

# A letter on "The Case of Martin Heidegger"

15 April 2000

*The following letter was received in response to the series "The Case of Martin Heidegger, Philosopher and Nazi," which appeared on the WSWS April 3-5.*

Dear Editor,

I want to add my appreciation to those I am certain you have already received in response to Alex Steiner's Heidegger series.

This is an authoritative analysis, and must be the fruit of years of work, in line with the undertaking of the party to champion critical thought in every area of intellectual endeavour. It is of groundbreaking significance to pierce the confusion surrounding the adverse influence of Heidegger in the twentieth century.

I think that the assessment of Hannah Arendt's article "Heidegger at Eighty" is masterly.

In her letters to Karl Jaspers, Arendt said in 1951: "Explanations would not have been genuine, because he really doesn't know and is hardly in a position to find out what devil drove him into what he did. He would be only too glad 'to let things fade out of sight.' I've obviously prevented him from doing that. You're right that he has written as one can only to a true friend after thirty years of unbroken friendship. But don't forget how cautious and evasive his original reactions were. As you can see, I have a guilty conscience." [1]

But as the second part of this series indicates, she weighed in with fervor in the attempt to rehabilitate Heidegger's reputation, providing the "fertile image" of the naïve philosopher overwhelmed by events. She retold the story of Thales tripping into the well while he concentrated on watching the stars, evoking the laughter of the Thracian maid. (Somehow this has evoked a postmodernist intimation that there is a self-portrait contained here also—Jacques Taminiaux, *The Thracian Maid and The Professional Thinker: Arendt and Heidegger*, 1997) Arendt's retelling of this tale is disingenuous, to say the least. But as the series brings out, it has proved a rich source for numerous apologists for Heidegger.

These include those upholding his influence in the field of literary criticism and comparative literature, which has been pronounced. One particular case in point is George Steiner, whose introduction to his work on Heidegger takes its cue

directly from Arendt. In noting Heidegger's intellectual influence in the 1920s, it utilises her term "the hidden king of thought," as "the secret king of thought," taking this to mean that Heidegger's importance was not yet based on published works, and was virtually that of an underground disseminator of ideas. [2] George Steiner embroiders an image in the same vein as Arendt's endorsement of Heidegger's fabrication of his own "spiritual opposition" to Nazism.

In an earlier work, "In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture," (1971) he wrote: "One of the principal works that we have in the philosophy of language, in the total reading of Holderlin's poetry, was composed almost within earshot of a death camp. Heidegger's pen did not stop nor his mind go mute." [3]

Not only is this to separate Heidegger's pen and mind from any responsibility for Nazism in a completely one-sided manner that takes criticism nowhere, and to advance the contentious judgement that Heidegger's reading of Holderlin's poetry was definitive, but also to imply that this reading involved him in a spiritual struggle against fascism.

This is even more explicit in the book *Martin Heidegger* (1978), where basing himself on Heidegger's so-called turn, George Steiner asserts: "Only in the 1930s, under stress of public events and in the conviction that the language of *Sein und Zeit* had proved inadequate to its innovative, revolutionary purpose, that Heidegger turned fully to Holderlin. The four readings of Holderlin that Heidegger gave in the guise of lectures and essays between 1936 and 1944 make up one of the most disconcerting, spellbinding documents in the history of Western literature and linguistic sensibility. Spoken against a backdrop of deepening barbarism and national self destruction, these commentaries on a number of Holderlin's major hymns are nothing less than an endeavour to pierce, via a singular kind of textual and critical exegesis, to the last sanctuary of poetic invention, national identity and human speech itself." [4]

Now "public events" drive Heidegger to present his thoughts "in the guise of lectures and essays", as though he were presenting oppositional thoughts under the cover of his official duties. But his commentaries on Holderlin could co-exist comfortably with National Socialist conceptions of

Holderlin the German nationalist icon.

They were also bound up with seeing poetry alone as able to escape the history of metaphysics. Supposedly, between the poets of ancient Greece and the present, only Holderlin and Heidegger himself had escaped the grip of metaphysics.

"Holderlin does not belong to 'humanism' precisely because he thought the destiny of man's essence in a more original way than 'humanism' could." [5]

"Remembrance is therefore essentially more primordial and thus more significant for the future than the mere cosmopolitanism of Goethe. For the same reason, Holderlin's relation to Greek civilisation is something essentially other than humanism" (Letter on Humanism). [6]

This essay established Jean Beufret as the official interpreter of Heidegger in France, and he was to invite Heidegger to France during the 1950s and introduce him to poet Rene Char, to Georges Braque and to Jacques Lacan.

George Steiner grudgingly mentions that "Holderlin scholars, notably Bernhard Boschenstein, have no difficulty in showing that Heidegger's readings are very often indefensible." [7] In fact more and more scholars undermined Heidegger's reading of Holderlin's works. One of the most damaging to Heidegger's sway over Holderlin criticism was Pierre Bertaux, who had written his doctoral thesis on the poet in 1933, and returned to academic studies in the 1960s. His *Holderlin und die französische Revolution* (1969) placed Holderlin firmly within the universalist traditions of the French Revolution, and in this way well inside the history of metaphysics.

Peter Weiss's controversial play *Holderlin* (1971) attempted to grapple with some of these issues dramatically. In 1984 two scholars Klaus Weimar and Christoph Jermann wrote a detailed indictment of Heidegger's influence on Holderlin criticism, and included an assessment that his influence on literary criticism and theory of literature had finished. Their article had the subtitle: *Towards the Revision of a Lazy Peace*.

But it had not been scotched. Then occurred the revival of Heidegger influence in France and the United States. In the new 1991 introduction to *Martin Heidegger*, George Steiner admitted the impact of Farias' work, admitted that Heidegger may have contributed to the "ambience of fatality and of dramatization in which Nazism flourished" and disassociated himself from the apologetics of Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe. But claiming that the historical record had not been settled, he then sought meanwhile to rehabilitate Heidegger again, on the basis of his association with poets: "If I sense rightly the attitude towards Heidegger of the great poet and Resistance fighter Rene Char or of an admirer such as Braque, it points in this direction. What could Heidegger have said?" [8] This is made even more explicit in the

explanation of the relationship between Heidegger and German poet Paul Celan, and specifically Celan's 1970 poem *Todtnauberg*. "Whatever happened at Todtnauberg, when the foremost poet in the language after Holderlin and Rilke sought out the 'secret king of thought', blasphemed against Heidegger's sense of the holiness of asking. It may, for our epoch at least, have made irreparable the breach between human need and speculative thought, between the music of thought that is philosophy and that of being which is poetry." [9] To rescue Heidegger, George Steiner has advanced the unknowable.

Alex Steiner's series is in complete opposition to this method. The section of the series on the *Danse Macabre* between Heidegger, Pragmatism and Postmodernism really serves as a settling of accounts that he has carried out, and the whole work will prove itself to be a seminal piece.

Once again in appreciation,

Margaret Rees

13 April 2000

**Notes:**

1. Lotte Kohle & Hans Saner (eds,) *Hannah Arendt/ Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969*, translated from German by Robert and Rita Kimber, Harcourt and Brace, NY, 1992, letter 109, March 4, 1951
2. George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger*, University of Chicago, 1991, p. 6
3. George Steiner, *Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture*, London, Faber, 1971, p. 63
4. George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger*, p. 141
5. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (ed) David Farrell Krell, Routledge, London, 1999, p. 225
6. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* pp. 242-43
7. George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger*, p. 143
8. George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger*, p. xxx
9. George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger*, p. xxxiii

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