

Review of *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life*, by Hugo Ott (trans. Allan Blunden; New York: Basic, 1993), *Deconstruction of Literature: Criticism after Auschwitz*, by David Hirsch (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1991), and *Heidegger's Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany*, by Hans Sluga (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1993).

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Post-World War II philosophy, like Postwar politics, has been fundamentally shaped by the work of a seminary dropout. Stalin spent several years at the Tiflis Theological Seminary reading radical Marxist propaganda, until he was expelled in 1899 for failing to take examinations. Likewise, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), granddaddy of existentialism, was originally destined for the Roman Catholic priesthood, and his earliest works were studies of scholastic philosophy. Julien Benda was more literally accurate than he might have imagined when he wrote of the *trahison des clercs*.

One of the many virtues of Hugo Ott's recent biography of Heidegger is the prominence given to the philosopher's thorny relationship with the "system of Catholicism". This, together with what Heidegger called the "failure of the rectorship" at Freiburg, provide the coordinates of Heidegger's political and intellectual life.

Heidegger began as a "postulant who sought entry to the Society of Jesus, [a] student of Catholic theology and lecturer in Christian (which is to say, Catholic) philosophy..., whose staunchly Catholic origins—his father having been sexton at Messkirch—were clear beyond a shadow of doubt" (p. 98). Personal and academic conflicts with Catholic scholars and officials, however, left Heidegger permanently disabled by a bitter anticlericalism. His marriage to a Protestant doubtless exercised some influence. Philosophically, he came increasingly under the influence of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology. As a result of these intellectual and personal transformations, sometime between 1917 and 1919, Heidegger "abandoned the faith of his birth."

Ott characterizes Heidegger's later religious views as a “broadly Protestant band [sic?] of Christianity” (p. 382). Heidegger himself said that he remained a Christian. In a letter to his friend Engelbert Krebs in 1919, Heidegger wrote, “Epistemological insights applied to the theory of historical knowledge have made the *system* of Catholicism problematic and unacceptable for me—but not Christianity *per se* or metaphysics, the latter albeit in a new sense” (quoted on p. 106). Elsewhere, Ott says that Heidegger “regarded himself as a member of the Catholic church all his life” (p. 118), and records that his funeral was Catholic.

From the evidence Ott provides, however, it is more accurate to say that Heidegger abandoned orthodox Christianity altogether. Krebs recorded in his diary a conversation with Frau Heidegger in which she explained that both she and Martin had “ended up thinking along Protestant lines, i.e. with no fixed dogmatic ties, believing in a personal God, praying to Him in the spirit of Christ, but outside any Protestant or Catholic orthodoxy” (quoted on p. 109). Heidegger read Schleiermacher avidly, and considered Bultmann the one person worth talking to in Marburg. He accepted Husserl's premise that philosophy is properly done only when a thinker frees himself of all theological assumptions: “A 'Christian' philosophy is neither fish nor fowl, a fundamental misconception” (quoted on p. 277). There is, he wrote to a reviewer of *Being and Time*, “a necessary and absolute antithesis to all forms of Christianity” in “the *philosophical* approach to the problem of existence” (quoted on p. 163).

A pastor attending Heidegger's pro-Nazi summer camp in 1933 summarized Heidegger's argument that a philosophical critique of Christianity cannot begin with the second article of the creed:

One must start by rejecting the first article, that the world was created and sustained by a God, that what exists is merely an artifact, something that has been made by a divine craftsman. This was the origin of that false devaluation of the world, that contempt for the world and denial of the world—and the source of that false feeling of comfort and security, founded on subjective ideas about the world that are untrue compared with the great noble awareness of the *insecurity* of “existence” (quoted on p.227).

In truth, Heidegger formulated his own gnostic religion, centered on a hope for the eschatological Advent of Being, which had been forgotten throughout the history of post-Socratic Western philosophy. Ott calls attention to the prominence of the Advent theme in Heidegger's thought. In 1932, he wrote to Karl Jaspers about his hope that men were coming on the scene who “bear a distant dispensation within them” (quoted on p. 22). The following year, he was more confident: “I feel more and more that we are emerging into a new reality, and that the old era has run its course” (quoted on pp. 24-25).

Karl Lowith summed up Heidegger's shift in these dramatic words:

A Jesuit by education, he became a Protestant through indignation; a

scholastic dogmatician by training, he became an existential pragmatist through experience; a theologian by tradition, he became an atheist in his research, a renegade to his tradition cloaked in the mantle of its historian (quoted on p. 120).

Ott's middle and later chapters provide a detailed examination of Heidegger's brief term as the rector of Freiburg University under the Nazi regime. Using new archival evidence, he supports beyond reasonable doubt the conclusions of Victor Farias,<sup>1</sup> that Heidegger was an active supporter of the Nazi regime who sought to bring Freiburg into conformity with the genius of Nazism, the "leadership (*Fuhrer*) principle." Heidegger discovered in Nazism stirrings of the secular Advent for which he yearned. Though Heidegger's philosophy was not crassly anti-Semitic, Ott found evidence that Heidegger had denounced one of his Jewish colleagues, and his treatment of his friend and mentor, the "non-Aryan" Husserl, was ugly. Ott also demonstrates that Heidegger's later attempts at self-justification were distorted in many particulars and in their general thrust. More on these matters below.

Whereas Ott gives detailed attention to the life of Heidegger, Hans Sluga's *Heidegger's Crisis* is an attempt to "contextualize" Heidegger by surveying the philosophical currents before, during, and after the Nazi regime. Sluga argues that the basic philosophical division of the time was between "conservatives" (inspired by Fichte) and "radicals" (disciples of Nietzsche). This essential division existed before Hitler and continued to define German philosophy after the war. Though there are significant differences between the two traditions, both groups shared what Sluga calls a "four-fold template" of issues: a sense that the world faced a cultural crisis of massive proportions; a belief in the primordial uniqueness of the German race and in the spiritual mission of the German nation in the world-historical crisis of modernity; Germany's need for a strong leader (*Fuhrer*); and the necessity for order. Beginning with Fichte, these issues shaped much of German philosophy. Heidegger's Freiburg rectorial address rang the changes on several of these themes.

Sluga is keen to show that Heidegger was not the only philosopher to support the Nazis. Hermann Schwarz was the first philosopher to join the party in 1923; thirty joined in 1933 and forty more during the next few years. By 1940, Sluga reports, about half of all of Germany's philosophers were members of the Nazi party. He continues,

... Heidegger's action was not unique among German philosophers. We discover that other philosophers were involved for a longer time; that others were involved more deeply; that, unlike Heidegger, others had worked on philosophical ideas during the Weimar period that clearly foreshadowed the new political ideology; and that others, unlike Heidegger, were willing after 1933 to adjust their philosophical thinking to political exigencies (p. 8).

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1 *Heidegger and Nazism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

Significantly, both conservative and radical philosophers supported Hitler in an effort to seize spiritual leadership of the movement; Heidegger, like many others, wanted to “make the revolution his own.” Nazi propagandists, for their part, deployed whatever philosophical concepts and symbols supported their cause, with the result that what was called the “Nazi worldview” was nothing but a hodge-podge of incompatible ideas and folk traditions. Heidegger therefore was not *the* philosopher of Nazism.

So far, so mediocre. It is worth knowing that Heidegger was not alone in his errors. As Sluga himself recognizes, however, the continuing interest in Heidegger's Nazi activities is an index of his relevance in contemporary philosophical discussion. Knowing that Alfred Baeumler, Ernst Krieck, and Nicolai Hartmann supported the Nazis from various viewpoints and to varying degrees may win a round of Jeopardy, but such names are far from common currency, even in Paris or New Haven. If, as Heidegger himself claimed at the time, his political activities grew out of his philosophy, the influence he exerts today is no trivial matter.

I became suspicious of Sluga's agenda already on page 5, where he states that “History is not a moral institution, the past does not repeat itself, and what is gone remains untouched by ethical judgment. The only significant function of moral judgments, it has been said wisely, is to direct future actions; to use them retrospectively is an idle, ineffective, and ultimately self-serving maneuver.” Several decades removed from Heidegger, “we can see that the most valuable lessons to be learned are obscured by too much attention to the moral dimension” (p. 6). That “too much” nicely enables Sluga to evade the poverty of his philosophy of history: *Some* attention to the moral dimension of history is OK, just not *too much!* His position is, of course, nonsense. What alternative do we have to making moral judgment about the past? How, pray, does one apply moral judgment to future actions? Indeed, might not the practice of making moral judgments about the past train us to make better decisions in the present and future?

Suspensions multiplied when I read this in Sluga's discussion of the destructive modern habit of overreacting to crises:

Nietzsche's vision of the approaching crisis of nihilism has proved equally elusive. Christianity, whose imminent collapse he predicted, is still alive. God may be dead in the minds of the philosophers, but he still lives some kind of murky life in the hearts of millions of people. If nihilism is at the door, most people have failed to hear its knocking. The world has not experienced a general loss of values. Over the last seventy years even atheists have proved themselves capable of the most rigid moralizing. We have not come to conclude that, if God is dead, then everything is allowed (p. 71).

I have no wish to be a crisis-monger, but this paragraph is as colossal a misjudgment as anything I've seen in recent print. Such insight comes, perhaps, only from those who limit ethical judgment to future actions.

Operating with these assumptions, it is not surprising that Sluga can find significance in the fact that Heidegger's rectorship address "carefully refrained from talking explicitly of Hitler and National Socialism" (p. 171). True enough. Heidegger knew, though, precisely what he was getting into, and Sluga knows equally well what Heidegger did. Heidegger accepted an educational post in a regime that only a few weeks before had burned a mountain of books in Berlin's Opera Square. Sluga himself records the statement made by Heidegger in a class during the winter semester of 1933, a few months after he took over as rector: "Not doctrines and 'ideas' should be the rules of your existence. But the Fuhrer himself and he alone *is* the present and future reality and its law" (quoted on p. 144). Heidegger signed the Leipzig Proclamation in November 1933, in which a group of German academics agreed that "the National Socialist revolution is not simply the assumption of a power already present in the state by another party that has grown large enough to wield it: this revolution brings with it *the total transformation of our German being.*" The declaration ended with "Heil Hitler" (Ott, quoted on p. 205).<sup>2</sup> Long after 1933, Heidegger spoke of the "truth and inner greatness" of the Nazi experiment. When Karl Lowith suggested that Heidegger's support for National Socialism was basic to his philosophy, Lowith wrote, "Heidegger readily agreed with me" and "He also left me in no doubt about his faith in Hitler" (Ott, quoted on p. 134).

Sluga's book helpfully provides a context for understanding Heidegger's politics; but there are many points in the book where contextualization veers perilously close to exoneration. David Hirsch has described the process well: "Tristram Shandy cannot get down to talking about his birth without first talking about his conception, and he cannot talk about his conception without talking about his Uncle Toby, and of course once he starts talking about his Uncle Toby then there is no telling where he is going to wind up. This kind of contextualizing is not to contextualize but to trivialize" (p. 109).

Hirsch's collection of essays, published as *The Deconstruction of Literature*, examines the effects of Heideggerian philosophy on the study of literature.<sup>3</sup> The resulting product, in a word, is "antihumanist" criticism. Since World War II, literary theory, especially among German-influenced French thinkers and their American disciples, has moved rapidly from one "antihumanist" fad to another, from structuralism to semiotics to hermeneutics to poststructuralism and deconstruction. Among the leading tenets of the final product are:

"the dissolution of the self"; the claim that the individual is a "fiction", or that the individual is the creation of bourgeois ideology, or that the "subject" must be deconstructed; the denial of transcendence (or of the transcendent

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2 The source of this paragraph is unclear. Sluga records it as if the words were delivered by Heidegger alone (p. 144), but Ott presents the paragraph as a portion of the Declaration itself.

3 *The Deconstruction of Literature*, a wide-ranging collection of previously published essays, is not intended as an introduction to postmodern critical theory. For that, the reader might wish to consult Gene Veith's recent *PostModern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Crossway), or Allan Megill's *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

subject); and the belief, derived from Nietzsche and filtered through Heidegger, that there are no facts, only interpretation (p. 17).

Looming behind this antihumanist viewpoint is, Hirsch contends, Nazism and the Holocaust. Auschwitz provides the historical context for understanding recent literary criticism; Hirsch suggests substituting the “historically rooted term, 'post-Auschwitz'” for the “vague and misleading category, 'postmodern.’” Hirsch apparently has several things in mind when he speaks of our intellectual landscape as “post-Auschwitz”. First, Auschwitz “is the symbol of the total collapse of a high culture” (p. 85), a collapse that literature, science, and art could do nothing to prevent.<sup>4</sup> Second, Hirsch has detected “certain affinities to totalitarian ways of thinking” in postmodern theory; Auschwitz stands as a horrible reminder that bad ideas have bad consequences.

Auschwitz exercises a more direct influence as well. The ever-shifting edifice of Postwar theory has been constructed by thinkers who either actively collaborated with the Nazis (Heidegger and Paul de Man) or remained indifferent to atrocity. The theories they formulated in the aftermath of the war, Hirsch claims (with specific reference to Paul de Man), are “a useful device for creating an intricate and elaborate set of evasions that would help him nullify his own guilt-ridden past” (p. 100). It is certainly convenient for anyone who has committed gross transgressions to argue that 'value' is a fiction designed to legitimate middle-class oppression of the lower classes. If words, deconstructed, can be shown to contain their opposites, then collaboration can be—presto!—another form of resistance. If the synchronic excludes concern with the diachronic, then forgetfulness of history is a virtue. If language necessarily distorts, how can I be accountable for my particular lies?

It is important for Hirsch that Auschwitz serve not only as the symbolic background for contemporary history, but also as an actual focus of literary study. He wants to bring Holocaust literature into the mainstream of the curriculum: “should *literary* theorists and critics dedicate themselves to interpreting the works of verbal puzzle makers or to understanding the writings of those who have earned the right to tell us what the twentieth century was really about?” (p. 165). In the latter category, Hirsch includes Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, Viktor Frankl, and other writers on the Holocaust. At this point, I must confess, I get uncomfortable. Why does Elie Wiesel have more of a claim on our attention than Alexander Solzhenitsyn and other survivors of the Gulag, Whittaker Chambers, or, for that matter, Walker Percy?<sup>5</sup>

Further, I find some aspects of Hirsch's literary theory as unsatisfactory as his opponents'. In discussing the distinction between literature and criticism, Hirsch writes that a great poet “converts energy into matter by translating undifferentiated experience into language”, while the “critic starts with that which has already been shaped by the time the critic arrives on the scene” (p. 64). This romantic theory of poetic composition is surely

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4 Hirsch here alludes to the issues that George Steiner has dealt with in much of his work.

5 To be fair, Hirsch does occasionally include the Gulag in his discussion of the post-Auschwitz world (p. 245). But his pleas for additions to the canon are drawn exclusively from writings on the Holocaust.

wrong. Did Shakespeare “translate undifferentiated experience into language”? What of Holinshed, Plutarch, the Bible, the Hamnet legend, the mass of traditional stories and legends transfigured by Shakespeare's unique genius? I don't wish to dispute that writing and criticizing poetry differ, but the difference cannot be what Hirsch says it is.

Despite these flaws, Hirsch is capable of some stirring literary insights. He rightly emphasizes that author, text, and reader form a critical trinity, and shows the logical fallacies and critical ineptitude that dog all forms of unitarian criticism. He defends New Critics such as John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, T. S. Eliot, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren from their recent attackers. Opponents of New Criticism object to caricatures of New Critical slogans—e.g., New Critical attacks on the “intentional fallacy” and the “affective fallacy”, and their attention to the “autotelic text”—without examining any actual critical work. By Hirsch's account, New Critics were orthodox critical trinitarians, and the balance of their approach has since been fragmented by the rise of contending schools—reader-response (Stanley Fish), intentionalist (E. D. Hirsch), structuralist, whatever.

Embedded in a consideration of Chomsky's transformational grammar is a dazzling exposition of a single sentence from Joyce (“Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity”), which demonstrates the irreducible character of a well-formed sentence as well as the limits of deep structural analysis (pp. 194ff.). I cannot resist a specific example: According to Richard Ohmann's Chomskyan analysis, Joyce's sentence consists of six basic sentences, two of which are, “I gazed up into the darkness” and “I saw myself as a creature”. Separating these two thoughts, however, distorts: Hirsch notes, “In Joyce's syntax, the darkness becomes a kind of a mirror....his gaze is forced inward, and what he sees in the darkness is a reflection of his own soul, or perhaps a projection of his own soul imposed on the universe” (p. 198). Throughout, Hirsch operates with the implicit assumption that the words of a sentence are not hard atoms of meaning, which are simply juxtaposed; instead, the words of a sentence chemically act and react upon each other, in such a way that the changing of a single word reverberates across the whole sentence. Hirsch's literary analysis is so good that I wish he had devoted more space to literature and far less to his ultimately repetitive discussions of theory.

By far the most insightful statement in the book, however, is from a Warren essay on Robert Frost: “the perfect intuitive and immediate grasp of a poem in the totality of its meaning and structure - the thing we desire—may come late rather than early—on the fiftieth reading rather than on the first. Perhaps we must be able to look forward as well as back as we move through the poem—be able to sense the complex of relationships and implications—before we can have that immediate grasp” (quoted on p. 3). A better summary of the art of reading I cannot imagine!

These three books together make for some eery reading. The criticisms of Weimar by the Nazis echo slogans of contemporary American politics: an assault on “humanism”; frustration with legislative gridlock; a sense of looming crisis; a subterranean desire for

messianic leadership. These books forcefully pose the question, Is Fascism the only alternative to the messiness liberal humanism?

The Christian must answer No to each horn of this false dilemma. The Christian, moreover, must not limit himself to defending the status quo. Hirsch seems intent on shoring up what I see as a dying (dead?) worldview, namely, modern liberal humanism. From a Christian perspective, the collapse of this worldview is not cause for alarm, but instead provides an opportunity to articulate a thoroughly Christian alternative. It seems to me that Christians can even usefully, but with great care, employ some of the weapons of the deconstructionists. For example, the Enlightenment, as John Courtney Murray pointed out with reference to Locke, taught that the individual is a “sociological monad”, a “little god almighty” whose freedom is limited only when he bumps up against the freedom of another “little god almighty”; for Locke, society is a product of artifice, not inherent to human nature. Here the deconstructionists are right: Understood in this way, the individual is a fiction. It does not follow, however, as the deconstructionists claim, that the individual is nothing but an intersection point of external social forces; instead, the deconstruction of the Enlightenment notion of the individual must be followed by Christian reconstruction.

I find both naive Arnoldian humanism of the last century and Hirsch's more chastened humanism unsatisfactory, but antihumanism is surely a horror chamber of its own. It is thus important for Christians, while we attack the crumbling idols of contemporary humanism, to plead simultaneously for the true humanism that is Christianity.