

even says that the New Left's faults, which were many, did not include utopianism. If anything, he argues, America needs more utopianism and less self-satisfied realism. This may explain why at the very end he encourages the Left, which he believes is right to reject the Religious Right for baptizing the Republican Party and the Iraq War, not to throw out the baby of evangelical religion with the bathwater of George W. Bush. Stevens appeals specifically to the "evangelical legacy of social reform, including abolition and progressivism" (320). As attractive as progressive evangelicals, whether in the era of Charles Finney or Josiah Strong, may be to contemporary Americans, Stevens does not solve a fundamental dilemma—namely, that progressive evangelicalism cultivated the likes of Henry Van Dusen, Reinhold Niebuhr, and their secretary of state, John Foster Dulles. In point of fact, Niebuhr's realism may have been the most modest and restrained of American Protestant efforts to justify the United States' status as a redeemer nation.

What Stevens fails to consider is whether Americans might have been better off to pass over theology and metaphysics on the way to readings in political theory and international relations for considerations of the United States' foreign policy. After all, questions of guilt and innocence when it comes to war are much less conducive to responsible conduct by elected and appointed officials than those of order, stability, and justice (of the Aristotelian sort). If Stevens had spent more time reflecting on what Thucydides rather than Jesus has to teach about statecraft, he might have seen that Niebuhr's major mistake was to shift the category of morality from persons (moral man) to institutions (immoral society). In which case, the way to recover a constrained foreign policy is not to aim for innocence or idealism but prudence.

NOTES FROM THE AMERICAN UNDERGROUND

Derek Turner

Under the Nihil by Andy Nowicki
(San Francisco: Counter-
Currents Publishing, 2011)

Perhaps Andy Nowicki ought to be a little worried. The Savannah-based Catholic novelist is developing something of a habit of chronicling crazed men who are always on the verge of doing something utterly appalling.

In *The Columbine Pilgrim*, he gave us the unforgettable Tony Meander, a whining wretch who seeks to exorcise a whole life of inadequacies by becoming sickly obsessed with the Columbine killers and eventually replicating their actions on the tormentors of his own youth. Now he has served up for simultaneous execration and empathy another stunted soul who similarly seeks "revenge" for a lifetime of real or perceived slights. Sometimes these characters are a shade too convincing for comfort, as if some Dostoyevskian doppelgänger is crouched gibbering behind the thin veil of the narrative about to burst through into the real-life headlines.

Nowicki would appreciate the comparison because the Russian's *Notes from the Underground* has been a formative influence. That work's first lines might have been uttered by any of Nowicki's pimply protagonists: "I am a sick man. . . . I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man." But as in

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Dostoyevsky, in even the most unsparing of Nowicki's writings can be detected a deep well of compassion—for everyone trapped by modernity, a multitude of mostly First World souls swimming sadly in circles in a superficial space. Even the apparently “evil” have some depth, some breadth, some redeeming feature that makes us understand, even if we can never excuse. In the most self-aggrandizing tirades of Nowicki's most appalling creations, there is some germ of grace, a suggestion that, whatever verdict is pronounced upon him by us, there is also a higher court.

The man pressed *Under the Nihil* is unnamed, but he is a former seminarian, drawn to the priesthood more as a means of escape from reality than out of genuine vocation. The sense of having “a calling, instead of just a falling” soothes his seething personality for a time, and he even starts to imagine he might have a proclivity for pastoral work. He also has genuine, traditionalist moral scruples. Once he dreams he is an aborted fetus, and this Goya-like imagining conveys powerfully the truly terrible and squalid reality of what the world euphemizes as “lifestyle choice.” But he is eventually rejected as a priest by the “Vat 2 Old Guard *alte Kämpfer*” on the grounds of psychological unfitness. They may well be correct that he would not have made much of a priest, but it means that the single plank that might have arrested his lifelong, Luciferian hurtle to earth has been torn from under his feet.

Then an equally anonymous, if better manicured, government agent comes to see him in the hospital and offers a deal—they will pay him generously if he will consent to be a guinea pig in the trial of a secret drug called the Nihil. The Nihil is an experimental mind-altering substance supposed to remove inhibition and make American troops as heedless of death as the Islamist terrorists,

and therefore more fearsome and effective. The government man tells him, with seeming frankness, that the side effects are utterly unknown and that even his most intimate activity will be monitored. Indifferent to the pabulum of patriotism and uncaring about either money or the future, the narrator agrees out of sheer curiosity.

So he takes the Fed's dollar and begins a long game of wits with the government mannequin-monster, whose Bostonian Brahman demeanor overlays a moral void in which expediency is everything. We soon see that he is no better—and no wiser—than the “mad” narrator, and a faithful representative of his government, which, notwithstanding its PC Pecksniffian protestations, is at least as nihilistic as the protagonist. It may even be more so, because it is composed of one-dimensional “Men of Fact,” whereas the protagonist at least senses the existence of other universes, even if he cannot quite get them into focus.

Yet nihilism is ubiquitous, and the government is itself a prisoner of a *Zeitgeist* without any *Geist*. The doped-up, wired-up protagonist strikes up acquaintance with a divorcee mother and her bored and sullen daughter and treats them with atrocious heartlessness. Yet howsoever more conventional and “respectable” than he is, they have no more heart than he does, and less depth. In some unsullied segment of their beings, they know this and hate themselves and their world—like the Blackberry-scanning mothers he observes sitting in a park “secretly hoping for a disaster or a calamity to give their coddled existences meaning, purpose, and direction.”

The author is plainly genuinely sympathetic toward these women, and for all who haplessly, hopelessly play the stacked cards tossed to them by the Eumenides: “all of the great, unwashed, un—Ivy League

educated, un-patrician, un-handsome, unsmiling, doomed, damned folks out in the hell-blasted realm.”

The Nihil is really a placebo, because most inhibitions have already been removed in the decivilizing West. Even the taboo against killing has weakened; recalcitrant countries are legitimate targets for drone-borne “democracy,” and fetuses are fit-for-flushing clinical waste.

The most notable exception is the fear of dying, perhaps the strongest of all instincts. This fear has if anything become stronger in the modern West, partly because of growing disbelief in any possibility of any afterlife but also—asserts Nowicki—because the contemporary West is, quite simply, not worth dying for. All that was transcendent and traditional having been or being taken out of our equation, increasingly all that is left is consumption and the “freedom” to be automata allowed only the semblance of individuation, like the “tramp-stamp” tattoo on the belly of the “pseudo-nonconformist” daughter in *Nihil*. We are longer lived and better fed than humans have ever been before, yet our culture drips with discontent—as if we were healthy but bored zoo animals pacing up and down in our enclosures, remembering dimly some bigger place. As the protagonist declares savagely as he prepares himself to die in what he hopes will

be a truly world-shaking *son et lumière*: “I kneel before nothing. I am the logical conclusion of all this ‘liberty.’ Liberty is death.”

Nowicki’s character’s manifesto is incoherent and Unabomber extreme, existing in a thankfully little-visited conceptual territory where “ultra-left” meets and melds with “ultra-right” in shared rejection of bourgeois morality. But what if that no-longer-serviceable bourgeois morality becomes finally separated from its original metaphysical underpinning, as the author worries it will (if it has not already)? What then can prevent a plummeting descent every bit as calamitous as that of Nowicki’s seared seraph? We speak facilely of “the clash of civilizations,” but behind that genuine geopolitical gulf there is also the looming likelihood of a clash *within* our civilization. Implicit in *Under the Nihil* is the idea that we need somehow to reinvest our culture with substance, by celebrating rather than apologizing for our folkish, classical, and Christian antecedents and the extraordinary historical achievements that have arisen from that heritage. We are not nothings, but somethings—somewhere men and women, heirs of a great estate to which we owe allegiance. Nowicki bookends *Nihil* neatly with the same timeless demand from the clearly not completely mad King Lear: “Nothing will come of nothing; speak again.”