Heidegger's Letter on Humanism *as Text and Event*

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In 1940 Walter Benjamin — prophetically — imagined history as an apocalyptic tempest roaring towards the present. In his most famous allegory, Benjamin invoked an angel whose glance is directed backwards towards "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage." Where we perceive only continuity, a chain of events, Benjamin's angel envisaged a "storm blowing from paradise."[1] Many years later, Adorno compared the impact of Auschwitz on philosophy in the nineteenth century to that of the Lisbon earthquake two hundred years earlier. The first catastrophe of nature called into question the theodicy of Leibniz, the second, the catastrophe of history, the theodicy of Hegel.[2] For the first time perhaps, the catastrophic political event becomes the insurmountable horizon of philosophical reflection against which any account of Western thought would have to be measured. The wreckage, as Benjamin foresaw, required more than a mop-up operation.

At the end of the World War II three philosophical texts appeared whose intensity and influence have still not diminished today. They might be described as the first texts generated in the debris left behind by the cataclysmic events that had only recently transpired: the collapse of German power, the genocide of the Jews, the decimation of Europe, and the atomic bomb. Their authors, Karl Jaspers (*The Question of*

1. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed., Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) 257, 258.

2. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury, 1973) 361.

German Guilt [1947]), Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* [1947]), and Martin Heidegger (*Letter on Humanism* [1947]) respectively, suffered wholly different personal fates during those years, each emblematic of the choices faced by German intellectuals: inner exile, emigration, and, in Heidegger's case, complicity with Nazism and banishment from the University. What these texts have in common is only the acknowledgment that the catastrophic event of mid-century was a *caesura* in a philosophical as well as a political sense.

Each of these texts attempted, in fundamentally different ways, to do more than register the seismic impact of the event on European thought. Each of them tried to achieve a kind of "mastery" over a traumatic occurrence; though perhaps we should question the psychoanalytic assumption that historical understanding is temporally delayed by the trauma, requiring a "period of latency" before the 'return' of the experience (and its "working through") allows an elaboration of historical meaning. As Saul Friedlander has recently suggested, it may instead be true that time intensifies rather than diminishes the opacity and irresoluteness of the event.[3]

In the case of these "debris" texts, the immediacy of the event sets in motion the mechanism of displacement that the text accomplishes. By embedding it in a continuum that alters the nature of temporality itself the event becomes at once the endpoint of a long historical trajectory and simultaneously a "rupture with civilization," as Hannah Arendt called it. The attempt to "master" the event, like the attempt to master trauma requires an artificial distance, in order for reflection — in different ways — to bring the *caesura* to consciousness.[4]

Each of these texts can be read as reflections on the limits of what might be called the burdened traditions of modernity. Jaspers confronts the cynicism of German liberal great power politics in the Weberian mode. Adorno and Horkheimer cast doubt on the capacity of liberalism and Marxism to account for the suffering and unreason unleashed by

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3. Saul Friedlander, "Trauma, Transference and 'Working through' in Writing the History of the *Shoah*," *History and Memory* 4.1 (Spring/Summer, 1992): 43, 44.

4. On the concept of "*caesura*", see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art, and Politics*, trans. Christ Turner (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 41-46. Lacoue-Labarthe's claim that Heidegger's thought offers the most profound commentary on Nazism, despite his silence on its consequences, takes the argument that "Auschwitz is the essence of the West," to its logical, and absurd conclusion.

enlightenment and the domination of nature. Heidegger's text goes still further, regarding the history of Western thought since Plato as a precipitous fall from the first awakening of the Greek idea of truth as *Aletheia*, or disclosure. Apart from their apocalyptic rhetoric, what unites them is a common concern with the "omnipotence of thought": what Horkheimer and Adorno referred to as "the dialectical link between enlightenment and domination."[5]

To be sure, these texts are diametrically opposed in their political evaluations and judgments. Jaspers's *The Question of German Guilt* called upon Germans to break with the tradition of power politics and the nation state — to assume collective responsibility and self-consciously accept that they must become a pariah people until they demonstrate the moral capacity to reenter political life.[6] Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* concludes with a meditation on the dark side of Reason whose relentless homogenization of difference ultimately projects onto the Jews the great refusal of civilization, and whose elimination promises happiness. Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*, which this essay will explore, is notoriously silent on the Jews, yet has achieved canonical status both as a founding document of deconstruction, and as an extraordinary discourse on the apocalyptic collapse of Western metaphysics into nihilism and a plea to return to the shelter of Being.

II

Written in the fall of 1946 and first published in France in 1947, the *Letter on Humanism* was initially a response to questions put to Heidegger by a young French Lycée instructor, Jean Beaufret. As the first and most cogent statement of Heidegger's postwar thinking, it has had far more influence than any other expression of his thought, including perhaps *Being and Time*. Arendt called the *Letter* "an eloquent summing-up and immense clarification of the interpretive turn he had given the original reversal."[7] Critics, most notably Adorno, were not so charitable, citing its "anesthetizing" effect, and referring to it as a "haze" or "ether," that belied its own concepts.[8] Karl Löwith commented on its style, noting that "in

5. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972) 169.

6. Karl Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage. Von der politischen Haftung Deutschlands* (Munich: R. Piper, 1987) 69.

7. Hannah Arendt, *Willing* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978) 188.

8. Theodor W. Adorno, *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit. Zur deutschen Ideologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1964) 10.

order for its apodictic linguistic thinking to be fully commensurate with the demands of Being, it must be an inspired language of revelation, and a thinking according to the dictates of Being."[9] The *Letter* exemplifies Heidegger's characteristic ability to assume a position of the highest philosophical rigor while positioning himself in the most opportune political light. Since it first appeared in 1947, the text has passed through several incarnations. First, in the controversies around existentialism in the late 1940s, second, in the 1960s as a key text of deconstruction and, most recently, during the Heidegger affair of 1987 as a reframing of the Heideggerian project of overcoming metaphysics. My interest is in this highly charged hermeneutical and political afterlife, in the ways that Heidegger's *Letter* has become for us, both text and event.

According to Heidegger's "marginalia" to the second edition published in 1949, the *Letter* was "not first thought out at the time of its writing," but rests on the "course of a path" [*Gang eines Weges]*, which began in 1936.[10] Despite that assertion, the circumstances of its drafting and publication reflects Heidegger's precarious situation at the moment of the collapse of the Third Reich, the French occupation of Baden, and the negative judgment rendered by the Freiburg University faculty in his case. When Heidegger returned to Freiburg in the summer of 1945, the University Senate commissioned a panel to deal with the most prominent of National Socialist functionaries on the faculty, its first "Führer-Rector."[11] Moreover, according to the inter-allied *Basic Handbook*, the occupation guide, Heidegger was considered "a 100% Nazi, a dangerous intellectual, to be eliminated."[12] The French military authorities concurred, confiscating his house and library. A few days before Christmas 1945 Jaspers delivered the *coup de grace*, his negative letter of evaluation to the Senate committee.[13] At that time,

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9. Karl Löwith, *Heidegger. Denker in dürftiger Zeit* (Frankfurt/Main: S. Fischer, 1953) 13.

10. Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* 9, *Wegmarken* (1919-1961) (Frankfurt/ Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976) 313 [This standard edition will hereafter referred to as *GA*].

11. Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger. Unterwegs zu seiner Biographie* (Frankfurt/ Main/ New York: Campus, 1988) 293 .

12. Letter from Louis Sauzin to René le Senne, 17 Dec. 1945, *La regle du jeu* 2.4 (May, 1991):165.

13. "Letter to the Freiburg University Denazification Commission, 22 Dec. 1945," *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin (New York: Columbia UP, 1991) 144-53; and Ott, *Heidegger* 315 -317.

Louis Sauzin, who was responsible for the administrative affairs of the French zone of occupation wrote to his former professor, who was also Dilthey's French translator, René le Senne, that Jaspers was "categorically brutal towards his former friend."[14] At the end of December 1946, he was prematurely "pensioned," losing all rights to participate in university activities, with compensation for only one additional year. The final decision arrived from the University only shortly after the *Letter on Humanism* was sent to Beaufret.[15] Several weeks later Heidegger suffered a nervous breakdown and entered a sanitorium in Badenweiler where he was entrusted to the care of a psychiatrist.

These circumstances should make us aware of the extent to which the *Letter* combines personal, philosophical, and strategic elements. The problem of exoneration looms large in the composition of the text, particularly in the obvious effort to create the impression of a philosophical continuity from the pre-Rectorate period to his postwar thinking. Yet it also represents Heidegger's first utterances on the defeat of Germany and —indirectly — on Heidegger's own fall from grace. As I hope will become clear, it is this conflation of self-exoneration and political defiance in the face of catastrophe that ultimately defines Heidegger's text and its relation to the event that is at its center. Heidegger's effort to philosophically excuse and explain his complicity with Nazism circumscribes and informs several strands of its argument, and this combination of philosophical and strategic considerations has continued to weigh heavily on the legacy of its reception up to, and including, the reading given the *Letter* by contemporary French thinkers. First, I will briefly examine the text and its strategy; second, I will discuss some of its political implications (including the often overlooked aspect of the "humanism problem" in National Socialist ideology); finally, I will consider its contemporary reception and some of its implications for Derrida's reading of Heidegger.

III

The *Letter* begins with Heidegger's famous distinction between the essence of man and the essence of truth. Only thought concerned with Being, never "action or praxis," can reveal the latter. Neither man's

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14. Letter from Louis Sauzin to René le Senne, 17 Dec. 1945, in *La regle du jeu*, 166.

15. Ott, *Heidegger* 324.

existence nor will, but Being itself is the source of action. Occidental thought has reversed this relation, substituting essence or existence for the Truth of Being. The source of this fatal reversal is a primordial event: at an early stage in the development of Western "logic" and "grammar," metaphysics "seized control of the interpretation of language" and posited subject and object as appropriate terms to define the human condition. The *Letter on Humanism* is an attempt to liberate language from this grammar: to forego Western metaphysics and return to the essence of thought, which is the truth of Being. Its most famous sentence asserts that this thinking occurs in language, which is "the house of Being."[16]

The grammar and thought of the West is entirely responsible for the "homelessness" of modern man; the root cause of the "forgetting of Being." This homelessness is manifested in many forms: in communication, in technology, in the culture industry, in such illusory notions as public and private. Ideas of aesthetic or moral responsibility are further indications of an ever-increasing fall of language. Heidegger sees humanism — which he defines as any conception which places "man" at the center and privileges man's essence — as implicated in this forgetting. All "humanisms" have as "their ground" the projection of some essential characteristic onto man. The apparent differences, which Heidegger elaborates through the examples of Greek, Roman, Christian, Marxian, and modern Sartrean thought, are ultimately without distinction. Diverse as their notions of "freedom" might seem, and "however different these forms of humanism may be in purpose and in principle, in the mode and means of their respective realizations, and in the form of their teaching, they nonetheless all agree that the *humanitas* of *homo humanus* is determined with regard to an already established interpretation of nature, history, world, and the ground of the world . . . " (*LH* 202). The history of metaphysics is the history of a decline [*Verfallsgeschichte*], the devolution of this anthrocentric and foundational hubris in which man's essence or existence is always prior to Being.

Similarly, metaphysics, which inquires into the nature of the knowable, or the "real", "not only does not pose the question concerning the truth of Being, but actually obstructs it, insofar as metaphysics persists

16. Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1976) 192. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as *LH*.

in the oblivion of Being"(*LH* 224). Nor can it even pose the question of man, since the distinction between essence and existence "completely dominates the destiny of Western history and of all history determined by Europe"(*LH* 208). As such it blocks the recognition that man's being is a matter of "Ek-sistence", which can only occur in language as the "lighting-concealing advent of Being itself." The facticity of *Dasein* in *Being and Time* is transformed into the ecstatic determination of *Sein*.

IV

The language of the *Letter* extricates thought from action so that the truth of Being, "primordially sheltered in Being itself and removed from the domain of mere human opinion" (*LH* 216), can be thought. To stand "in the openness of Being" suggests both a different orientation and a rethinking, so Heidegger says, of "man" who "is never first and foremost man on the hither side of the world, as a 'subject'" (*LH* 229). We can imagine "man" in this sense as foregoing a pretense to mastery, control, worldly being. Humility is invoked by nurturent words such as "shepherd," "care" and "guardian," and by the awe suggested by such phrases as standing in the "openness," "clearing" or "light of Being." Yet the *Letter* is in no way as naive as its rhetorical humility intends.

The *Letter* also includes the author's guide to reading Heidegger from the perspective of the "turning" or "*Kehre*" toward Being which Heidegger dates as occurring as early as 1930, prior to the Rectorial Address and the other statements attesting to Heidegger's enthusiasm for the Nazi revolution.[17] It explicitly suggests that Heidegger began to think in these terms *before* his involvement with Nazism (which may have begun a early as 1931) so that Nazism could not in any way be considered the outgrowth of his philosophical thinking. However, in 1949 Heidegger added the sentence: "Since 1936 the 'advent' [*Ereignis*] has been the *leitmotif* of my thinking"(*GA* 9, 316). This claim places yet another marker in the story-line, this time between the period from 1933 until 1936, when, as he now contends, he broke openly with the "worldly" conceptualization of Dasein, e.g., with a politicized conception of "man." Thus, opposition to National Socialism is also emphatically inserted into the revised narrative of Heidegger's thought. If we combine the two dates — 1930 and 1936 — the

17. See Wolin, *The Heidegger Controversy* 29-40.

text puts forward two alternative periodizations: the myth of Heidegger's immunity to Nazism, and the myth of the great philosopher's brief but fateful descent from the realm of thought to the realm of worldly affairs, from Being to being, and back again.

Richard Wolin, following Karl Löwith's lead, has persuasively argued that *Being and Time*, with its contempt for the "everyday" and its rhetoric of "authentic resolve" and "decision," though not explicitly political, already points toward Heidegger's later collectivist, organicist thinking during the Rectorate.[18] In the *Letter*, the decisionism and extreme voluntarism of *Being and Time* are confined to a misunderstanding or misinterpretation (of Heidegger I), but one which was legitimate enough for Heidegger himself to have subscribed to it. The *Letter* is the first statement of "Heidegger II," a shorthand that, I should add, originated before Hollywood gave us "Rocky," "Aliens," "The Terminator," or even the "Godfather." For several decades the designation "II" has been a way of of periodizing Heidegger. According to this interpretation then, the chief cause of Heidegger's National Socialism was a residual and "fatal" attempt to reverse the course of being's destiny though the actualization of philosophy; a metaphysical "act" of historical engagement, a profound lapse from the achievement of *Being and Time*, and "a humanistic deviation in his earlier philosophy."[19]

Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism," a lecture delivered in 1946, conveniently serves the *Letter* as a kind of "straw" version of Heidegger I, since Heidegger obviously recognized that Sartre appropriated themes of "being-there," "authenticity," and "decision" from his own earlier work. Sartre's misreading is excusable, he admits, since the "adequate execution and completion of this other thinking that abandons subjectivity" was less accessible because the third division of *Being and Time* was "held back" at that time (*LH* 207). *Being and Time* is retroactively interpreted as a "phenomenological destruction" of the notion of subjectivity. What Heidegger "held back" in that earlier work, was the more profound "humanism" that grants man only the passive role of "the shepherd of Being," while worldly existence is interpreted as care, as guardianship, but never as actualizing or bringing into being the essence of man or the world. As Löwith

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18. Richard Wolin, *The Politics of Being: The Political Thought of Martin Heidegger* (New York: Columbia UP, 1990) 16-66.

19. Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, *Heidegger and Modernity*, trans. Franklin Philip (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990) 31-54.

observed, by retroactively putting this turning prior to 1933 there can be no connection between Heidegger's philosophical development and his Nazi involvement since Heidegger's "opposition" to Nazism is already "announced" and "conceived" prior to the Rectorial episode.[20]

The *Letter* is also strategic in its odd (and unique to this text) claim that the "Marxist view of history is superior to that of other historical accounts"(*LH* 219). A bold assertion, to say the least, and one that seems so out of character for Heidegger, that we shall return to this point later. Finally, and most importantly, the *Letter* is an allegory of the author's attempt to remove himself from all ethical considerations or demands of responsibility. The narrative voice assumes a posture equivalent to that of man's "Ek-sistence," which "gains the essential poverty of the shepherd, and whose dignity consists in being called by Being into the preservation of Being's truth"(*LH* 221). The marked quietism in Heidegger's stance in the *Letter* is diametrically opposed to the action oriented heroic stance of the Rectorial Address. In fact, the entire text is structured around the opposition between "action" or "praxis" and man's "coming forward into the lighting of Being." In this way, the *Letter* is concerned with absolution, which for Heidegger takes place not in the realm of conscience but in the domain of Being. The essence of evil consists not merely in the baseness of human action, but rather in the "malice of rage" — an unambiguous reference to the bad motives of the victors. Jürgen Habermas has rightly called this posture "abstraction via essentialization," a process by which the history of Being is "disconnected from political and historical events."[21]

V

To fully understand the *Letter on Humanism*, it must be considered not merely as a philosophical meditation on the hubris of subjectivity in the blinding light of Being, but as a careful reformulation and restructuring of a narrative concerning the event with which Heidegger is most profoundly concerned: the collapse of Germany, whose chief victim Heidegger considered to be himself. Recently, several scholars have added significantly to our knowledge of the philosophical implications

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20. Karl Löwith, *Denker in dürftiger Zeit*, in *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 8 (Stuttgart, 1984) 128 and Wolin, *Politics of Being* , 144-146.

21. Jürgen Habermas, "Work and Weltanschauung: The Heidegger Controversy from a German Perspective," *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, ed. and trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: MIT, 1989) 159.

of Heidegger's involvement in Nazism, particularly Otto Pöggeler, Tom Rockmore, and Richard Wolin.[22] Especially after the biographical spade work of Victor Farías and Hugo Ott, there is little doubt, as Pöggeler notes, that Heidegger himself "placed the decision about the truth of Being as he sought it in a political context."[23] This emerging historicization of Heidegger's Nazism will, however, by necessity remain incomplete as long as the archives are barred to the scrutiny of scholars.[24]

Nonetheless, a plausible account of Heidegger's changing attitude towards Germany's political destiny can be gleaned from his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935), the wartime lectures on Nietzsche, and the courses on Heraclitus and Parmenides during the early 1940s. In 1935, less than a year after leaving his post as Rector of the University, Heidegger's lectures still insisted on the possibility of a "new beginning," which he calls a "fundamental event." Since the Greek poets and thinkers first produced the grammar of the West, their view of Being — as essence and existence — has prevailed. But that view, that man and not Being, is the essence of Truth has led to a "flattening," to the nihilistic struggle over "values," to the reign of technology, and to having "fallen out of Being without knowing it."[25] As a consequence, the "historical destiny of the West" had culminated in a fatal "enfeeblement of the spirit," a weakness rendering it incapable of standing up to the singular task of repeating the primordial achievement of the Greeks at the outset of Western history — of constituting a new beginning.

National Socialism alone could enable Germany to fulfill its historic mission and reverse this destiny, to overcome "the darkening of the world."[26] Germany is entrusted with this "vocation" because it is "the most metaphysical of nations," because its poets and thinkers (Hölderlin and Nietzsche) are the most profound, and because "this nation, as

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22. See Tom Rockmore, *On Heidegger's Nazism and Philosophy* (Los Angeles: U y of California P, 1992); Thomas Sheehan, "Heidegger and the Nazis," *The New York Review of Books* (16 June 1988): 38-47.

23. Otto Pöggeler, *Martin Heidegger's Path of Thinking.* With an afterword to the second edition, trans. David Magurshak and Sigmund Barber (Atlantic Highlands New Jersey: Humanities P, 1987) 278, cited in Wolin, *Politics of Being* 192.

24. The proprietary and exclusionary practices of the Heidegger Archive in Freiburg are discussed in Josef Chytry, "The Timelessness of Martin Heidegger's National Socialism," in *New German Critique* 58 (Winter, 1993): 90, 91.

25. Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York: Anchor Books, 1961) 30.

26. *Ibid.*, 31.

a historical nation, must move itself and thereby the history of the West beyond the center of their future 'happening' and into the primordial realm of the Greeks."[27] In the *Der Spiegel* interview of 1966, Heidegger still considered this kinship to be operative: ". . . I have in mind especially the inner relationship of the German language with the language of the Greeks and with their thought."[28]

"This Europe," Heidegger wrote in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, "lies today in a great pincers, squeezed by Russia on the one side and America on the other." From a metaphysical point of view, "they are of course identical" (Communism and Liberalism) insofar as they are "the same dreary technological frenzy."[29] In order to break this threat Germany must wear the uniform of a ruthless and consequential nihilism (Nietzsche) to confront, through total mobilization (Jünger), the metaphysics of technology (Bolshevism, Americanism) and the "half-hearted nihilism of England and France."[30] In his Schelling lectures in the summer of 1936, Heidegger referred to "Hitler and Mussolini, each in his own way, as having inaugurated into Europe counter-movements to nihilism," but "without the actual metaphysical dimension of Nietzschean thought being acknowledged directly."[31] German "nihilism," in other words, was a "counter-movement" to the nihilism of the West, by which Heidegger meant nothing less than an inner and outer abandonment of being — *Seinsverlassenheit* — "the darkening of the world, the flight of the gods, the destruction of the earth, the transformation of men into a mass, the hatred and suspicion of everything creative."[32] For all of its limitations, he considered Nietzsche's nihilistic anti-nihilism to be the form of thought that defined "all areas of human actuality." Little wonder that Heidegger regarded World War II as a war of metaphysical

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27. *Ibid.*, 31, 32.

28. "Only a God Can Save Us": *Der Spiegel*'s Interview with Martin Heidegger (1966), Wolin, *The Heidegger Controversy* 113.

29. Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* 31.

30. In his *Total Mobilization* (1930) — a view which Heidegger adopted — Jünger argued that this task cannot be accomplished without a ruthless embrace of nihilism and technology as the only path to removing the obstacles to renewal. On Heidegger's relationship to Jünger see Wolin, *Politics of Being* 88-92; Michael E. Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) 35-36.

31. Heidegger, *GA* 40, 41. Also see Nicolas Tertulian, "Seinsgeschichte als Legitimation der Politik," *Martin Heidegger — Faszination und Erschrecken: Die politische Dimension einer Philosophie, ed. Peter Kemper* (Frankfurt/Main and New York: Campus, 1990) 51-71.

32. Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* 31.

surrogates between American "technologism," Soviet "productivism" and Germany in the uniform of Nietzsche's "will to power."

Still, Heidegger's commitment to National Socialism was never a conformist parroting of the slogans of the regime. Tom Rockmore rightly points out that Heidegger considered his Nazism to be higher, purer, and better than the Nazi program or the rhetoric of the racist ideologues. Since there was no single doctrine that embraced all aspects of Nazism, Heidegger could not have considered it inappropriate to carefully construct what one Nazi leader complained was his own "private" version of National Socialism, even though it more than once caused close brushes with the authorities.[33] After 1934 his lectures contain critical remarks directed against doctrinaire biologism, especially that of the racial ideologues (Alfred Bäumler, Alfred Rosenberg). In the mid-1930s Heidegger was increasingly hostile to the fetishism of technology — evident in the propaganda campaigns for Göring's Four Year Plan and Albert Speer's *Amt Schönheit der Arbeit.*

His *Beiträge zur Philosophie* (1936-39) frequently equates National Socialism with a reign of technology, "machinism," and "gigantism."[34] There he even seemed to recognize that there would be "no counter movements to nihilism," and he castigated the lack of a Herculean effort on the part of those who would initiate the new beginning: "The foundation of this essence demands, of course, an effort of thought, which must have been brought to completion only at the first beginning of Western thought." He condemned those who remain excluded from this "thinking path," and who "take flight" in "'new' contents and preoccupy themselves with outfitting the 'political' and the 'racial' with an until now unprecedented dressing up [*Aufputz*] of the old display pieces of philosophy."[35] Yet to call this an opposition to National Socialism, or even a "critique" as does Silvio Vietta, is nonsense, since Heidegger never believed that the actual Third Reich had anything "essential" to do with what was referred to *sotto voce*, as his "Freiburg National Socialism."[36]

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33. On Heidegger's "Ideal Nazism" see Rockmore, *On Heidegger's Nazism*, 109-11, passim.

34. *Ibid.*, 204-205; Otto Pöggeler, "Heidegger's Political Self-Understanding," Wolin, *The Heidegger Controversy*, 223-229; Silvio Vietta, *Heideggers Kritik am Nationalsozialismus und an der Technik* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1989).

35. Heidegger, *GA* 65, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, 190

36. Pöggeler, *Heidegger's Self-Understanding*, 205.

VI

Despite the lack of corroborating letters and personal documents, much detail about Heidegger's involvement with Nazism is now known. Though Heidegger was not associated with any particular faction — and certainly not with any form of resistance — in 1940/41 he briefly played a small part in what can be called the "humanism debate" within National Socialism. It was then that the problem of "humanism" was first posed politically for Heidegger, in a way that directly affected his own position, and his "solution" in many ways anticipates the one put forward in the *Letter* six years later.

There were several reasons why Nazi ideologues, particularly Rosenberg, became concerned with "humanism" shortly before the outbreak of war in 1939. First, closer relations between Hitler and Mussolini after the exchange of "state visits" in 1937/38 raised the issue of the potentially corrupting influence of Italian Fascism. Fascism, it should be emphasized, was not unproblematically regarded by the leading ideologues of the Third Reich. Though considered "kindred," it idealized both elements of modernism in the arts, as well as a Roman and Florentine past that competed with, if not overshadowed, the claims of "Nordic" doctrinaires that blood and not culture was the source of German superiority. Among the ideologues there was a good deal of concern that certain Italian intellectuals, for example, Giuseppe Bottai, the Minister of Education and Culture, were clandestinely smuggling a dangerous version of Fascism into Germany that stressed humanism and non-racial ideals.[37] Nazi propagandists attacked the "ruin fetishism" of the Italian Renaissance because "the humanists were beautiful speechifyers for a *Bildung* lacking in *Volkstümlichkeit.*"[38]

After the war began in 1939, anti-German propaganda coming from the exiles (most prominently from Thomas Mann), persistently contrasted "the values and goodness" of the anglo-American democracies (humanism) with the barbaric violence of the axis powers. An ideological campaign against "humanism" coincided with England's declaration of war against Germany, and intensified during 1940/41, as evidenced by the publication of new "black lists" of anti-German, Jewish, and Anglo-American writers.[39]

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37. The story of Bottai's career and his relations with Grassi are documented in Victor Farías, *Heidegger and Nazism* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1989) 259-267.

38. Wilhelm Schäfer, *Wider die Humanisten: Eine Rede* (Munich: Albert Langen - Georg Müller Verlag, 1943) 7.

39. See Dietrich Strothmann, *Nationalsozialistische Literaturpolitik: Ein Beitrag zur Publizistik im Dritten Reich* (Bonn: H. Bouvier u. Co. Verlag, 1960) 233.

However, if as Heidegger argued, the war was essentially a war of nihilistic powers, if it was merely an expression of "the will to power," then, as Domenico Losurdo rhetorically asks, "what is the sense of taking sides with one or the other of the parties in the struggle?"[40] This campaign put Heidegger in the position of reaffirming his commitment to German nihilism and demonstrating its superiority over the various "humanisms" that constituted the thought and action of the West. Heidegger's wartime lectures leave no doubt that despite his misgivings about Nazi ideology he was not at all indifferent to the outcome of the conflict. His enthusiasm for the expansionism of the German war machine was — despite all criticism of technology — often boundless; its victories the result of "a fundamental metaphysical law of power itself," and all allied criticism of "dictatorship and authoritarianism" hypocritical moralizing.[41] The "new Beginning" is the "unconditional domination of nihilism;" the active nihilism of Nazism, not merely the triumph of the "New Order" but a completion, destruction, and ultimate triumph over the passive, decadent nihilism of the West and its "half-heartedness." In the summer of 1941, Heidegger opened his lectures with the pronouncement that "History signifies here, if again at first glance only arbitrarily, *the advent of a decision about the essence of Truth.*"[42] Heidegger's identification of this German/Greek advent squares with his interpretation of the war as the decisive conflict in which the "West" or Germany would triumph over the "East" and the non-European Americans.[43]

At that time, Heidegger found himself under increasing scrutiny by the racial ideologues around Alfred Rosenberg for his insistence on reading National Socialism through the prism of his "Hellenism" rather than through the prism of race. The distinction is important, because the "Hellenism" of Nazism's leading artists, for example, Arno Breker and Josef Thorak was approved by Hitler, while the Nordicists were apparently concerned that an excessive emphasis on Greece could in fact be a Trojan horse for humanistic "ideals." The classical

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40. See Domenico Losurdo, "Heidegger and Hitler's War," *The Heidegger Case*, ed. Tom Rockmore and Joseph Margolis (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992) 145.

41. *Ibid.*, 146.

42. ". . . Geschichte bedeutet hier, dem Anschein nach zunächst wiederum willkürlich, *das Ereignis einer Entscheidung über das Wesen der Wahrheit.*" Heidegger, *GA* 51, "Grundbegriffe," 21.

43. Cited in Losurdo, "Heidegger and Hitler's War" 147, 151.

Bildungsideal of the so-called "Third Humanism," which reached its apotheosis in Germany during the last decades of the nineteenth century was castigated as a "schoolmaster-affair," in contrast to the authentic *Völkisch* values of the Nazi revolution. The most important of these attacks was made in 1940 by the Heidelberg Professor Ernst Krieck, who accused Heidegger of belonging to a long list of "philosophers from Heraclitus and Parmenides to Hegel" who had attempted "to replace and suppress reality by the concept rather than to "describe and actively transform it."[44] Krieck further charged that a "campaign against the gods, heroes, and poets, against nature and history" was being carried on by Heidegger, which he also intimated was being orchestrated by his student and colleague, Ernesto Grassi. The virulence of Krieck's attack on Heidegger, is significant for several reasons. First, Krieck, though Heidegger's most bitter opponent from the outset, had not been actively hostile since the Rectorate, when along with Rosenberg and the Marburg philosopher Erich Jaensch, he had mobilized colleagues to block Heidegger from assuming a leading position either in Prussia, or in the Reich.[45] The new attack clearly signalled the onset of a potentially dangerous public campaign against him. Secondly, the attacks were directed, not at Heidegger's lack of fidelity to the movement's *Weltanschauung*, as they had been in the 1930s, but against his resistance to the "triumphal" ascendancy of myth over pure logic and ontology. Heidegger's notion of "Being" [*Sein*], or "consciousness," Krieck asserted, belonged to the autonomous rationalism of the last century and therefore to the "miscarriage [*Ausgeburt*] of universalist nihilism."[46] In other words, reading Krieck's attack politically, Heidegger could be considered a protohumanist, an opponent of the National Socialist "myth," and might potentially even be declared an enemy of the state.

Earlier in 1940, Grassi, an Italian philosopher teaching at the University of Berlin, had published an Annual entitled "Yearbook for Spiritual Legacy" [*Jahrbuch für geistige Überlieferung*], which included contributions by several German as well as Italian scholars.[47] Victor Farías has discovered that Heidegger's contribution to the second volume of the Yearbook, "Plato's Doctrine of Truth," which contains Heidegger's first

44. Ernst Krieck, "Die Geburt der Philosophie," *Volk im Werden* 10/11: 18 (1940):229.
45. Ott, *Heidegger,* 241.
46. Krieck, "Die Geburt der Philosophie" 230.
47. *Geistige Überlieferung: Ein Jahrbuch* (Berlin: Verlag Helmut Küpper, 1940).

public equation of "humanism" with "nihilism" and "metaphysics"("Der Beginn der Metpahysik im Denken Platons ist zugleich der Beginn des Humanismus"), became the subject of a conflict between Goebbels and Rosenberg, who had tried to prevent Heidegger's contribution from appearing in print. This discovery is extremely important, though hardly as Farías characteristically exaggerates, evidence of a "pressure group that acted in favor of Heidegger with Goebbels's support."[48] Rather, the importance of the affair is that it reveals that a number of prominent thinkers (among them Grassi, the Königsberg classicist Walter F. Otto, and the philologist Karl Reinhardt) tried *sub rosa*, to put forward an esoteric "Hellenist" interpretation of National Socialism, in which "the Spirit of Greek philosophy since Nietzsche speaks to us more profoundly than ever."[49]

The "humanism" affair of 1940/41 was clearly not a well-publicized event. Grassi's *Annual* marked out a middle path between the racialists and what was then regarded as the quasi-humanism of the Italians who, like Bottai, saw their forerunners in the Roman Imperium and in the Greek-Roman spirituality of the Renaissance. The study of Greek antiquity is "the most sublime manifestation of German life," Otto wrote in his preface, and the renewal of the Greek spirit is simultaneously the creation of a German "new man." Yet the esoteric challenge of these "Hellenists" to the National Socialist "Nordicists," who claimed that their "tradition" was "Indo-Germanic," and that *Volk*, *Blut*, and *Rasse* were concepts derived from biology and not from culture, did not go unnoticed. The Rosenberg *Amt* reacted with an article by Wilhelm Brachmann, an evangelical theologian, who contrasted the "contemporary humanism" of the Italians and this group of Germans with the "political humanism" of Hans F.K. Günther, the proponent of a "racial science."[50] Talk of humanism, Brachmann claimed, was a way of evading the real connection to antiquity, "the blood determined spiritual inheritance of the Indogermanic peoples."[51] Heidegger's presence among the defenders of the cult of Nietzsche and classical antiquity

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48. Farías, *Heidegger and Nazism*, 262, 267, 268.

49. ". . . der Geist der griechischen Philosophie seit Nietzsche vernehmlicher als je zu uns spricht." E. Grassi and W. F. Otto, "Die Frage der geistigen Überlieferung," Zwei Briefe zur Bestimmung der Ausgabe," *Geistige Überlieferung*, 28.

50. Wilhelm Brachmann, "Gegenwärtiger Humanismus," *Nationalsozialistische Monatshefte*, 140 (Nov. 1941): 926-932. Also see Ott, *Heidegger* 268-273.

51. *Ibid.*, 932; Ott, *Heidegger* 270.

appeared to Rosenberg as proof that his "position on the important problem of humanism helps to validate the Italian claims to exist and compete with German science."[52] Rosenberg further charged that Heidegger was sowing confusion by supporting Grassi's efforts to import humanism "into the German spiritual world": "Heidegger went against the position recently defended by Comrade Wilhelm Brachmann in the National Socialist *Monatshefte*. His position indicates strongly and insistently that for us in Germany contemporary humanism has ceased to exist and that we oppose to the contemporary humanism a political humanism."[53]

Farías reveals that Heidegger's contribution to the Annual was only permitted to appear "at the request of Il Duce," who through the Italian Ambassador Dino Odoardo Alfieri, interceded personally with Goebbels. Rosenberg had to content himself with the assurance that the "press will not mention Heidegger's article."[54] In fact, when "Plato's Doctrine of Truth" was finally permitted to appear in the second volume of the *Annual* in 1942, it did not square with either the position of the racialists, the Fascists represented by Bottai, or the "humanists" around Grassi and Otto. Heidegger's claim that humanism — including its most radical "completion" in Nietzsche — was a fatal error in the philosophical/historical constitution of the West, and that the poetic/philosophic advent is still to come, avoided the reprobation of the racialists without subscribing to what Brachmann called "Erasmian, that is West-European-cosmopolitan humanism."[55]

Heidegger carefully defined humanism as "the inclusive process that is bound up with the beginning, the unfolding, and the end of metaphysics, and which, in accord with any one of several differing perspectives, but each time knowingly, the human being is placed in the center of Being without therefore becoming the highest being."[56] Heidegger carefully included the typical Nazi definition of "man" among universalist, individualist, national, and ethnic "humanisms": "'The human being,' here means, first a humanity or mankind [*Menschentum oder die Menschheit*], then an individual or a community [*Einzelnen oder eine Gemeinschaft*], then a people or group of peoples [*Volk oder eine*

52. Farías, *Heidegger and Nazism* 262.
53. *Ibid.* 262.
54. *Ibid.* 263.
55. Wilhelm Brachmann, "Der gegenwärtige Humanismus: Ein Beitrag zur Geistes- und Glaubensgeschichte der Gegenwart," *Kant-Studien, N.S.* 44 (1944): 15.
56. Martin Heidegger, *Platon's Lehre von der Wahrheit (Bern:* Francke, 1947) 49.

Völkergruppe]."[57] Yet Heidegger still left the door open for what the Rector of the University of Göttingen, Hans Drexler, saw as a revival of "Third Humanism," of a "heroic National Socialism" and — with obvious reference to Heidegger's Rectorial Address — a return to the Greek principles of "risk" and "decision."[58] In fact, the larger premise of the Rectorial Address, that "science in the ancient Greek sense will realize the Nazi goal," was conspicuously revived in the two volumes of *Geistige Überlieferung*.[59]

VII

Several scholars have convincingly argued that the turning point in Heidegger's Nietzschean National Socialism came only after the "decision," which the war posed, was resolved at Stalingrad.[60] Russia's "metaphysical," not to mention military, triumph demanded a revision as to which "nihilism" was the most "complete." Though Heidegger still hoped for a German victory, after 1942 he gradually seemed to accept the possibility that "Europe" might not be redeemed by a new primordiality won on the battlefields of "Asia." Some of Heidegger's most pessimistic thoughts about politics come to light in his summer 1942 lecture cycle on Parmenides, where he unambiguously identifies National Socialism with Imperial Rome, as opposed to the authentic politics of the Greeks: the difference between the Roman *res publica* and the Greek *polis* is equated with the difference between the modern concept of the essence of truth or the Roman *rectitudo*, and the Greek *Aletheia*. The metaphysical passion of today's Russians for technology is understandable, he claims, because the Russians are bringing "the

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57. *Ibid.* 49.

58. H. Drexler, *Der dritte Humanismus. Ein kritischer Epilog*. 2nd ed. (Frankfurt/Main, 1942) 86.

59. Heidegger was not alone in this "Hellocentric" view, even if he considered himself its most profound thinker. It also characterizes the "higher" National Socialism of the neo-classical sculptor Arno Breker, the classicist Walter F. Otto, and Hitler's architect Albert Speer, all of whom were put off by the "vulgar" racism of the Nordic ideologues. These distinctions are important because they help locate Heidegger more clearly in the ideological matrix of National Socialism; they also begin to dissolve the monolithic view of National Socialist ideology that both Heidegger's defenders and critics often adopt. On Antiquity and the Nietzsche cult in National Socialism see Rockmore, *Heidegger's Nazism* 63.

60. "The consummation of Germany's defeat stimulated a new phase in Heidegger's reflection: now the war and the will to power themselves became expressions in their own right of the technical 'massification' the modern world." Losurdo, "Heidegger and Hitler's War" 156; Otto Pöggeler, "Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Politics," *The Heidegger Case*, 136, 137.

technical world to power." Technology, for Heidegger, "*is* our history" (*GA* 54, 127).

Nietzsche too is reconsidered in this light, since his evocation of the *polis* in Roman terms (like spirit and culture), confuses the modern "power state" with the Greek "site" of tragedy (*GA* 54, 133). Before 1942 Heidegger saw democracy, socialism, and communism as variants of half-hearted nihilism, as opposed to metaphysical, e.g., active German nihilism. Now, after the German defeat was at least "thinkable," the latter option faded, replaced by the passivity of the philosopher who must wait patiently for Being to disclose itself. This disclosure occurs cataclysmically, through the tragic events of history: "the terror, horror, and calamity [*Unheil*]" that befall the *polis*.

Heidegger's interpretation of the *polis* as a site of tragedy explains some of the most puzzling passages of the *Letter*. The unambiguous tilt towards Marxism, which Jaspers called "lethal," can be interpreted as Heidegger's concession to the new reality that the "West", e.g., Germany (but also England and France) had been decisively defeated, that Stalin's victory (and America's) signals the collapse of the weak European democracies, and their domination by the new technological order. In the summer of 1942, during his course on Hölderlin, Heidegger noted that "Bolshevism is only a variety of Americanism. The latter is the genuinely dangerous form of the measureless, because it arises in the form of bourgeois democracy and is mixed with Christendom, and all of this in an atmosphere of decisive history-lessness"(*GA* 53, 86-87). Germans, Heidegger averred in 1943, would now be "tested" by those who "know nothing," who represent "mere modernity."

There is possibly a more justifiable opportunism at work here, insofar as Heidegger's sons were still in prisoner of war camps, and he feared that Georg Lukács's attacks on him were potentially a threat to them. Ironically, Lukács's review of the *Letter*, entitled "Heidegger Redivivus," acknowledged Heidegger's affirmation of Marxism, noting that he understood the inner connection between the private and public spheres of modern life and their respective alienation from the essential being of humanity, but that he had turned real history into the mythical pseudohistory of Being.[61]

Nonetheless, Heidegger does not hide his contempt for the victorious nihilisms: "Whoever takes 'communism' only as a 'party' or a

61. Georg Lukács, "Heidegger Redivivus," *Sinn und Form* 1.3 (Berlin, 1949): 37- 62.

'*Weltanschauung*' is thinking too shallowly, just as those who by the term 'Americanism' mean, and mean derogatorily, nothing more than a particular lifestyle"(*LH* 220). Similarly, Heidegger condemns both "nationalism" and "internationalism" as mirror-forms of anthropologism, equally nihilistic humanisms, with the inescapable conclusion that to conceive of National Socialism as a "worldview" is equally shallow. Viewed from the Olympian perspective of their essential, that is metaphysical truths, the defeat of Germany is a catastrophe — and not only for Germany — for its historical mission. The "worldview" of the movement is one thing, he noted, the metaphysical heroism of young poets in uniform quite another. How else can we interpret the lines: "When confronted with death therefore, those young Germans who knew about Hölderlin lived and thought something other than what the public held to be the typical German attitude"(*LH* 219)?

Heidegger, who had stated unequivocally in 1942/1943 that the Germans alone could deliver the West into its beginning, that this historical "*Volk*" had already "triumphed and cannot be triumphed over," feared in 1946 that the "danger" that Germany's defeat poses for "Europe" is its "falling behind" in its "provenance" to announce the new dawn. Unavoidably delayed by catastrophic defeat, the advent is postponed. At this juncture, Heidegger quotes from the penultimate page of *Sein und Zeit*: "The *conflict* with respect to the interpretation of Being (that is, therefore, not the interpretation of beings, or of the Being of man) cannot be settled, *because it has not yet been kindled*" (*LH*, 223 [italics in original]).[62]

The catastrophe is not the collapse of National Socialism, which itself had become a nihilism, or of Nietzscheanism, which deserved what it got, but of Heidegger's conception of National Socialism. National Socialism and the war was not a catastrophe for its victims, only a catastrophe for the advent of Being. What the outcome of the war decided was only the "postponement of the crisis and conflict" that leads to its "unconcealment." It is hardly accidental then that the *Letter*

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62. This sentence achieves two purposes: it builds a bridge to *Sein und Zeit* over the Rectorate while forgetting that the struggle had not merely been "kindled" but "decided," even if provisionally. The key sentence in 1933 reads: "This beginning is the beginning [*Aufbruch*] of Greek philosophy. That is when, from the culture of one's *Volk* and by the power of that *Volk*'s language, Western man rises up for the first time against the totality of what is and questions it and comprehends it as the being that it is." Martin Heidegger, "The Self-Assertion of the German University," Wolin, *The Heidegger Controversy* 31.

concludes with an appeal to Being's guardians and shepherds to an "open resistance to humanism"(*LH* 225).

Heidegger expressed his ultimate judgment on the outcome of World War II even more clearly in 1951/52:

> What did the Second World War decide, if we do not mention its terrible consequences for our Fatherland, in particular the tear through its Center? This World War has decided nothing, if we use 'decision' here in so high and broad a sense that it pertains solely to the destiny of the essence of humanity upon the earth.[63]

The *Letter* is a gesture of defiance in the cloak of humility. Heidegger's complaints about the "peculiar dictatorship of the public sphere," the conflict of "isms," and his tilt toward Marxism, reveal his barely disguised contempt for the occupation. It is also a direct answer to the call for a reckoning with the Nazi past and an opening to democracy, that Jaspers issued in *The Question of German Guilt*, and which he and the University committee found so utterly lacking in Heidegger. The comment Heidegger sent to his former student, Elisabeth Blochmann, in March 1947 is indicative of just how defiant his posture was at that juncture:

> But we are now, as we have been for a long time, in the center of Europe, and as a result, the fatal consequence [*Verhängnis*] has a wholly different power over us. The 'West' of course already collapsed at a time when no one spoke about it. Other 'powers' have long since become *real*. But the question remains nevertheless: whether this reality is the beginning or only the end of the process that for three hundred years has determined the epoch of modernity [*Neuzeit*].[64]

What was that "power" become real, that process, and that collapse which has already occurred? Not merely the collapse of the Third Reich, or of Hitler who, in Heideggerian terms only functioned as a "Myrmidon" [*Scherge*]. Rather, the victory of the American and Soviet armies constituted a descent into a metaphysics of the machine, or "in Marxist terms," the "power of the technical," whose first victim is Germany. The *Letter* expresses this tragedy in these terms: "German is not spoken to the

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63. Martin Heidegger, *Was heißt Denken*? (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1954) 65. Cited in Pöggeler, "Heidegger's Political Self-Understanding," *The Heidegger Controversy*, 207.

64. Martin Heidegger — Elisabeth Blochmann, *Briefwechsel 1918-1969*, ed. Joachim W. Storck (Marbach/Neckar: Marbacher Schriften, 1990) 92.

world so that the world might be reformed though the German essence; rather it is spoken to the Germans so that from a fateful belongingness to the nations they might become world-historical along with them"(*LH* 218). In other words, the German catastrophe is globalized, insofar as "homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world"(*LH* 219).

From this point of view, it is not surprising that a philosopher whose thought centers on the "forgetting of Being," and who is frequently concerned with remembrance [*Andenken*], never publicly remarked on or even alluded to the killing of the Jews, except to coldly compare it to "motorized agriculture."[65] Heidegger's notorious remarks in a letter to his former student Herbert Marcuse which arrogantly refused to distinguish between the fate of the Jews and the fate of East Germans are entirely consistent.[66] The collapse of the one true nihilism capable of carrying metaphysics to its completion was the only true catastrophe of 1945, compared to which a few million victims was a mere side-show.[67]

In the *Letter*, National Socialism, whose essence remains unscathed by its unprecedented crimes, is transferred onto the higher plane of the "West" and joins the metaphysics of the subject, humanism, and nihilism. From Plato to Nietzsche, the error of the West turns out to be Heidegger's and Germany's error. Reduced to one wrong turn, the philosopher's error is indistinguishable from the error of all metaphysical "isms," and that error is no error at all because it belongs to the disclosing/revealing history of Being.[68] The *Letter* is a missive from Being to man, absolving its author of all responsibility. As Habermas put it: "The eventuating of Being transposes the thinker into error. He is absolved from all personal responsibility, because error itself objectively befalls him. A mistake could be ascribed only to an intellectual, an unessential thinker.[69]

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65. Cited in Wolfgang Schirmacher, *Technik und Gelassenheit* (Freiburg: Alber, 1983) 37.

66. The exchange is translated in Wolin, *The Heidegger Controversy* 152-64.

67. Heidegger's notorious silence has been the subject of many commentaries, including Jean Francois Lyotard's *Heidegger and "the Jews"*, trans. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990), which focuses entirely on Heidegger's "forgetting" not merely the murder of the Jews, but the entire history of the Jewish "West" as well. His interpretation ignores the fact that Heidegger was not merely silent but defiant in his rage against the German catastrophe.

68. On this aspect of Heidegger's thought, see Wolin, *The Politics of Being* 137-47.

69. Habermas, "Work and Weltanschauung" 160.

VIII

When he wrote the *Letter* in late 1946 Heidegger already knew that the University Commission would likely prohibit him from teaching, even if the question of his premature retirement or an "emeritus" classification remained undecided. Yet he soon became aware that the French occupation of Baden might also offer a way out of his dilemma. In the spring of 1945 Heidegger proposed, and was refused — "*sans douceur*" — the right to hold a small private seminar on Pascal and seventeenth-century religious thought.[70] In 1945/46 Heidegger was uncharacteristically generous in welcoming several young French visitors who arrived in Freiburg while still in uniform (among them Edgar Morin and Alain Resnais), granting no less than two interviews for a special issue of *Les Temps Modernes*.[71] This German/French nexus structured the double cultural context that has accompanied the story of Heidegger's postwar influence during the past five decades.

For German Heideggerians of the "zero hour," there was only "*one* theme of philosophizing, not the human being and existence, but only and solely Being."[72] This perspective emphasizes man's passive subordination to Being, language as the "site" of Being's disclosure, and the history of metaphysics as the process by which Being delivers the decisive message of its absence to man. By shifting the emphasis to *Ek-sistenz*, in Heidegger's "radical reversal" [*radikale Umkehr*], "Dasein has become Being's act" or, to put it more directly, a "revelation" of Being to man.[73]

Heidegger's involvement in National Socialism was never mentioned in these early German commentaries whose "theological ring" echoed the "silent mastery of the past" after 1945. Adorno's *Jargon of Authen-*

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70. Letter from Louis Sauzin to René le Senne, 17 Dec. 1945, 165.

71. On Heidegger's first contacts with French intellectuals see Jürg Altwegg, *Die Republik des Geistes: Frankreich's Intellektuelle zwischen Revolution und Reaktion* (Munich: Piper, 1989) 90-92; Jean-Michel Palmier, "Wege und Wirken Heideggers in Frankreich," ed. Jürg Altwegg, *Die Heidegger Kontroverse* (Frankfurt/Main: Athenäum, 1988). On the French reception of Heidegger in the 1930s, see Pierre Aubenque, "Heidegger's Wirkungsgeschichte in Frankreich," ed. Kemper, ed. *Martin Heidegger — Faszination und Erschrecken* 114-20;

72. Max Müller, *Existenzphilosophie im geistigen Leben der Gegenwart*, 3rd ed. (Heidelberg: F.H. Kerle Verlag, 1964) 17.

73. See Otto Friedrich Bollnow, "Heideggers neue Kehre," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 2 (1949/50): 113-28; Egon Vietta, "Being, World and Understanding: A Commentary on Heidegger," trans. Susanne Jung-Bauer, *Review of Metaphysics* 5 (1951/2): 157-72.

ticity (1964) was directed against what might be called the "popular" Heideggerianism manifest in a sanctimonious style of public address in which Being is an ontological "alibi," and the "testimonial" [*Aussage*] "the complimentary ideology to silence."[74] Yet it is also evident that the first German Heidegger controversy did center on the question of ethical responsibility. For example, in the 1940s and 1950s, the paramount issue was whether the text should be read as the emptying of all historical and existential contents into the overarching category of Being, so that all ethical action is impossible, or whether the text points towards an "*Überwindung*" of ethics. As Otto Pöggeler and Beda Allemann argued, the *Letter* turned to a new language after the failure of the "metaphysical" to think the ontological difference (between being and Being), pointing to a new or "second way" of regarding humanism.[75]

This German context is far removed from the reception of the *Letter* in France after the Liberation, where the situation in 1946 was more serendipitous in two respects. First, it should be recalled that Heidegger's reputation in the French speaking world, though tarnished, was still very much intact. In April 1940, while still in the army, Sartre declared himself a "partisan of Heidegger," and the debt to him and to Husserl was frequently acknowledged by others within the orbit of postwar existentialism: Merleau-Ponty, Alphonse de Waehlens, Jean Wahl, Emannuel Levinas.[76]

In October 1945, Alfred de Towarnicki, still in French military uniform, attempted to arrange a meeting between Heidegger and Sartre. Though the meeting never came off, Heidegger, after some hesitation, sent Sartre a letter which has recently been discovered.[77] In it he mentioned that he had been given a copy of *L'être et le néant* by de Towar-

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74. Adorno, *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit* 16.

75. Beda Allemann, *Hölderlin and Heidegger*, 2nd ed. (Atlantis: Zürich and Freiburg, 1956) 164; Otto Friedrich Bollnow "Heidegger's neue Kehre" 113-28.

76. Annie Cohen-Solal, *Sartre: A Life*, trans. Anna Cancogni (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987) 153

77. The letter is published in Hugo Ott, "In der kleinen Skihütte zusammen philosophieren," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (19 Jan. 1994) 27. *Sein und Zeit* was not translated into French until 1964. Even today there are two translations and a controversy over their legitimacy and adequacy. Heidegger's work began to appear in French translation in the 1930s with Henri Corbin's translation of "What is Metaphysics" and several other essays in 1937. For discussion of the reception of Heidegger in France, and the semantic problems raised by Corbin's translation see Michel Palmier, "Wege und Wirken Heideggers in Frankreich" 50, 51. Also see Palmier's *Les écrits politiques de Heidegger* (Paris: L'herne, 1968).

nicki, and that "for the first time I was confronted with an independent thinker, who from the very foundations experienced the dimension from which I think. Your work," he added, "is dominated by an immediacy of understanding of my philosophy, that I have never before experienced." Heidegger added that he hoped for a "fruitful discussion" [*fruchtbare Auseinandersetzung*] but also cautioned that since he had written *Sein und Zeit* twenty years earlier, he now saw many things "more clearly and more simply." More specifically, he wrote that though he found the "introduction" and "conclusion" to Sartre's work "stimulating" [*erregend*], he now regarded these questions from the perspective of a "primordial relation to history, above all in connection with the beginning of Occidental thinking, which until today is subordinated to the predominance of Platonism."[78] He concluded by inviting Sartre, in the course of the winter, to visit him in the ski-hut, "and from there to philosophize together, and make a ski-tour of the Black Forest." A month later he confided to his friend Rudolf Stadelmann that he had come to realize that his work had already "influenced and stimulated" the thinking of the youth of France in intellectual matters, but that he preferred to wait until the possibility existed to make his work available to the Germans before he "risked our thinking having such an influence in France."[79]

Already in 1945/46 Marxists like Henri Lefebvre were tarring the existentialists with a "fascist" connection — above all that of Heidegger.[80] In 1947 Sartre published an introduction to one of three issues *Les Temps Modernes* devoted to Heidegger. Sartre claimed — in a statement that can only be read with some astonishment —that there was no more connection between Heidegger's phenomenology and his politics than there was between Hegel's dialectical logic and his politics.[81]

If Sartre wanted to protect Heidegger's reputation, others soon recognized the latter's even greater usefulness in destroying Sartre's. In

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78. *Ibid.*

79. *Ibid.* 153.

80. De Towarnicki's account and that of Maurice de Gandillac were the first partially false, and apologetic versions of Heidegger's involvement to appear in France. Those that challenged them, apart from Löwith, were among the most dogmatic and orthodox communists, such as Lefebvre and Armand Cuvillier.

81. De Waehlens challenged Karl Löwith's account of the close connection between Heidegger's notion of historicity and the resolute decision for National Socialism by claiming that the notion of "authenticity" in *Sein und Zeit* implied no political choices, apart from those which "reject Nazism and in its ideals of nation, state and war." Even those, like, the philosopher Eric Weill, who demurred, focused more on Heidegger's behavior after the war, then on the connections between his philosophy and politics. On the debate in *Les Temps Modernes* see Rockmore, *On Heidegger's Nazism,* 252-256.

1945, a young philosophy teacher named Jean Beaufret published a series of articles in which he constantly invoked Heidegger to challenge Sartre's virtually undisputed preeminence over existentialism. Beaufret portrayed himself as the true disciple, in contrast to Sartre, who only "exacerbated confusion." To truly grasp existentialism, he wrote, it was necessary to "taste" the real thing, the "most profound and original" thought of the great philosopher "who doubles as a great writer."[82] Beaufret later recalled that in 1944, while teaching philosophy at a Lycée in Lyon, a colleague burst into his classroom with the cry, "they have landed." Beaufret reproached himself for not having had the same enthusiasm for the allied invasion as he did for "the feeling for the first time, on that 6th of June 1944, to have begun to understand something, of what Heidegger wrote."[83]

Beaufret's long career as the protector of the Heideggerian flame, a career which reached its denouement with the 1981 scandal of his support for the Holocaust "revisionist," Robert Faurisson, began as early as December 1945.[84] At that time, Beaufret gave a long interview to *Le Monde*, in which he falsely claimed that Heidegger had been prohibited from publishing by the Nazis for twelve years. Even prior to his first meeting with Heidegger in September 1946, Beaufret defended him against what he called Sartre's "hasty" conclusion, published in the 27 December 1944 issue of *Action*, that "Heidegger has no character, that is the truth."[85] Beaufret's explanation of Heidegger's Nazism was that Heidegger, like Rilke, naively saw in fascism "an authentic philosophy of resoluteness in the face of death." His was not merely the naiveté of a "distracted intellectual," Beaufret added, but a typical

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82. Jean Beaufret, "A propos de l'existentialisme," *Confluences* 3, April 1945: 307. In these articles Beaufret emphasized the distinction between Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* as a being-in-the-world that transcends subjectivity, conscience, or *ego*, and Sartre's version of "L'être" which is pure subjectivity redefined as radical liberty.

83. Jean Beaufret, *Entretiens avec Fréderic de Towarnicki* (Paris: PUF, 1984) 4.

84. Jean Beaufret, "Qu'est-ce que l'existentialisme?" Interview par Henri Magnan, *Le Monde* 306 (11 Dec. 1945): 3; 310 (15 Dec. 1945): 3.

85. The remark is cited in Beaufret, "A propos de l'existentialisme," 314. After the war, Sartre argued that this lapse of character was irrelevant to philosophy. In the February 1946 issue of *Les Temps Modernes* Sartre introduced the debate with this comment: "The French press speaks of Heidegger as a Nazi; it is a fact that he was a member of the Nazi Party. But if it were only a matter of judging a philosophy by the political courage and lucidity of the philosopher, Hegel's would not be worth much. One might conclude that a philosopher would be disloyal to his greatest thoughts if they resulted in political decisions." *Les Temps Modernes* 1:4 (Jan. 1946) 713.

and fundamentally unconscious trait of the "petty bourgeois."[86]

After Beaufret's first encounter with Heidegger in September 1946, and after becoming familiar with Heidegger's wartime publications, Beaufret published the first article to trace Heidegger's philosophical development since *Being and Time*.[87] This study, which appeared as a preface to the *Letter* in November 1947, established Beaufret as Heidegger's messenger in France, not only because of his fidelity to his master's voice, or his willingness to do battle against any and all of his misinterpreters and maligners, but above all because of his acute sense of the strategic possibilities of Heidegger's philosophy in new, postwar circumstances.[88]

Ironically, it was Marxism, not existentialism, that first propelled Beaufret to make a pilgrimage to the hut in Todtnauburg. He was led by his correct intuition that the perspective of the history of Being sanctioned Marxism's account of violence in human history. Neither Marxism nor Heidegger hypocritically condemn what Hegel called the "slaughter bench" of history, because struggle and violence are the inner law of both class struggle and *Seinsgeschichte*. Originary violence is the primordial beginning of both civil society and Being, and both Heidegger and Marx see through the masquerade of the hypocritical humanism which serves as the West's legitimation. For Beaufret, to be a Marxist "is to be at war precisely where the enemy pretends to be at peace."[89]

This neo-Machiavellianism of the Left, we should remember, was not peculiar to Beaufret. Not surprisingly, both Heidegger and the Marxists around *Les Temps Modernes* regarded Stalin's victory as proof positive

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86. Beaufret, "A propos de l'existentialisme" 314.

87. Jean Beaufret, "Martin Heidegger et le Problème de la Vérité," *Fontaine* 63 (Nov. 1947): 758-85.

88. He concentrated particularly on Armand Cuvillier (Percivax), author of an anti-Heideggerian pamphlet, Les infiltrations germaniques dans la pensée française (Paris: Éditions Universelles, 1945), perhaps the first to portray Heidegger as "the metaphysician of Nazism,." According to Cuvillier, the popularity of existentialism (Heidegger and Jaspers) in Germany during the 1920s and 1930s could only be explained by the totally desperate and hopeless situation of German youth, a state of mind which also explained the postwar Heidegger "craze" in France. Beaufret in turn accused Cuvillier of among other things, a profound ignorance of German thought, existentialism and, Marxism, as well as an extreme chauvinism. (In response, Cuvillier cited the egregious lines of the Rectorial Address, and pointed to Beaufret's tendentious coupling of Heidegger with anti-Nazism). Jean Beaufret, "Vers une critique marxiste de l'existentialisme," Revue Socialiste, Nouvelle Serie 2 (July 1946): 149-52; and the response by Cuvillier, *Revue Socialiste* 4: 450-60.

89. Jean Beaufret, "Questions du Communisme," Entretiens-Réponse à la enquete de Roger Stéphane, *Confluences* 18-20 (1947): 43.

that a new historical epoch had been inaugurated. The argument that Stalinism was a "humanism," and the Moscow trials were justified by the dialectical logic of history, was the basis of Merleau-Ponty's arguments in *Humanism and Terror*, which appeared in the same year (1947).[90]

The famous passage in the *Letter* proclaiming that the "Marxist view of history is superior to that of other historical accounts"(*LH* 219) is the chief sign of Heidegger's reciprocal acknowledgment of the opening to the Left. By 1947 Beaufret's main line of defense was well rehearsed: Heidegger's philosophy is the most original and profound version of existentialism; there is no connection between *Being and Time* and National Socialism; Heidegger was a victim of Nazi ideologues; and there is no reason why Heidegger's thought could not be compatible with Marxism. The French connection explains, as I have already suggested, the otherwise inexplicable "Marxism" of the *Letter.*

IX

The *Letter* did not merely serve its author as a grand exoneration. By situating the violence of human history in the nihilistic and destructive war of subject-centered humanisms, it offered a new generation a way out of the vicissitudes of the Cold War. A radical left-wing Heideggerianism was already anticipated by Beaufret in 1947, but by the late 1960s it was recast with Sartre once again the iconic representative of existential-Marxism, a Marxism that had itself fallen on hard times with the explosion of sectarian politics and Maoism, not to mention Sartre's own communist apologetics.[91] In this new context the *Letter*, in which Sartre's voluntaristic Heideggerianism is the antipode to Heidegger's postwar thinking, called into question the very origins of political commitment, and once again pointed to a way out of the dilemmas of engagement.

Derrida's "The Ends of Man," written in 1968 at the height of the Vietnam War and delivered in New York in May of that year, begins with a frontal assault on Sartre's misreading of *Being and Time*. The essay faithfully replicates the procedure of the *Letter*, though Derrida's criticism is aimed directly at the edifice of French Hegelianism, built upon Alexander Kojève's reading of Hegel, and Sartre's purported

90. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, trans. John O' Neill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

91. See Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals 1944-1956* (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1992).

(mis)reading of Husserl and Heidegger. This interpretive tradition, Derrida argues, is fundamentally wedded to the logic of transcendence, and as such, is unable to free itself from the onto-theological determinations of its various essentialisms. For example, Sartre's translation of *Dasein* as "human reality" is "monstrous" because it leaves unexamined the entire conceptual framework with which Heidegger had so decisively broken. Whereas the Heideggerian *Dasein* is bound to a situation which is anterior to the framing of such categories as subject and object, Sartre simply substitutes one ideal of man's perfectibility for another. Existentialism, so to speak, took man for granted and, notes Derrida, "everything occurs as if the sign 'man' had no origin, no historical, cultural, or linguistic limit."[92] The "magnetic attraction" of Heidegger's "archeological radicalness" is its uncompromising refusal to leave unquestioned any metaphysical structuring of Being, its claim to look beyond "the identity or self-presence" of any unity that claims to be collectively — "man". What Derrida finds in the Sartrean emphasis on some authentic or essential truth of "the end" of man, is ultimately a logic of exclusion, of distinctiveness, of privilege, that *a priori* corrupts its own radical premise.

However, it should also be clear to anyone with a rudimentary acquaintance with deconstruction that Derrida has never shared what he called "Heidegger's hope." There is no trace of nostalgia for a moment of thinking that reaches beyond the origins of the first "false" Enlightenment of the Greek thought of Being, beyond Plato and the West, where language was pure in the light of Being, not yet implicated in false claims to logic, truth, or hierarchy or power. Here Derrida parts company with Heidegger, who remains within the metaphysical tradition of a higher, more, profound humanism of "letting be," or "listening to Being." Derrida's response to Emmanuel Levinas turns Heidegger upside down by insisting not on an ethical reading of Being "as a pluralism which does not fuse into unity," but on the impossibility of returning to a humanist ethics. Levinas had seen that the priority of Being subordinates, tyrannizes, and neutralizes the other to such a degree that "Ontology as a first philosophy is a philosophy of power."[93]

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92. Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man," *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982): 108-36. Hereafter cited paranthetically as *EM*.

93. Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978) 97. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *VM*.

Yet Derrida regards Levinas's return to the subjectivity of the other, the face-to-face encounter that is prior to all positing of being, as something quite impossible apart "from a hollow space of finitude in which messianic eschatology comes to resonate." In short, violence in Derrida's critique cannot be reduced to a purely ethical act without taking into account "violence as the origin of meaning"(*VM* 127).

My point here is not that Derrida succumbed to a totalitarian temptation or that Heidegger's thought should be quarantined. Nor am I claiming that deconstruction is simply unadulterated Heideggerianism, or that "today's Heideggerianism has simply taken up where yesterday's exhausted Marxism left off."[94] Heidegger's project of "overcoming metaphysics," in Derrida's essay takes neither the form of humanism nor anti-humanism, but posits an escape or remove from the opposition between them.[95] The power of the text to transcend its immediate circumstances and still generate — as it has for Levinas, for Arendt, and also for Habermas — "lasting insights" is undeniable.[96]

For Derrida, especially in 1968, Heidegger's radical critique of subjectivist metaphysics would not permit him to remain content with Levinas's ethical non-violence, precisely because Heidegger's post-metaphysical thinking penetrated to "the violent relationship of the West to its other," a relationship in which language is complicit with an ethnological, economic, political and military violence. Satisfying as it may have been at the height of the Vietnam War, Derrida's response leaves the more fundamental question unasked: did not Heidegger's "original" framing of humanism as a metaphysics of the will to power level all distinctions? How do we now evaluate the legacy of Heidegger's refusal to distinguish among the "humanisms" of the West (which includes its most extreme racist manifestation), his flattening of the history of Being? The irony that before 1945 the majority of Heideggerians were on the right, and after 1946, on the left, does not minimize the crucial weakness in the post-Heideggerian "questioning" of the political, its "bias to denigrate public life," to define politics entirely in terms of the exclusionary matrix of all metaphysical humanisms:

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94. Tzvetan Todorov, *Times Literary Supplement* (June 17-23, 1988): 676.

95. See for example, Alan D. Schrift, "Foucault, Derrida on Nietzsche and the End(s) of 'Man'," *Exceedingly Nietzsche: Aspects of Contemporary Nietzsche Interpretation,* eds. David Farrell Krell and David Wood (London and New York: Routledge, 1988) 146.

96. Habermas, "Work and Weltanschauung" 165.

"man, production, biology, race."[97] This difficulty has not escaped even those who are sympathetic to Heidegger's thought, like Dominique Janicaud, who has called it "a complete blurring of the ontical specificities of the political dimension."[98]

Derrida sought to confront this difficulty in his 1987 account of Heidegger's involvement in National Socialism, *Of Spirit*.[99] Derrida contends that Heidegger, who should have known better, consciously returned to the word "Spirit" in the Rectorial Address and the texts of the Nazi period without deploying the all-important "scare quotes" that still surrounded it in *Being and Time*. This return to a metaphysics of "presence" is no mere *lapsus* but rather, Derrida speculates, a tactical move, by which Heidegger opposed and resisted the worst of Nazism — its racism — by sanctioning its "spiritual" project of a German/Greek resurrection of the West. This move, however, commits two sins at once: it assents to Nazism and it restores the "subjectivism" already exorcised from *Being and Time*, a linguistic regression that made Heidegger complicit with Nazism by putting a "decision" about "history" in the realm of human action. The *Rektoratsrede*, Derrida claims, "capitalizes on the worst, that is on both evils at once: the sanctioning of Nazism, and the gesture that is still metaphysical" (*OS* 40). Heidegger's justification of Nazism was made inevitable by his having recourse to a metaphysical language that he had already once abandoned, the language of humanism.

There are three serious problems with Derrida's conceptualization of Heidegger's involvement: first, historians who are aware that Nazism never prescribed a monolithic ideology, that its political polyvalence carried over into matters of doctrine, will find his juxtaposition of "spirit and race" simplistic. As we have seen, Nazism permitted a relatively polyphonous array of ideological doctrines, and even the primacy of "race" was never wholly enunciated as an official doctrine.The "humanism debate" during the early 1940s reveals Heidegger's effort to find a middle path between his own earlier formulation of a philosophical

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97. See Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge: MIT, 1992), 79-141.

98. Dominique Janicaud, "Restructuring the Political," *Heidegger and the Political, The Graduate Philosophy Journal*, 14:2, 15:1 (1991): 139.

99. Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geofrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1989). Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *OS*.

approach to Nazism and the doctrine of racial breeding.

Second, Derrida unquestioningly accepts Heidegger's claim to having "resisted" National Socialism, a claim that even Heidegger himself revealed to be disingenuous, when, in 1945, he directed a few bitter remarks about "guilt" to those who did not — "in a secret bond" — seek, as he did, to "refine and temper" the movement which had gained power."[100] Heidegger's Hellenic-Nietzschean National Socialism was, as I have indicated, distinctive, but it could only be considered "opposed" to Nazi doctrine as a potentially influential alternative within Nazism's fundamental premises.

Third, Derrida's overemphasis on the absence of the "scare quotes" around "spirit" in the Rectorial Address does indeed point to a difference from *Being and Time*, but it underestimates the more fundamentally nationalist and activist sense of a German mission in Heidegger's Nazism. In that respect, Heidegger's vision of a German/Greek *polis*, the fundamentally aesthetic ideal of state construction in its originary violence is reduced to a linguistic misstep. Here Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of Heidegger's "archi-fascism" is more consistent with his insistence on a Greek/German synthesis in the *Rektoratsrede*. For Heidegger, a second German/Greek beginning was the true promise of Nazism: a reorientation in the interpretation of the essence of knowledge, an overturning of slave morality, a shift in the meaning of *techné* — or making real. This German Greece or "meta-Greece" (Germany, Lacoue-Labarthe says, "only exists in the distress of not existing") is an aesthetic reversal, the substitution of a poetic state for a scientific-technological one.[101]

Towards the end of *Of Spirit* Derrida poses the issue which his own involvement in "the Heidegger Affair" of 1987 brought to public attention: the more serious question of the Heideggerian legacy. How do we account not merely for Heidegger's failing to perceive the essential truth of the regime he supported, but for his more consequential attempt to extricate himself from his "error" by demonstrating that it was the product, perhaps even the necessary disclosure of a more fundamental history of Being?

Derrida does not go so far as to claim, as does Lacoue-Labarthe, that "Nazism is a humanism in so far as it rests upon a determination of

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100. Pöggeler, "Heidegger's Self-Understanding" 277.
101. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics* 86.

humanitas."[102] But he does argue that Heidegger trapped himself in the fatal logic of his own metaphysical discourse by opposing "spirit" to race. His mistake was not merely trying to "humanize Nazism." Rather, by opposing racism with his own spiritualized "will to power" he could still believe that National Socialism — despite its ideological excesses —would be the vehicle of Being's self-disclosure. In short, in spite of its "worldview," the "Nietzschean" nihilism of National Socialism might still be Being's way of disclosing to man that the epoch of metaphysics was at an end. Heidegger's thought was still hopelessly "metaphysical," "caught in the metaphysico-Platonic-Christian oppositions of the below and the beyond"(*OS* 33).

Only in 1953, in an essay on the poet Georg Trakl, Derrida claims, did Heidegger finally extinguish the term "spirit," consigning it to "flame." The flame, and here one can only interpret, is a sign of recognition that all metaphysical humanisms are ultimately complicit in their respective political involvements, including those they claim to resist. This complicity is inevitable once the language of metaphysics, of the "truth of man," is invoked, even for those who did not embrace, or resisted Nazism: "Because one cannot demarcate oneself from biologism, from naturalism, from racism in its genetic form, one cannot be *opposed* to them except by reinscribing spirit in an oppositional determination, by once again making it a unilaterality of subjectivity, even if in its voluntarist form" (*OS* 39).

What was attractive to Derrida in 1968 was that the *Letter* avoided the "contaminations" of an overinflated subjectivity: of revolutionary utopianism, of political commitments fallen into disrepute, corrupted by bloody regimes, terrorism and violence. Heidegger's own complicity was relegated to the margins of the text. At the time it appeared that only a radical refusal of metaphysics could outwit the rapid descent of the New Left into its own revolutionary apocalypse. Yet, in 1987, Derrida seemed to acknowledge that we can no longer be seduced into thinking that there is any magical formula that avoids such future "risks." This risk — Derrida says — is even there for those who opposed Nazism (he includes Heidegger) since there is a "law of commonality" that persists in any appeal to "spiritual" freedom, "threads shared by Nazism and non-Nazism, the law of resemblance, the fatality

102. *Ibid.* 95.

of perversion."[103] What this means, in the final analysis, is that there can be no avoiding the contaminations of intellectual traditions — that there is very little difference between fascism and anti-fascism.

It seems that for Derrida the circle has come round, from Sartrean anti-Fascism, with its own lethal contaminations, to Heidegger's "solution," and once again to Heidegger's own contamination. Yet this also brings us back to the issue of the unresolved legacy. By introducing the problem of the need to establish differences and distinctions within metaphysics, Derrida seems at once to accept and simultaneously to resist the conclusion that in the end the problem still remains one of "demarcations." The crucial passage deserves full quotation:

> The constraint of this program remains very strong, it reigns over the majority of discourses which, today and for a long time to come, state their opposition to racism, to totalitarianism, to nazism, to fascism, etc., and do this in the name of spirit, in the name of an axiomatic — for example, that of democracy or "human rights" — which directly or not, comes back to this metaphysics of *subjectivity.* All the pitfalls of this strategy of establishing demarcations belong to this program, whatever place one occupies in it. *The only choice is the choice between the terrifying contaminations it assigns. Even if all forms of complicity are not equivalent, they are irreducible* [my italics, A.R.]. The question of knowing which is the least grave of these forms of complicity is always there, its urgency and its seriousness could not be overstressed, but it will never dissolve the irreducibility of this fact. (*OS* 40)

If indeed the "forms of complicity" are a constant, why does Derrida foreground their "irreducibility" against the background of their non-equivalence? What does this reversal of emphasis mean? If the "only choice" is between these forms, if the urgent matter for us is to discern the ways in which they "are not equivalent," why does he bring us back finally to what is not different, not alterable, "irreducible?" Is this point of conclusion not in fact just a beginning, whose next logical step might be that *"humanisms" do not have the same face*, that some "transcendental" systems of belief — Nazism, for example — cannot be equated with humanism at all.

Is this admission not already implicit in Derrida's own construction of a Heideggerian "spirit" as the philosopher's antipode to race, so

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103. Derrida, "Philosopher's Hell: An Interview," Wolin, *The Heidegger Controversy*, 269.

that even within the terms of the Nazi discourse we have discussed, he makes a hierarchy of "demarcations?" Doesn't "spirit" still transcend racism's natural determinations? Does Derrida not return here to the problem of "will," and "action," even perhaps to "tolerance" — precisely the terms exorcised once and for all by the *Letter*? And finally, isn't the legacy of the *Letter* that by absolving Heidegger of responsibility and complicity, by making his error the error of all "humanism" since Plato, it too becomes yet another "totalizing" program? Is Derrida conceding that there is no way of *not* returning to the "metaphysics" of being, to privilege one account of "subjectivity" over another, to at once recognize that the "terrifying" side of Reason or "Spirit" is that it obliterates difference, and yet to see that obliteration in terms that do not "anesthetize" us to the contingencies of human experience?

If we can no longer revoke the knowledge of "contamination" and complicity that these critiques — Heidegger's no less than the others — have urged upon us: if now we recognize the complicity of all humanisms, all projects of enlightenment, all transcendental subjects, then we are faced with the task of making a different kind of distinction. The upshot of the Heidegger question is that the question for us is no longer a simplistic "for" or "against" humanism. For if humanism can no longer be idealized except by willful naiveté and denial of catastrophe, so it can no longer be monolithically dismissed except by an equally totalizing conceptual framework which obliterates such distinctions. Such distinctions can only be made by conceding that in politics, ethical considerations do matter, that humanism is not always entirely indifferent to history's victims, and is sometimes even conceived as an expression of solidarity with them.

To make this sort of discrimination returns Derrida and us to the problem distinguishing between the overpowering indifference of some forms of Reason, and forms that are still capable of solidarity with suffering and reflection. The problem of "humanism" is that it is not historically uniform, uncontradictory, monolithic; reason cannot be dismissed "by the yardstick of a teleological history of humanity."[104] Although it was not written with the *Letter* in mind, to have identified this problem in the same catastrophic event as Heidegger, but from the point of view of solidarity with its victims, is the lasting contribution of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment.*

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104. Ferry and Renaut, *Heidegger and Modernity* 103.

Unlike Heidegger, Adorno and Horkheimer were able to sustain the tension between the destructive omnipotence of thought and the capacity of subjects to resist it. Their work, for all its similarities to Heidegger's in situating the catastrophe in the history of Western reason, posed the question that Derrida now acknowledges is inescapable, the question of a possible, if partial retrieval. Their thinking pointed to the unfulfilled possibilities of modernity, as well as to the reality of the catastrophe, rather than await a new "advent." What makes enlightenment totalitarian, they concluded, was not Reason itself, but the subject's loss of the ability to differentiate, the price of mental omnipotence. Given that diagnosis, they recognized that critique could no longer be expected either from transcendental Reason or the transcendental subject of history. Yet their contribution was to insist that, though rationalism was itself responsible for the decline of critical thought, they never cease to ask "whether reason —as a force of domination of nature — is able to gain control of itself, to reflect on itself."[105] Their paradoxical conclusion, that only enlightenment "can break the bounds of enlightenment," is *avant la lettre*, a response to the legacy of the *Letter.*

105. See Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Back to Adorno," *Telos* 81 (Fall 1989): 13.