therefore, no shame or fulfillment to be had in tying himself to them. Having fully embraced nihilism, Tomás accepts and finds peace first in acknowledging that it happened and second in choosing to live in the present without thought of the future.

Through the experience of Tom Nevinson, it is possible to divine the true antidote for nihilism. If we take it as true that nihilism is based in valuative thought, then its antidote is the recognition of absolute truth grounded in being and becoming rather than in values. This truth can transcend all barriers of time, language, and culture because it is not based in the will to power of any one individual, rather it is based on the coexistence of all beings (human, animal, and nature) in mutual harmony—not as a collective whole, but as a society of unique individuals. In effect, it is only when one realizes and comes to peace with the understanding that he exists only as an individual that nihilism is fulfilled. Tomás Nevinson articulates this thought best before he is even ready to accept it as his one and only salvation from his despair: “Y sucederé, seré mar y nieve y viento” (Marías 141). In short, Tomás Nevinson finally is—not as hero or conqueror, enemy or failure—himself.

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