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Shattering the Political or the Question of War in Heidegger's Letter on Humanism

Babette Babich (Fordham University)

Jean Beaufret's question concerning humanism was "politically" framed on several levels as initially presented to Heidegger.¹ Accordingly, Heidegger's own response was itself political: invoking both technology and the self-same question of science that we remain—and to this day—still "too pious" (in Nietzsche's words) to be able to frame *as* a question: the very same question Heidegger develops in his later lectures delivered to the businessmen of Germany, including his *Question Concerning Technology*.²

The preoccupation with thinking technology and thinking science remains with Heidegger to the end of his life.³ Even more significant perhaps (particularly in proximity with Heidegger's focus on language as the "house of

¹ Heidegger however insists "Aber der Hauptsatz des «Existentialismus» hat mit jenem Satz in «Sein und Zeit» nicht das geringste gemeinsam" and he demonstrates this in point of fact. See Heidegger, *Über den Humanismus. Brief an J. Beaufret, Paris* (Bern: Francke, 1954). Citations for Heidegger's "The Letter on Humanism" follow Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) and the same translation appears in *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Note Heidegger's impatience with this question even in his initial response to its first formulation.

² The question concerning science is not resolved here as it is not resolved by the Freiburg and Bremen lectures, nor in the decade and a half to follow. Later Heidegger will go on to note science's exclusive concern with "Seienden" together with the conviction that "die Wissenschaft allein gebe die objektive Wahrheit," whereby and to be sure Heidegger's contrast with science as „die neue Religion“ is ironic: "Ihr gegenüber scheint ein Versuch, das Sein zu denken, willkürlich und ‚mystisch‘." *Zollikon Seminars: Protokolls—Conversation—Letters* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 18.

³ See for discussions the contributions, including my own, in Patricia Glazebrook, ed., *Heidegger on Science* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012) as well as Babich, Denker, and Zaborowski, eds., *Heidegger und Nietzsche* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Verlag, 2012).

Being” as on the human as “the shepherd of Being”—rather than as “lord of beings”—and on thinking through the notions of *Näbe* and *Nachbarschaft*), is Heidegger’s focus on malevolence, *das Bösertige*, thought in terms of the entanglements of what heals or saves or redeems [*das Heilen*] and of what is holy [*Heilig*]. Relevantly, Nietzsche himself cannot but set *das Böse* together with the good—that is to say, good *and* evil, *Gut und Böse*—even in his program to go beyond both as he writes in his *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. For Heidegger, good logician that he is, following Parmenides, following the scholastics: “Every ‘no’ is simply the affirmation of the ‘not.’ [*Alles Nein ist nur die Bejahung des Nicht.*] Every affirmation consists in acknowledgment.” (237/355)

In this sense, what is to be thought beyond the wretched dealings of human beings—“*der bloßen Schlechtigkeit des menschlichen Handelns*”—is the uncanny malignancy of viciousness, what Heidegger calls the ‘Grimm,’ a word which, like *grauenvoll* and *unheimlich*, words to be taken in a precisely ontic and literal sense, reflecting the world as it remained or better said as it was left for Heidegger and his countrymen in the wake of the destruction of World War II, not only in (but especially in) Germany, not only for (but especially for) Germans.

Heidegger does not say more than this. The effort to think through this claim has taken the energies of many scholars before me and Heidegger himself finds it worth outlining as necessary where evil comes to presence in the holy, as in healing: “With healing, evil appears all the more in the clearing of Being.” (237/355)

But beyond the elusive and troubling reflection on good and evil, beyond the issue of the human and the inhuman, i.e., the hard edges of nihilism, what runs throughout the *Letter on Humanism* is Heidegger’s own author’s concern with what can be called the ‘failure’ of his thinking. This failure is evident in what he

describes as “the inevitable misinterpretations” of his work, an attempt to clarify which Heidegger had been making since *Being and Time*, where he had already attempted to guard in advance against misinterpretations, writing that the reader might take some time thinking about what was asserted—think for example of the concept of ‘inauthenticity’ but think also of *Sein* and *Da-Sein*—prior to concluding that only the everyday meaning of the term would be what was (or could have been) intended. And Heidegger has a number of such efforts throughout his work: in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, he addresses Carnap’s presumptions on logic contra Heidegger’s own talk of “nothing.” In a related fashion in his letter to Beaufret, Heidegger invokes the terminus *Nichtet* where, as we have just noted it above, Heidegger makes the perfectly logical observation— *nego*—that “*Alles Nein ist nur die Bejahung des Nicht*” (ibid.). A related terminological precision energizes his attempt in his *Die Frage nach der Technik* to emphasize that his project isn’t about condemning technology.

Heidegger summarizes this same effort in his later lecture *Time and Being*.⁴ Here he reflects that precisely where one would not presume to have instant and immediate comprehension of a painting by Paul Klee, for instance, illustrating the by invoking two of the painter’s last paintings, noting their medium in each case: »Heilige aus einem Fenster« (*Aquarell*) and »Tod und Feuer« (*Tempura auf Rupfen*), and by this means reminding his listeners that Klee’s paintings are the subject of a very specific and specifically demanding science—art history: *die Kunstwissenschaft*—or indeed Georg Trakl’s »Siebengesang des Todes«, about which engagement with the exigencies of yet another science, comparative literature—*die Literaturwissenschaft*—Heidegger himself could testify from his

⁴ *Zeit und Sein* is the title of a lecture and following seminar given in 1962, first published in German (and French) in 1968 in the context of a celebration of Jean Beaufret. *L’Endurance de la Pensée. Pour saluer Jean Beaufret* (Paris: Plon, 1968),. 13-71. Cf. *Zur Sache des Denkens* (Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 1969).

encounters with Emil Staiger and others, or indeed physics itself, the arch-science of all natural sciences, and quantum physics in particular, naming his friend Werner Heisenberg.

Heidegger's point with these three examples is that just where one begins from a point of reticence or reserve with respect to these fields of expertise, one has no such restraint when it comes to philosophy. There one expects instant insight and direct applications for life with no further ado.⁵

As we know, Heidegger responds to Beaufret's question by articulating the challenge of understanding *Da- Sein* as "*ek-sisting*." In other words

As ek-sisting, the human sustains Da-sein in that he or she takes the Da, the lighting of being, into 'care.' But Da-sein itself occurs essentially as thrown. It unfolds essentially in the throw of Being as the fateful sending. (207/324)

This sentence seems to summarize Heidegger's *Being and Time* (at least the scope of the book as we have it). Yet given the political claim at stake, with respect to existentialism and the import of *Being and Time*, Heidegger immediately contends that we go wrong—he speaks of *Verirrung*—if we attempt “to explain the sentence about humanity's *ek-sistent* essence as if it were the secularized transference to human being of a thought that Christian theology expresses about God (*Deus est suum esse* [God is His Being])” (ibid.) not just because, as

⁵ Heidegger, *Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper, 1972), p. 1. The joke in Heidegger's day might have been that we are all so many Popperians, as it were: regarding philosophy as merely a matter of 'problem solving' (isolating argument claims and so on) and expecting ready solutions, where the constant between Heidegger's day and today is that analytic philosophy insists that it exemplifies such clarity. This is of course untrue as one can see by reading any issue of *Mind* or *Synthese*, taking any article, pretty much at random. Philosophy too, be it analytic or continental, is a highly technical affair, complete with insuperably esoteric referents.

Heidegger insists in *Being and Time*: “The ‘essence’ of Dasein lies in its existence.” (205/322)⁶

The point is quintessentially decisive:

“Here everything is reversed. The section in question was held back because thinking failed in the adequate saying of this turning [*Kehre*] and did not succeed with the help of the language of metaphysics.” (208/325)

With this, Heidegger raises the question concerning the putative absence of ethics in his philosophy: “Soon after *Being and Time* appeared a young friend asked me, ‘When are you going to write an ethics?’” (231/349) Here Heidegger argues that already in Sophocles one can find the clearest articulation of an ethics, a point Heidegger emphasized in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*. But Heidegger foregrounds neither Antigone’s ethical venture nor the Rilke-esque venturesomeness that is the nature of the human condition as such. More sympathetically (and that also means more embarrassingly), Heidegger offers Beaufret a fairly self-referential parable⁷ as he relates a story about intellectual sightseers in search of Heraclitus/Heidegger, a tale of visitors who found the man they sought and immediately turned to leave without finding what they supposed they came to find.

The motif of *seek and ye shall find* was of lifelong importance for Heidegger,⁸ but Heidegger’s wit is telling as he implies that the seekers’ ambition was to find

⁶ Heidegger emphasizes „Mit Bedacht schreibt daher der angeführte Satz in «Sein und Zeit» (S. 52) das Wort «Wesen» in Anführungszeichen.“

⁷ It is hard to avoid reading this anecdote autobiographically, as it might have applied to Heidegger himself, especially the Heidegger who had so thoroughly anatomized the empty absorptions of curiosity and idle talk *Neugier* und *Gerede*.

⁸ It was no accident that he asked Bernhard Welte to cite this passage to read at his funeral.

the thinker in a classic thinking pose (cue Rodin) only to be disappointed. Heidegger's source for this reading is Aristotle, according to which Heraclitus' visitors found him warming himself at an oven. In this all-too-human pose, backed to the fire, his appalled visitors withdrew. But backside to the fire only meant that Heraclitus was facing them, from which vantage he noticed their approach ('seeing the wolf coming,' as Socrates also put it with respect to his assailant Thrasymachus) and their turn to depart. Heraclitus calmed their embarrassment by addressing it directly: "είναι γαρ και ενταδθα θεούς «Götter wesen auch hier an.» (234/352)⁹ There are gods even here.

For Heidegger dwelling is possible as an alongside and as a kind of care which Heidegger renders in Anaximander's ethical terms. "Ruch," which, as he says, we no longer know the meaning of but for which he gives the middle high German *Ruoch* and we note that it is translated into English as "reck." Anglophone scholars have been charmed to hear Gerard Manley Hopkins' usage in his poem *God's Grandeur*:

THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Bernhard Welte, "Seeking and Finding: The Speech at Heidegger's Burial," Thomas Sheehan, trans. in: Sheehan, ed., *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker* (Chicago: Precedent, 1981), 73-75. See in German, Welte, "Die Gottesfrage im Denken Martin Heideggers," in: Franz Pöggeler, ed., *Innerlichkeit und Erziehung: In memoriam Gustav Siewerth. Zum Gespräch zwischen Pädagogik, Philosophie und Theologie* (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 1964), pp. 177-192.

⁹ *De partibus animalium*, 645a19-20. Cf. 233. In his own reflections on the Anaximander fragment, reflections that engage the challenge of translation, Heidegger also takes up a kind of dwelling, as allowance, as jointure, as the between, as what Heidegger can call "whiling." Thus he reflects in that locus: "What is present is that which lingers awhile. The while occurs essentially as the transitional arrival in departure: the while comes to presence between approach and withdrawal. Between this twofold absence, the presencing of all that lingers occurs. In this 'between' whatever lingers awhile is joined." (41)

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?¹⁰

For Heidegger this is “the reck corresponding to δίκη, order.”¹¹ Taking this reading to a rendering of τὸ κρεῶν as “der Brauch,” such ethical usage means for Heidegger: “to hand something over to its own essence and to keep it in hand, preserving it as something present.”¹²

Heidegger thus invokes an already extant ethos of a Greek kind which also serves him as saying that he has no part of an ethics of a Roman variety which is to say that he does not have a Judeo-Christian ethics whereby saying this means that we do not (and cannot) recognize Heidegger’s ethics as such.¹³ Instead

¹⁰ Hopkins’ poem as a whole reads:

THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.
(Written ca. 1883 and published in 1918).

¹¹ Heidegger, “Der Spruch des Anaximander,” *Holzwege*, S. 356.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 363.

¹³ Many have tried, particularly as inspired by the repeated impetus of the Heidegger scandals associated with Heidegger and National Socialism, see, for example, some of the contributions to Karsten Harries and Christoph Jamme, eds., *Martin Heidegger: Politics, Art, and Technology* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1994), as well as Joanna Hodge, *Heidegger and Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1995), Stuart Elden, *Speaking Against Number: Heidegger, Language and the Politics of Calculation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006) and more recently see too the

Heidegger's ethical reflections may be traced even more critically in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* in his discussion of *to deinotaton*, *techne* as providing "the basic trait of *deinon*, the violent" (160) and in his paratactic reflection on real being where commentators discuss Heidegger's reflection on Sophocles' lines 370: *hypsipolis apolis*.¹⁴

Here, for me, what is crucial is Heidegger's terminological reflections. Thus we read, here citing the German, that the *polis* is

politisch, d.h. an der Geschichts-stätte, insofern z.B. die Dichter *nur*, aber dann wirklich Dichter, indem die Denker *nur*, aber dann wirklich Denker, indem die Priester *nur*, aber dann wirklich Priester, indem die Herrscher *nur*, aber dann wirklich Herrscher sind.¹⁵

This collective *sind*, that is to say, being what poets *are*, what thinkers *are*, what priest *are*, what rulers *are*, profiling so many reflections on being, reflects both creative and actual doing: namely being as such, namely and this is his point *really* and *actually* being that (in the sense of whatsoever) politico-ethical life role one happens to be talking about in each case. In this sense, what is to be supposed is that poets are really to be poets, thinkers really thinkers, priests really priests, and—this is the patently Platonic point in the cadence Heidegger

contributions to Holger Zaborowski and Alfred Denker, eds., *Heidegger und der National Sozialismus. Heidegger Jahrbuch 5* (Freiburg: Alber, 2009).

¹⁴ See Jacques Taminiaux, "The Platonic Roots of Heidegger's Political Thought," *European Journal of Political Theory*, 6/1 (2007): 11-29 for a discussion of Heidegger and Aristotle and Plato, among more recent readings, as well as for a political discussion, including an overview of the literature, Tracy Strong's chapter, "Heidegger and the Space of the Political" in his *Politics Without Vision: Thinking Without a Bannister in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 263-324.

¹⁵ Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1976), 117.

carefully retraces here — what is supposed is that rulers really be rulers: Quoting Heidegger’s own reflections on what poets, thinker, priests, rulers are, this real being is all about *action*, eminently so, and that is to say as evidenced in what one actually does.¹⁶ Again, this is the same point Plato makes in his *Republic*. With such a reference to deeds or doings, we recall that Heidegger writes in his *Letter on Humanism* that “the tragedies of Sophocles—provided such a comparison is at all permissible—preserve the *ethos* in their sagas more primordially than Aristotle’s lectures on ‘Ethics.’” (232-233/350) In this way, too, Heidegger begins to parse Heraclitus ἦθος ἀνθρώπω δαίμων. “Man dwells insofar as he is man, in the nearness of god.” (233/351)

Readers in philosophy as in political theory are here both intrigued and uneasy. We have politics and ethics and we have *Gewalt-tätige Gewalt*. And all of this, especially in this constellation, is politically problematic. Thus all the while we read the *Letter on Humanism* with all of Heidegger’s several and literal invocations of the language of his interlocutor, we find the locus of Heidegger’s discussion of the uncanny in the lecture course on Hölderlin’s poem, *The Ister*, recalling Sophocles and contrasting with Heidegger’s later focus on *Heilen* and malignancy. We cannot but come to an encounter at the same time with *das Unheimliche* because the occasion for the letter—and every letter, every text, every tweet, has such an occasioning context—the eventuality of the letter is one *preceded by*, because it *endured through*, and thus and above all because it in fact *followed* in the wake of the world and Germany at war. This is thus an issue that concerns the theme of violence and rage, not only as Homer uses this in *The Iliad*,

¹⁶ “Sind, dies sagt jedoch: als Gewalt-tätige Gewalt brauchen und Hochragende werden im geschichtlichen Sein als Schaffende, als Täter.“ Ibid. “Be, but this means: as violent men to use power, to become pre-eminent in the historical being as creators, as men of action.” *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 162.

the Greek poem sung in praise of war —*Sing rage!—Singe den Zorn*— and this same uncanny violence is connected to *Rausch*. This is a *Befindlichkeit* that endures and feeds on itself in ways that exceed either anxiety or boredom. Heidegger’s focus on the strange, as we remember this predates his reflections here: “τα δεινά, το δεινόν. We translate: *das Unheimliche*, the uncanny...”¹⁷

It is in this context that a senior and by any measure *extra-ordinary* thinker— one often called the thinker of the century—writing, on the loser’s side of a conflict, to a junior scholar who, one can suppose, in the absence of the war might never have gotten a chance even to speak to Heidegger, much less enjoy a friendship and a correspondence with him, a correspondence of an almost every day kind, reflecting on philosophical matters but also the academic gossip concerning another scholar who wrote his own big book, *Being and Nothingness* borrowing not only from Husserl but also Heidegger himself and who opted to take a small revenge for slights (as we know that Sartre felt insulted) whether real or simply perceived, with his own claim for *Existentialism is a Humanism*.

The video documentary of *The Ister* made in 2004 by the Australian (at the time of its making) graduate students, David Barison and Daniel Ross, documents the persistence of war. In the video as we have it we can see its *resistance* as we may say, enduring not by way of the videographer’s encounter

¹⁷ Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister”* §12, 74. And all this situates, instantiates Heidegger’s claims on his own behalf with regard to the issue of philological correctness, an issue we may call the question of translation. “Tell me what you think of translation, and I will tell you who you are.” (*The Ister*, §12, 65) Remarking that “this translation is initially alien to us, violent, or, in ‘philological’ terms, ‘wrong’” Heidegger continues here to pose the question of decision (regarding rightness and wrongness) as the question of standards and exceptions: “who decides, and how does one decide, concerning the correctness of a translation? We ‘get’ our knowledge of the meaning of words in a foreign language from a dictionary or ‘wordbook.’ Yet we too readily forget that the information in a dictionary must always be based upon a preceding interpretation of linguistic contexts from which particular words and word usages are taken.” *The Ister*, §12, 74-75.

with the voices of famous and not-so-famous names as recorded in video, Bernard Stiegler, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, but the video as document, as archeo-mediation, archive-phenomenology. This is the video footage of landscape and riverscape and this video has *a lot of it*, some three hours worth—not quite as epic as Abel Gance’s *Un grand amour de Beethoven* (1936) or better said, Eisenstein’s *Panzerkreuzer Potemkin* (1925), but still. This preserved remainder of the wreck of war is seen in its focus on a devastated town that might well have been forgotten—and be sure on this: one can easily imagine such oblivion, as we should all of us here recall that we (and this *should* embarrass us) scarcely paid attention to the “war” at its outset or even as it transpired in the time of our own lives. I would know as I was in Dubrovnik in the Spring of 1991, and all we saw—I organized a conference there, like this one, but on a different topic—in cities and airports and elsewhere along the way, weapons, machine guns of the kind we have learned to ignore in our ‘virtual’ age of the spectacle, as of the ecstatic unreal, the integrated (non)reality that we suppose the *result* of terrorism, whereby, as Karl Kraus aptly gives us a formula for this in his quip regarding what he took to be the quack science of psychiatry—Kraus was the Thomas Szasz of his day—the remedy for terrorism (as we in New York City have learned from enduring more than a decade of the 9/11 war on terror), effectively effects or engenders the same terror it claims to prevent.

In New York, in London, in Paris, we pass policemen or National Guardsmen armed with machine guns on subway platforms or downtown who do not blink an eye. Nor do we imagine that we ourselves are living in a fascist regime, not even after the supposed liberties of American freedom have long been abrogated by Bush, and again signed into law by Obama, as the so-called

and very Orwellian, War is Peace, “Patriot” Act. In the same way, American drones continue the same ‘fight for freedom’ America claims to be fighting in distant swath of the world, from Africa and the middle east and onward towards Asia through Pakistan. We ask only if those drones should be able to kill us in our own home, we assume that we are fair game along with any other target anywhere else in the world.

Where indeed is questioning in the wake of technology? Do we question? In the case of the Balkan conflict or conflicts it is even harder to speak: so many names in this conflict were almost instantly forgotten but the video flashes a name on a screen—Vukovar. Here we are reminded not only of the insistent claim that is the question of the Holocaust, named as it often is named as a word for a one and only tragedy, an exceptional horror. My question here—and I do not have an answer—asks what happens in the wake of such singularizing attention? Thus I ask what our focus, what our recognition, leaves out? What of Novi Sad or all the other names we do not know? What remains to be, what *can* be said of “any bombed-out town” to use the American poet Archibald MacLeish’s words?¹⁸

Heidegger seems too sovereign (there is a Schmittian point here that lies on the surface and is incorrect and a deeper one that might help us here, which I cannot pursue).¹⁹ What is certain in any case is that Heidegger, especially as one who could have been called as he was, and to say it again, the thinker of the century, does not say enough. Thus he uses only the human, all-too-human word of “shame,” which betrays not only his shame but our shame: this confesses the

¹⁸ I refer to Archibald MacLeish’s play, *J.B.*

¹⁹ It is again worth referring to Strong, *Politics Without Vision*, in this case his chapter “Carl Schmitt and the Exceptional Sovereign” (218-262).

body in its vulnerability— its frozen “wet fur” as the war poet Randall Jarrell wrote in 1945.²⁰

Nietzsche mocked Aristotle along with rest of antiquity by pointing to the philosophic inconvenience presented by the body (“it dares to behave as if it actually existed”).²¹ In Nietzsche’s terms: “The lower body is the reason the human being does not simply mistake himself for a god.” (BGE §141)

Shame” was Heidegger’s enigmatic word, as Jaspers recounts it²² and if this tells us something it does not tell us enough because it is not the word we want. The only thing we want to hear from Heidegger is a plain confession: “guilty.”²³ Heidegger’s silence, as his Parisian admirer Jacques Lacan quickly noted, is all too-sovereign: it is the silence of the master.

²⁰ From my mother’s sleep I fell into the State, / And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze. / Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life, / I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters. / When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose. — Randall Jarrell, *The Death of the Ball-Turret Gunner*

²¹ To be sure, the ancients never retracted their own condemnation of Heraclitus, the “dark” philosopher, burying even his sentiments in the same dung in which he was plastered at the hour of his death. In addition, of course to its origin in Diogenes Laertius, who was the subject of Nietzsche’s particular expertise, see too , as part of a litany on vainglory, Marcus Aurelius who mentions Heraclitus in his *Meditations*, Book 4.

²² I take this up in connection too with Hannah Arendt in Babich, “Jaspers, Heidegger, and Arendt: On Politics, Science, and Communication,” *Existence*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2009): 1-19. Cf. Babich, “Daniel Mayier-Katin, *Stranger from Abroad: Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, Friendship and Forgiveness* (NY: Norton, 2010),” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, Vol. 29, Nr. 4 (Summer 2011): 189-191.

²³ There has been an extended scholarly debate on this issue, back and forth and again and I expect that it is not over, as such debates ought to begin again and again. I list some of the literature, again, in the final chapter of Babich, *Word in Blood, Like Flowers* and see too, for a book length discussion, Charles Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism* (1995) and for a powerful contemporary discussion, see Holger Zaborowski, “*Eine Frage von Irre und Schuld?*” *Martin Heidegger und der Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt a/M: Fischer, 2010).

With respect to Heidegger, the constant return of the philosophical question posed by Schneeberger, Farias, Faye,²⁴ but also Elizabeth Hirsch and Herbert Marcuse and still more recently on the far left side of the political spectrum, Bruno Gulli and others, cannot but mean that something in us asks if Heidegger does (or does not) speak to us on this our own very politicized sense of the political?²⁵

Language speaks. Thus where Heidegger invokes simplicity, “The one thing thinking would like to attain and for the first time tries to articulate in *Being and Time* is something simple,” his point seeks to take up the address of being, “the simple nearness of an unobtrusive prevailing. The nearness occurs essentially as language itself.” (212/330) But what matters to note here is that where it comes to language and proximity Heidegger’s reflection on this same language, nearness, proximity also offers us one of his rare and uncanny insights into sound (and this is always a matter of presence and relation, space and time). He writes:

language is not mere speech, insofar as we represent the latter at best as the unity of phoneme (or written character), melody, rhythm, and meaning (or sense). We think of the phoneme and written

²⁴ Guido Schneeberger, *Nachlese zu Heidegger: Dokumente zu seinem Leben und Denken* (Bern, 1962), Victor Farias, *Heidegger and Nazism* (Temple University Press, 1989) Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger, l’introduction du nazisme dans la philosophie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005).

²⁵ I discuss these authors along with a range of surrounding literature and sought to give some account of this debate and its complexities, including its inherent politics, in my own essays, as I note one such (and there are others) in the note below. See for an insightful discussion that also speaks to (and beyond) the present theme, Tracy B. Strong, “Martin Heidegger and the Space of the Political” in Strong, *Politics Without Vision: Thinking Without a Bannister in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) 263-324. Things are of course only made more problematic, and we will return to this at the conclusion, although it matters that Heidegger counts silence as a mode of discourse. But see for one discussion, Babich, “Heidegger’s Silence” in: Charles Scott and Arleen Dallery, eds., *Ethics and Danger: Currents in Continental Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 83-106.

character as a verbal body for language, of melody and rhythm as its soul, and whatever has to do with meaning as its spirit. (212-213/330)

To say that language is the house of being yields anything but a free or assured grant. Here everything depends upon appropriation, upon assignment and that means that here as elsewhere our relation to language is fraught: language eludes us, the word fails.²⁶ “Instead”—and here we return to the insurrection of the technical, of technique, and given the dominion of technology today—

language surrenders itself to our mere willing and trafficking as an instrument of domination over beings. Beings themselves appear as actualities in the interaction of cause and effect. We encounter beings as actualities in a calculative businesslike way, but also scientifically and by way of philosophy, with explanations and proofs. (199/316)²⁷

As Heidegger notes in his own lecture course on the Ister (and I think it is incumbent upon us to extend his parallel to the email and texting, i.e., our dependency on our cellphones as on the internet and I here include Facebook and Twitter):

²⁶ See for a discussion and further references, Babich, *Words in Blood, Like Flowers*, 3-18.

²⁷ And making a point key to the *Beiträge* Heidegger adds here: “Zu diesen gehört auch die Versicherung, etwas sei unerklärlich.“ Ibid. For Heidegger in his Brief über den „Humanismus“ “Der Bindung durch die Ethik muß alle Sorge gewidmet sein, wo der in das Massenwesen ausgelieferte Mensch der Technik nur durch eine der Technik entsprechende Sammlung und Ordnung seines Planens und Handelns im ganzen noch zu einer verlässlichen Beständigkeit gebracht werden kann. Wer dürfte diese Notlage übersehen?” 349.

we need mention only the airplane and the radio in order to see at once that not only are both machines devices that have arisen in the context of modern natural science, but that they are also determining the course of the most recent history of the modern era. For it is by no means the case that it is simply the same processes previously introduced and dealt with by means of the rural postman and the mail coach that are now being accomplished using other means. Rather, the airplane and the radio are intrinsically, that is, in terms of their machine essence and in terms of the extensive scope of their essence, determining the leeway for playing out possibilities that can be planned and accomplished through human willpower and for its putting things into effect.²⁸

None of these things are for Heidegger “the same” and he will contend that what is needed is not a technological remedy.

Heidegger instead asks us to try something else.

This something else, as I argue elsewhere, takes us to the mere mereness of things in an echo, be it direct or indirect, of Adorno’s *nur*, only. This is the barest of indigent things as we also echo Levinas as Celan too emphasizes this point as it is to be sure Heidegger’s own. This is the closest Heidegger comes to a program for action in the age of technology, “hier und jetzt und im Geringen.”²⁹

²⁸ Heidegger, *The Ister*, 44.

²⁹ Heidegger, “Die Frage nach der Technik,” in: *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1978), 37.

“Only from the truth of being can the essence of the holy be thought”

When Heidegger speaking to the heart of the charge of nihilism argues that “Only from the truth of being can the essence of the holy be thought” he suggests that one must hear language beyond logic in a mode that hearkens to melody, interval, the spirit of the word.

In this sense Heidegger follows Nietzsche’s recollection of the grammarian Stoic, namely Seneca, who recommends that philosophy is to become philology,³⁰ and to recall Heidegger’s Platonico-Aristotelian phrasing of this injunction, as we traced this through his 1935 lecture course, what follows then is that one really has to *be* a philologist or a grammarian. Only from this juncture can Heidegger pose the following double question, already set in cadence and framing his question as critical, reflecting to begin with that “Erst aus dem Wesen des Heiligen” is it possible to think “das Wesen von Gottheit” and adding that “Only in the light of the essence of divinity can it be thought or said what the word ‘God’ is to signify...” *Or*, as he continues, and we remember that Germans, Allemanic, Badenser, or Suabian, love the word or [*Oder*]:

should we not first be able to hear and understand all these words carefully if we are to be permitted as human beings, that is, as existent creatures, to experience a relation of God to human beings? How can the human being at the present stage of world history ask at all seriously and rigorously whether the god nears or withdraws, when he has above all neglected to think into the dimension in which alone that question can be asked? (230/348)

³⁰ Nietzsche, »Homer und die klassische Philologie«, *Werke in drei Bänden* (München: WBG, 1954), Vol. 3, 154-174.

Thinking “into the dimension in which alone that question can be asked” is nothing other than attempting to think the dimension of the holy. This attempt to think the sacred corresponds to the doubleness Heidegger is always at pains to trace as this is also the dimension of the question that is Heidegger’s question of “the truth of being,” a question he always felt compelled to raise as the question that is forgotten, withdraws, is closed off as “a dimension if the open region of being is not cleared and in its clearing is near to humans.” (Ibid.) And it is in this context that he reflects and this is decisive, as this also echoes throughout his later work: “Perhaps what is distinctive about this world-epoch consists in the closure of the dimension of the hale [*des Heilen*]. Perhaps that is the sole malignancy [*Unheil*].” (Ibid.)

The *Unheil* is tied to what is closed off when *Heilen* is foreclosed. ‘Heilen’ as Heidegger speaks of it here is not ‘die Sakrale,’ not ‘Heiligkeit,’ but the hale, the healthy, the whole or unshattered. This distinction matters more than all the theology in the world when we are speaking, as Heidegger is clearly speaking, about a particular world-epoch following not only one world war, and of costs suffered by not only one people. The hale, what is whole is what is fractured, sundered, shattered by war and its aftermath, an aftermath that would in Germany’s case continue late into the 20th century; some would say it is with us even still. And thus it is that *Heilen* is what is needed.

In “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger later traces a Hölderlinian figure of tragedy and strife, an insight that for Hölderlin had a powerful romance about it, even if we steer clear of supposing Hölderlin a Romantic thinker when he offered the Heraclitean reflection on harmony and opposition or tension. Reconciliation as Hölderlin muses with respect to lovers’

and lovers' disputes, is in the *midst* of conflict—*Versöhnung ist mitten im Streit und alles Getrennte findet sich wieder*.

The backstretched connection where what is at variance with itself agrees with itself, where danger prevails and unfolds into the same prevalence is the salvaging, saving power. Everything in these words speaks with the high pathos of metaphysics and ultimate redemption. Heidegger's gesture seeks to bring this backstretched tension of reconciliation to the quotidian, the here and the now—the same present, here and now, that is also Goethean *gold* and thus, as the late Pierre Hadot sought to remind us, it only the present that remains as our *only* possibility for happiness, for well-being—Nietzsche would say convalescence—just where we find ourselves in this same world-epoch.

For Heidegger this is found if it is found at all in words our commentators have brought to our attention from those thinkers of the ethical who also learned as much as they did from Heidegger. We say it once again: “in little things.” *Im Geringen*. Adorno's mere and only: *nur*.³¹ This Levinasian word—this very little, this almost nothing—we have to hear repeatedly in order that we might hear it for the first time, from Critchley and Bernasconi (yet more understatedly) and from many others, as Heidegger himself traces the *Gering* through Hölderlin and Rilke, George and Trakl.

I have been seeking to place the questions of Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism* such that we might again hear these questions (of humanism and inhumanism, atheism and theism, on the supposed threats of nihilism and irrationalism) as questions concerning the possibility of whatever ethics may come forth as a way not merely of thinking but of being. The trouble with all of this remains as

³¹ I take this up elsewhere with reference to Adorno in particular. See Babich, “Adorno on Science and Nihilism, Animals, and Jews,” *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy/Revue canadienne de philosophie continentale*, Vol. 14, No. 1, (2011): 110-145.

Heidegger observes, as Nietzsche had observed, nothing other than *our humanism* as this stands and falls with us, in just the way that Heidegger a few years later would both quote and then unquote or correct Heisenberg, recollecting that so far from what appears to be the insurrection of the human, “man increasingly and everywhere encounters only himself,” such that there is instead a retreat, a fading of the human from what it once meant in the quadrangle traced between earth and sky, mortal and divine.

To this day, we do not think this thought and to this day our ethics continue to be absorbed with the question of our own dignity, ineluctably anthropocentric as this may be connected, for those who wish to consider Heidegger’s earth and sky, to the analytic reflections and very real or “deep” earth reflections as these characterize the thinking and the ethico-ecology of an Arne Naess. Yet simply by affixing a prefix to our ethics, geo- or bio- in place of our traditionally anthropocentric ethics we have yet to address the problems Heidegger outlines.

Humanism in this respect, like nationalism and subjectivism, is the problem. In this sense we, ourselves, get in the way of both the problem of being and any ethical way of dwelling on this earth.

At stake from the start in Heidegger’s response to Beaufret has been the complicated question of the human, heard with reference to Kantian dignity, *Würde*, which, we know that Kant himself took care to set above, beyond, apart from price. Heidegger’s reflection reminds us that distinguishing value in this way is inevitably, i.e., *still* a kind of valuing.³²

³² There are many who write on this notion and I recommend in particular Jacques Taminiaux, not less for his own theoretical background in law. See Taminiaux and in English and with specific reference to Heidegger and Nietzsche: Taminiaux, “On Heidegger’s Interpretation of the Will To Power As Art,” *New Nietzsche Studies*, Vol. 3, Nos. 1 and 2 (1999): 1-22, see for a direct discussion: Babich, “On Connivance, Nihilism, and Value,” *New*

Heidegger's insight continues Nietzsche's mocking invocation of our dedication to "shopkeeper's gold"³³ as this holds even with the higher gold of the spirit" the good Christian is still seeking to be well-paid.³⁴ In Heidegger's encapsulation of this quintessentially Nietzschean point,

precisely through the characterization of something as 'a value' what is so valued is robbed of its worth. That is to say, by the assessment of something as a value what is valued is admitted only as an object for man's estimation. But what a thing is in its Being is not exhausted by its being an object, particularly when objectivity takes the form of value. Every valuing, even where it values positively, is a subjectivizing. It does not let beings: be. Rather, valuing lets beings: be valid—solely as the objects of its doing. (228/345)

Here in his letter written to a friendly and one-time opponent Heidegger writes about the nihilating of nothing: "The nihilating in being is the essence of what I call the nothing. Hence, because it thinks being, thinking thinks the nothing. In healing being first grants ascent into grace; to raging its compulsion to malignancy." (238/357)³⁵

Nietzsche Studies, Vol. 3, Nos. 1 and 2 (1999): 23-52. Robert Sinnerbrink discusses Taminaux's analysis in an aesthetic context in his "Heidegger and Nietzsche on the "End of Art" in Babich, Denker, and Zaborowski, eds., *Heidegger and Nietzsche* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 417-428.

³³ Nietzsche's term is "*Krämer-Gold*." Cf. Z III *Von alten und neuen Tafeln*, §21.

³⁴ Cf. Nietzsche's FW, JGB, GM

³⁵ This is double-bound path is fraught and there is no other path—this is why Reiner Schürmann always called it a double bind. It was this resistant remainder that remains to be thought. For his part, Schürmann, sought to think them without dismissing them as simply beyond the pale, beyond consideration: to be condemned, the Rylean move, that enshrines the ad hominem argument that to do this day remains the major issue when it comes to

Heidegger's concluding words ask us to pay attention to what would be needed for reading not words but the letter itself and thus the spirit of German song, as this last was Hölderlin's observance. Where literary scholars trace the strictures of the "feste Buchstab,"³⁶ I hear this attention to the *melos* of "deutscher Gesang" as this sounds at the end of Hölderlin's *Patmos* hymn, a poem that accompanies Heidegger for the rest of his life:

*Nah ist
Und schwer zu fassen der Gott.*

And we know how that line goes for the poet, as we have learned from Heidegger to think into the dark forms of the beginning of this poem, named as it is for an island consecrated to the apostle of the word, and we know the rest of this line not only from Hölderlin but Heidegger:

*Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst
Das Rettende auch.*

I hear the end of the poem:

*Der feste Buchstab, und Bestehendes gut
Gedeutet. Dem folgt deutscher Gesang.*

However one chooses to read the poet's words, whether it be with the literary theorist's attention to the "feste Buchstab" or the philosopher's hearkening to song, Heidegger's ultimate point remains revolutionary.³⁷ Thus I have sought to

Heidegger's "not a good man." I take this up, and I recommend the other contributions to the same collection, in my "Schürmann's Broken Hegemonies: The Cracks in Heidegger's Contributions and Meister Eckhart's Alchemy." In: Vishwa Adluri, ed., *On Reiner Schürmann* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming).

³⁶ I refer here to the contributions to collection edited by Aris Fioretos, *The Solid Letter: Readings of Friedrich Hölderlin* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

³⁷ And when I say that I do not merely here his own allusive claim that die "Sprache ist so die

set Heidegger on the side of the phantasm of civic political action, the fantasy of revolution that is Occupy Wall Street³⁸ as what remains for the essential challenge of philosophy for life, for changing the world, just as Marx reflected.

Concluding Marxian Postscript

At the end of a text, at the end of a talk, as true for us, true for Heidegger, one *begins* to read. Thus we recall Heidegger's references to Marx throughout his letter, referring to Sartre's dialogue with Marx, but also to homelessness, making his reference more pragmatic than academic. One key reference to Marx is articulated in Heidegger's typical coopting strategy of reading other thinkers through their own claims, and summarizing the trajectory we have been following down to Hölderlin's lovers' *Versöhnung* as Heidegger describes this very reciprocal return, one to another, in Husserlian Hegelian or indeed Heideggerian terms:

Absolute metaphysics, with its Marxian and Nietzschean inversions, belongs to the history of the truth of being. Whatever stems from it cannot be countered or even cast aside by refutations. It can only be taken up in such a way that its truth is more primordially sheltered in being itself and removed from the domain of mere human opinion. All refutation in the field of essential thinking is foolish. Strife among thinkers is the "lovers' quarrel" concerning the matter itself. It assists them mutually toward a simple belonging to the Same,

Sprache des Seins, wie die Wolken die Wolken des Himmels sind" but and much rather that das "Denken legt mit seinem Sagen unscheinbare Furchen in die Sprache."

³⁸ See if you like, my essays: "Politics and Heidegger: Aristotle, Superman, and Žižek," *Telos*, Vol. 161 (Winter 2012): 141-161 and "Weaker Hermeneutics: Changing Convictions, Changing the World," in: Sylvania Mazzinie, ed., *Hermeneutic Communism* (Forthcoming).

from which they find what is fitting for them in the destiny of being.
(215-216/331-332)

What is needed for Heidegger is an articulation of a philosophical encounter with Marxism in an age where die “Heimatlosigkeit wird ein Weltchicksal” (219/336) — where we note just once more, and where the images from Gaza may bring this home to us and quite literally: whatever else it is, Heidegger’s letter on humanism is a letter from a war-devastated world.

Everything, and I am not only speaking of bridges and houses, *everything* is shattered.

Here “the danger [*die Gefahr*],” to be thought between »Amerikanismus« and »Kommunismus« and above all in terms of “nationalism,” defined “metaphysically as an anthropologism and as such as a subjektivism”³⁹ — including indeed and even the language of *Geschick*⁴⁰ itself — is also in sway as Heidegger here returns to the notion of science as signifying the “end of philosophy” and “its utter dissolution in the sciences, the unity of which unfolds similarly anew in cybernetics”⁴¹ The ‘*Gefahr*’ in this sense is driven, tracked, as what Heidegger was fond of calling one-track thinking and science, and it is as dangerous as it is because it cannot be directly countered.

We are back to the little, we are back to almost nothing, to little things, and in every case we risk a shattering confrontation with our own suppositions, our

³⁹ “Dieser ist die Subjektivität des Menschen in der Totalität. Er vollzieht ihre unbedingte Selbstbehauptung.”

⁴⁰ “Die Technik ist in ihrem Wesen ein seinsgeschichtliches Geschick der in der Vergessenheit ruhenden Wahrheit des Seins.” (337)

⁴¹ “Der Rückfall des Denkens in die Metaphysik nimmt eine neue Form an: Es ist das Ende der Philosophie im Sinne der vollständigen Auflösung in die Wissenschaften, deren Einheit sich gleichfalls neu in der Kybernetik entfaltet.“ Erste Auflage, 1949.

own convictions as Nietzsche would say, our own “prejudices.” Where all that was solid had been obliterated (twice) Heidegger emphasizes that “to ‘philosophize’ about being shattered is separated by a chasm from a thinking that is shattered.” (223/340)⁴²

⁴² To this day we may yet — but only to the extent as Heidegger also argues that we ‘risk’ or allow this shattering in our own thinking — hear Heidegger’s call for a revolution: “What is needed in the present world crisis is less philosophy, but more attentiveness in thinking; less literature, but more cultivation of the letter.” “Nötig ist in der jetzigen Weltnot: weniger Philosophie, aber mehr Achtsamkeit des Denkens; weniger Literatur, aber mehr Pflege des Buchstabens.” (360)