

## NAZISM, POETRY AND THE POLITICAL

Heidegger and Nazism: the issues are so contentious, so overdetermined by contemporary intellectual politics, and some of the concerns so horrific that this is a topic about which it is probably impossible to think straight. The controversy was stirred to new life by a book by Victor Farias (1989). Farias's argument that Heidegger was a Nazi throughout his life and his work thoroughly fascist is easy to dismiss. Less dismissable is evidence gleaned by other scholars at this time, notably Hugo Ott (1993), revealing the extent and depth of Heidegger's involvement with the Nazis in the 1930s. This refutes some of Heidegger's own defensive self-presentations on these issues.

Farias's book said little new. At times, this was an opportunistic book, engineering a *succès de scandale* by making extreme claims bound to grab the attention of a lot of people. It owed its impact to the way the figure it attacked had become, by the mid-1980s, an indispensable reference in radical modern thinking, especially in continental Europe, where Heidegger's thinking had become newly prominent with the decline of Marxism. This association gave the debate its seeming stakes and its peculiar vehemence. The oddity remains that it is often more conservative thinkers who are eager to dismiss Heidegger, while those who defend the continuing value of his thought are broadly of the left.

What is incontestable is that Heidegger joined the Nazi party in May 1933 and that during 1933–4 at least his political engagement was a

matter of genuine conviction and even excitement. In May 1933 Heidegger was elected by his colleagues to serve as Rector of Freiburg University. Heidegger later claimed that he accepted this post reluctantly with a view to helping protect the University from the new regime that had come to power earlier that year. In fact, he took a leading role in the 'bringing into line' (*Gleichschaltung*) of German university life, producing several speeches and newspaper articles in support of the regime and even calling himself the 'Führer' of the University. The extent to which Heidegger was anti-Semitic is open to debate. His writings from the 1920s and 1930s stand out – such was the context – for the absence of racism, which Heidegger explicitly attacked in lectures. Nevertheless, in academic politics Heidegger was prepared to appeal to the anti-Semitism of others if it helped get his own way. A letter proving this was among evidence cited in Heidegger's case before the Denazification Committee of the French occupying force in 1946. Overall, Heidegger was convicted for having 'in the crucial year of 1933 . . . consciously placed the great prestige of his scholarly reputation and the distinctive art of his oratory in the service of the National Socialist Revolution . . . thereby doing a great deal to justify this revolution in the eyes of educated Germans' (Ott 1993: 327). The committee suspended Heidegger from teaching, a ban lifted in 1950.

How far Heidegger continued his support for National Socialism after 1933 is one of the issues of contention. He certainly remained a member of the party till 1945, though of course, in a totalitarian state, resignation would not have been prudent. Heidegger dated his disillusion with the Nazis from the so-called 'Night of the Long Knives', 30 June 1934, when the particular party faction he felt closest to was purged (Rec: 499). He then seems to have reached an ambivalent position, defending some increasingly idiosyncratic lost 'essence' of National Socialism against what it was in reality. The lectures on the origin of the work of art and the first lectures on Hölderlin both emerge from this especially imponderable time. A lecture course of 1935 attacked 'works being peddled about nowadays as the philosophy of National Socialism' compared to what Heidegger clung to as the lost 'inner truth and greatness' of the movement, a statement reprinted in 1953 (IM: 213). In the late 1930s, Heidegger's lectures on Friedrich Nietzsche (N) make up a clear if coded attack on Nazism as a merely another, late nihilistic form of productionist metaphysics.

For the rest of his life Heidegger's view of Hitler's coming to power in early 1933 remained that the chance of a genuine national renewal had been there, one that could have led Europe away from the path of nihilism and self-destruction, but that the movement swiftly betrayed this promise. Looking back on this supposed betrayal, Heidegger blamed his fellow German intellectuals for not having tried in sufficient numbers to direct and shape events as he had tried, for allowing a racist and militarist cult to turn Nazism into merely another version of European nihilism, on a par with Stalinism or American capitalism. So Heidegger's personal version of National Socialism was very much a thing on its own, part of his tendency to self-mythologization as the prophetic thinker who may be able to lead Europe out of the shadows of a nihilistic modernity into a new dispensation of being.

We cannot consider here the debate as to whether or not Heidegger's greatest work *Being and Time* (1927) anticipates the fascist politics of 1933. *Being and Time* precedes by seven years the turn to art and the poetic in Heidegger that is our concern and which was in part a reaction to what he called the 'stupidity' of the Rectorship (Pet: 37). However, one can see how fascism is at least a possibility latent in aspects of Heidegger's thinking, if not inevitably or necessarily inscribed there. Let us return briefly to the issue of 'holism' from Chapter 1. Might not a holism which is critical and anti-reductive in its response to the dominations of scientism, bureaucratic rationalization and control – the implications taken up by so-called left-Heideggerians – become oppressive and inherently totalitarian when transferred too hastily into an active programme of immediate political change, i.e. the demand to think a state or nation *as a whole*, as more than and transcending the sum of its parts? From that perspective the people (*das Volk*) is more than the sum of its individuals. It is that whence they arise and take their identity, a position that might lead to a view of the individual's irrelevance. In the early 1930s attempts to criticize and alleviate the atomistic individualism of modern life, its solitude and alienation, led Heidegger too quickly into a dismissal of the importance of individual political and economic rights. Liberty in the modern sense of individual autonomy appears mainly as a threat to social cohesion and a would-be deeper sense of belonging to a people and place. Only, it seemed, surrender to a greater power, embodied in a leader, could ensure the genuine and non-alienating self-realization of that people in a communal movement, liberating the German worker from the yoke of capitalism and bringing

in the intellectual worker in common cause. So we can surmise that a holism at work in Heidegger's critiques of theoreticism might also lead, if transferred too hastily to politics, to disturbing claims such as that made by Rector Heidegger in 1934 that 'The individual by himself counts for nothing. It is the destiny of our nation incarnated by its state that matters' (Freiburg University Archives; quoted in Ott 1993: 240).

## HEIDEGGER'S SILENCE?

For many, however, the outstanding controversy about Heidegger is not his period of engagement with Nazism. It is that after the war, when the full horror of what had taken place in Germany was known, he seems to have failed fully to acknowledge it. His personal apologies, evasive or otherwise, seem insignificant compared to this failure of thought, especially the seeming inability to confront the holocaust and think through its implications. The nature of Heidegger's silence on the holocaust is open to interpretation. Not speaking is an even stronger source of wildly competing interpretations than are Heidegger's dense writings! Unfortunately for would-be defenders of Heidegger the rare occasions when he broke that silence are morally problematic. Most famous is a seemingly off the cuff remark made in a lecture in Bremen in 1949, a remark omitted when the text reappeared as 'The Question Concerning Technology' (QCT: 1–35):

Agriculture is now a mechanized food industry, in essence the same as the manufacture of corpses in the gas chambers and extermination camps, the same as the blockading and starving of nations, the same as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs.

(Quoted in Schirmacher 1983: 25)

The sentence has outraged many for its insensitive equation of food production and mass murder (see Milchman and Rosenberg 1996). Heidegger's primary topic is not the extermination itself but modern agriculture. To express his horror at the reduction of a way of life to a mere industry he seems to have reached for the most extreme instance he could conceive of the evils of technology. To say that modern farming, the holocaust and the hydrogen bomb have 'the same essence' means that they all manifest a world in which technology structures fundamentally the way things appear. This may well be true, but can

it justify the kind of blanket equivalence in Heidegger's sentence? It has been argued that Heidegger's standpoint, of always homing in on what is said on the largest scale, of being and of history only in the sense of changes in what is historically decisive, *geschichtlich*, blinds him to history in its more familiar sense. However, even this statement about agriculture and the holocaust has been defended. For some, Heidegger's equation is primarily a warning about the future, the coming technological devastation of the earth and of humanity (Young 1997: 181–5). Likewise it is not impossible to present Heidegger's post-war philosophy as in part a response to the holocaust. His work is after all a meditation on the nihilistic essence of the modern West, revealing its threat not only to life but to the human essence itself conceived in terms of the openness to being. From this respect, there might even seem something appropriate in Heidegger's public silence on the murder of the European Jews, when set against a society dominated by what he termed 'publicity' and the media, whose crass representations increasingly determine what is generally taken as real. Why reduce this unspeakable event to the level of representations that glibly circulate as 'news events'? Heidegger wrote to the Jewish poet Paul Celan on 30 January 1968, after their meeting in July that 'Since then we have much to have been silent about together' (*'Seitdem haben wir vieles einander zugeschwiegen'*) (quoted in Emmerich 1999: 144–5).

The view of Heidegger's silence as appropriate may seem generous. Nevertheless, discussions of this issue from post-Heideggerian philosophers draw deeply on Heidegger's thinking in approaching the holocaust, even while repudiating what seem Heidegger's own failings. In Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's work, what might be termed a Heideggerian reading of the holocaust is suggested, supplementing that which Heidegger's published work seems merely to hint. Lacoue-Labarthe takes up the concept of *Geschichte*, the history of being conceived as a series of shifts in the most fundamental sense of human things. For Lacoue-Labarthe, unlike Heidegger, the holocaust *is* such a decisive shift, and not just one event among others manifesting the nihilism of the modern world. It is a deep historical break (*geschichtlich*) in the sense that nothing afterwards can be the same. For Lacoue-Labarthe, drawing on Heidegger's reading of nihilism, 'Auschwitz' is a horrific revelation of the nature of Western civilization, and it 'opens up, or closes, a quite other history than the one we have known up until now' (Lacoue-Labarthe 1990: 45).

Perhaps, though, Heidegger was right: 'We may find Heidegger barbarically insensitive in his refusal to speak to the Shoah in his *Seinsgeschichte* [history of being], but our horror does not 'negate' his or any view that does not find in the holocaust a radical rupture in the possibilities open to Western thought' (Lysaker 1993: 206). Does world history since 1945 perhaps support Heidegger's seemingly brutal remark that the Second World War essentially decided nothing (WT: 66)? Among those who agree with this disturbing view is the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard who elaborates what is recognizably a variant Heideggerian reading of the extermination (Lyotard 1990). Lyotard endorses the argument that the holocaust manifests the violence inherent in Western rationality, without, like Lacoue-Labarthe, seeing this horrific revelation as marking a deep historical (*geschichtlich*) break. Nevertheless Heidegger, in Lyotard's view, still remains convicted of a disastrous inability to make moral distinctions. There are two broad aspects of Heidegger's blindness. First, to see the holocaust as a manifestation of European nihilism in general is to evade the specific German responsibility for the murders. Second, Lyotard argues that Heidegger cannot even pose, let alone answer the question, 'why mainly the Jews?'

Lyotard's, Blanchot's (Blanchot 1993: 129ff) and George Steiner's efforts (Steiner 1992: 45) to find some rationale as to why the Jews in particular were victimized offer again a kind of revisionist Heideggerianism. Each sees the issue in relation to the repressed insecurities of Western modernity, in its drive to provide a self-sufficient rationale for human life based solely on a secular viewpoint. Against this drive, they argue, the Jews offered the discomfiting challenge of a people who insist on the finitude of human life and knowledge and who maintain the necessity of some sort of relation to the divine. They pose a challenge in their very existence to the secular principles of modernity. But is this argument convincing? Is it not to attribute to anti-Semitism a greater knowledge of Judaism than is plausible, giving it even something of the dignity of an intellectual position?

## ART AND POLITICS

How do these issues relate to Heidegger's thinking about art and the poetic? The writings on the poetic all postdate his Rectorship and are generally read as a reaction against it. The years 1934–6 show an increasingly critical attitude towards any notion of politics itself still

centred on the human will alone and on competing world-views. Heidegger's unscheduled decision to lecture on Hölderlin in 1934–5 was a turn to a kind of quietist 'spiritual' politics geared towards fundamental attunements and receptivity to being, incompatible with active programmes of social planning or merely institutional change.

This introduction has necessarily already implied a position on this issue, effectively arguing that, from the time of the engagement with Hölderlin in late 1934, Heidegger eschewed direct political action in his hopes for German renewal and re-engaged in a deeper critique of the bases of Western history in productionist metaphysics, a critique whose main impact must be a grim realization of the extent to which its totalitarian anthropocentrism touches every aspect of modern life and thought.

One of the most influential books on this topic is again Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, published in 1987, just before Farias's assault. Lacoue-Labarthe shows that it is not possible to talk about 'Heidegger and politics' as if the term politics was without a set of assumptions about which Heidegger has a lot to say. Politics in the traditional sense, argues Lacoue-Labarthe, has been a function of productionist thinking: it has always been conceived in the West as a form of technics or craft, namely that of the fashioning or making of a people according to some idea or ideal of their life together (as a potter moulds a pot towards the shape of its preconceived design). Nazism was striking for the way it intensified this association of politics and a kind of craft, for it stressed the genuine essence of Germany as something the German people should continuously create in their daily life and activities, all of which in turn become celebrated as the expression of a common essence and destiny. It is an essence made visible in flags, insignia, uniforms and in such large scale productions as the infamous Nuremberg rally or the propagandist films of Leni Riefenstahl, as well as in the ruthless elimination of everything and everyone considered non-German. Against this, Lacoue-Labarthe argues, Heidegger offered his own revisionist reading of the relation of art and politics. So, what might 'politics' mean for Heidegger? Again, Heidegger's thinking moves by taking the terms of Western life back to their Greek source, so opening the space for a new beginning at the same, profound level. In 1935, Heidegger lectures that 'state' or 'city', or 'city-state' are inadequate terms to translate the Greek '*polis*'. '*Polis*' 'means rather, the historical [*geschichtlich*] place, the there *in* which and

out of which, and *for* which history happens' (IM: 162–3). So any making or production of a people in the conventional understanding of politics must presuppose and take place within some given 'world', that basic structuring of human existence which is 'political' in a deeper sense. In other words, the only 'politics' that can truly matter for Heidegger, or makes for any essential kind of change, is deep history, *Geschichte*.

Heidegger believed till the end of his life that although it had been quickly perverted, there had been the possibility of a genuinely 'deep historical' or *geschichtlich* change in Germany in the early 1930s, i.e. a shift in the most basic attitudes and 'world'. The 'Origin of the Work of Art' (lectured in 1936), still includes the 'founding' of a state as a possible new instituting of truth alongside thinking and art, though this disappears altogether in lectures later in the 1930s. The work on art and on Hölderlin is then a more fundamental continuation of the drive to renewal that had taken a more conventional 'political' form in 1933. In his apologia, 'The Rectorate 1933/4: Facts and Thoughts,' Heidegger writes:

What is essential is that we are caught in the consummation of nihilism, that God is 'dead', and every time-space for the godhead covered up. The surmounting of nihilism nevertheless announces itself in German poetic thinking and singing. Of this poetry, however, the Germans still have had the least understanding, because they are concerned to adapt to the measures of the nihilism that surrounds them.

(Rec: 498)

In Heidegger's understanding, this issue alone is genuinely 'political' in the sense of a historically decisive change in the worlding of the world. His reference to 'what is German', for all its latent nationalism, is very distant from the racist and exclusive Nazi essentialism. It seeks, in the German language and people, the possibility of a new non-reductive relation to being, one which would both repeat and revise the Greek inauguration of Western life.

So is the excruciating difficulty of thinking through Heidegger's politics thankfully eased for the reader whose main interest is in literature? Not entirely. This alternative, essential 'politics' centred on Hölderlin and art, still makes some people uncomfortable, and not only for its German-centric stance. For Lacoue-Labarthe the problem has less to

do with Heidegger's destructive/deconstructive readings of traditional notions of interpretation, meaning, history etc. but with what might be termed the more recuperative side of his elucidations. Heidegger is too eager to reach some 'other thinking', outside the closure of productionist metaphysics. As a result his readings of poetry are sometimes an idealization. Heidegger is premature. Lacoue-Labarthe suggests that the 'Hölderlinian preaching', as he calls it (Lacoue-Labarthe 1990: 12), is too often tempted into a dogmatic mythologizing. Lacoue-Labarthe's reservations concern the mythological motifs derived from Hölderlin in Heidegger's later thinking, the 'fourfold,' the lack of sacred names, the call for new gods, etc.. These contrast with the tortured but more scrupulously defensible recognition of other Heidegger texts (e.g. 'On the Question of Being,' P: 291–322) that one cannot so directly exit the language and thinking of the tradition, that its hold on us is too total to admit yet of more than a patient tracing of its all-pervading closure.

Lacoue-Labarthe's argument has been very influential. Heidegger has been charged with allegorizing some of the texts he reads in the light of his own hopes for a step out of metaphysical nihilism, contrary to the more chastened, perhaps despairing elements in the poetry itself. He tends not to see the time of pain of Hölderlin, Trakl and others but in terms of the coming of a new wholeness, or to see loss except as potentially the space for a new advent. Véronique Fóti writes that, whether it is a question of Hölderlin's poetry, Hölderlin's speculations on Greek tragedy just before the onset of his madness, or Trakl's poetry from the First World War, Heidegger is unable, strangely, to countenance loss and disaster fully, as such, outside the redemptive possibility of some hidden saving power (Fóti 1992: 74). John D. Caputo likewise argues that Heidegger holds 'poetry's most disturbing and menacing effects in check' (Caputo 1993: 148). Hölderlin's tentative and unsettled thinking on the possibility of new gods becomes sometimes too definite a programme in Heidegger's Hölderlin.

One issue is that the central concept of the 'history of being' provides just too monolithic a frame in which to deal with the singularity of the poetic or with much that is usually recognized of importance in literature. John Caputo writes of Heidegger's essay on Georg Trakl that whereas poetry has always been celebrated as one place where the cry of individual pain can sound out, from Heidegger's deep historical perspective the empirical pain of any one person would be a 'merely

anthropological' concern (Caputo 1993: 149). Heidegger's remorseless attention to essential and historical (*geschichtlich*) issues makes his work profound, but it also renders it oddly etherializing or, precisely, essentializing. This point has already come up in relation to the infamous agriculture remark. Factual pain, in itself, is downplayed except as Heidegger can read Trakl's poetry in terms of its historically disclosive or concealing power, i.e. as a mode of unconcealment or concealment in the history of being. Pain, or emotions such as love, anger, compassion etc., not having the status of rising to fundamental attunements, are simply not in the game of either disclosing or concealing anything and so fall to the side of the thinker's path as inessential. These would be very much the limitations of a specifically philosophical reading. Despite the arguments of 'The Origin of the Work of Art', the poetic is not given its full singularity, but is still being weighed predominantly as a means of knowledge, albeit in a radically altered form. In the reading of Hölderlin's 'Andenken' even love is considered as essentially a mode of truth (E: 147–8).

The argument then, elaborated at length in Fóti's influential *Heidegger and the Poets* (1992), is that Heidegger's concern with the 'history of being' and the possibility of a major transformation in Western history becomes a restrictive personal mythology, a 'grand narrative' that imposes itself upon the texts Heidegger reads. First, the themes of the oblivion of being and of awakening a fundamental attunement of mourning become unifying concerns that can override such normal details of scholarship as the status of the editions of the texts used, or other elements resistant to the overall focus on 'essential' questions. Heidegger relies on two editions of Hölderlin's poems, using at first the classic edition of Norbert von Hellgrath, and later the newly edited Stuttgart edition initiated in 1943. In some cases, the minutiae of Heidegger's interpretation bear upon a version of the text that is disputable, surely a major issue for readings that rest so closely on unravelling crucial words in the text (Fóti 1992: 44ff; Derrida 1995: 316).

Fóti's accusation that Heidegger cannot conceive radical loss in his readings of Hölderlin and Trakl concerns more than the accuracy of the interpretations. It relates to the greater issue of the adequacy or otherwise of Heideggerian thinking to face contemporary reality. Heidegger's alleged failure to measure up to the historically decisive character of the holocaust marks Fóti's reading, and gives it a certain tendentiousness. She is taking up a position, first articulated by the

Marxist Theodor Adorno (1903–69), that after the holocaust the very possibility of poetry must be in doubt (Fóti 1992: 74). This is why two chapters, a whole third of this short book, are devoted to the poetry of Paul Celan, a poet whom Heidegger admired as the greatest living poet, standing ‘further forward than anyone else’, but did not actually write about (Safranski 1998: 422). Celan was a Jewish German-speaking writer who produced some of the greatest post-war poetry in Europe. He was well read in Heidegger’s thinking, as the poems show, but also, given Heidegger’s past, deeply uncertain about him. Fóti, Lacoue-Labarthe and others read Celan’s poetry as articulating a post-Heideggerian ethic and poetic, one that gives full witness to disaster, irrecoverable loss and the possible impossibility of poetry after the holocaust. No wonder then that a first meeting between Heidegger and Celan in 1967 has attained the status of a mythic touchstone in discussion of Heidegger and poetic (see, for instance, Lacoue-Labarthe 1999: 33–8; Golb 1988; Rapaport 1997: 118–32). Heidegger and Celan were to meet twice subsequently, before Celan’s suicide in 1970. Interpretations of the poem that Celan wrote after the first meeting are as at odds with each other as everything else in this tortured debate. Entitled ‘Todtnauberg’, the poem is named for the place of the meeting at Heidegger’s country cabin (Celan 1983: II, 255). The two men had set out on a walk together after Celan had written in Heidegger’s guest book: ‘Into the cabin logbook, with a view towards the Brumenstern, with hope of a coming word in the heart’ (Safranski 1998: 423). Some, like Heidegger’s biographer Safranski and Hans Georg Gadamer read the poem as the record of a positive encounter (Gadamer 1985: 53). Safranski cites evidence that Celan was ‘elated’ after meeting Heidegger (Safranski 1998: 424). Others, however, see ‘Todtnauberg’ as a poem of disillusion, with its expression of the poet’s hope of a ‘coming word’ from Heidegger and the following of paths that lead only into a marshy swamp. A text that admits of readings so contrary is, needless to say, enigmatic. However, the consensus is towards the bleaker reading. The poem is full of images that, elsewhere in Celan’s work, relate to the holocaust (Golb 1988). For some readers Celan attains the status of the poet who managed to surpass the limitations of Heidegger’s own poetic, writing, after Auschwitz, a poetry that gives full witness to its intolerable historic conditions and the possibility of irrecoverable loss. It thus reaches into what might be called the ‘unthought’ of Heidegger’s own thinking.

In sum, Lacoue-Labarthe and Fóti pick up a totalizing tendency in Heidegger's readings, along with the slightly messianic drive that betrays the 'political' nature of the readings of Hölderlin in particular, offering as they do a quietist, patriotic programme of German renewal at odds with that of the Nazis and, later, with the Americanized state of post war Germany. Fóti's critique draws on a distinction between two sorts of reading. One, the more familiar, is bent on interpretation, elucidation and, inevitably, appropriation of its text. The other is no less scholarly but its rigour forces its acknowledgement finally of a certain 'unreadability' in the text, a structural resistance to any sort of univocal interpretation or totalization. The implication is that Heidegger's elucidations draw towards but fail to become the second form of reading, slipping too often into the first. Heidegger would thus approach but finally fall short of a fully deconstructive thinking that would affirm the singularity of its text against the totalizations of historicizing/thematizing readings, and which at the same time would affirm a limit of unreadability out of respect for that which eludes the grasp of our own thinking, for otherness. Fóti's is a version of an argument made many times since the 1960s: that Heidegger prepares the space for his most famous disciple, Jacques Derrida, but is still marked by residues of metaphysical thinking not at work in the latter. For instance, if Heidegger affirms the withdrawn secret nature of the text, as we saw in relation to the second part of 'Germania', it is insofar as such obscurity is seen in its 'earthly' sheltering aspect, as protecting the fundamental tone from misappropriation, not as a mere obscurity or indecipherability of the letter of the text and no more. Unlike in Celan, the failure of language itself does not seem to be countenanced fully as a possibility, but only in terms of the recuperative notion of the protective 'secret'. Thus even the very opacity of the text is put to work by Heidegger in the task of potential disclosure.

Yet, one can go a long way towards answering Fóti's accusations. Can Heidegger's stress on the poetic as a movement of fundamental questioning really be presented as a dogmatism? Gerald Bruns *Heidegger's Estrangements* (1989) discovers another Heidegger, one for whom the poetic is what might be termed a language of the 'earth' in the sense of that which is recalcitrant to thought, ungraspable, chastening:

poetry exposes thinking to language, to its strangeness or otherness, its refusal to be contained within categories and propositions, its irreducibility to

sameness and identity, its resistance to sense – in short, its denial of our efforts to speak it. Philosophy by contrast is thinking that closes itself off to the experience with language, turns itself over to logic, tries to protect itself by bringing language under the control of the proposition. Poetry, of course, knows no such control; poetry is the letting-go of language.

(Bruns 1989: xxiv–xxv)

As the site of such an event in the most fundamental human environment, namely language, the poetic is to be preserved as the supreme site of openness to otherness, to a future not already predictable as the result of calculative processes. Although Heidegger's readings sometimes contain a rhetoric of 'homecoming' that threatens to close off this space, to identify Heideggerian poetics merely with a mythical–political programme of German renewal is too reductive, and amounts to a refusal to bear the insecurity of the open space to which Heidegger leads us. At worst, some readings of Heidegger in the 1990s, a decade marked by a deeply moralistic tendency in criticism, give to Nazism and the holocaust the status of a key to all mythologies in Heidegger's difficult texts. For Heidegger, it is most often a space of endurance and patience that Hölderlin's poetry opens.

Lyotard writes:

What art can do is bear witness not to the sublime, but to this aporia [undecidability] of art and to its pain. It does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it. 'After Auschwitz' it is necessary, according to Eli Wiesel, to add yet another verse to the story of the forgetting of the recollection beside the fire in the forest. I cannot light the fire, I do not know the prayer, I can no longer find the spot in the forest, I cannot even tell the story any longer. All I know how to do is to say that I no longer know to tell this story. And this should be enough. This has to be enough. Celan 'after' Kafka, Joyce 'after' Proust, Nono 'after' Mahler.

(Lyotard 1990: 47)

And Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin? Lyotard's description of modern art as possible only as the 'sublime' witness to its own impossibility is already the place of the poetic for Hölderlin. One distinction between Heidegger and the modern writers listed by Lyotard is that Heidegger places the dilemma of the death of art much earlier – another reason perhaps why he might give less the holocaust less significance in this respect than do others. Might Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin's

enunciation of a non-enunciation in 'Germania' be a case of Wiesel's 'I cannot even tell the story any longer. All I know how to do is to say that I no longer know to tell this story'?

## THE READERS' DILEMMA

No new work on Heidegger is likely to be considered seriously unless it acknowledges the question of his Nazism. William Spanos's *Heidegger and Criticism* (1993) fully acknowledges Heidegger's complicity in political crime but expresses dismay at the crudities of Farias's book and special issue of *Critical Inquiry* (15, Winter 1989) on Heidegger and Nazism. Spanos argues that blanket condemnations and dismissals of Heidegger need to be understood as much in relation to our own time as to his. The vilification of Heidegger after the publication of Farias's book was in part a conservative backlash against the radical forms of critique that had owed so much to him, especially the work of Michel Foucault (1926–84) on the nature of power and Jacques Derrida's 'deconstruction' (see next chapter). Heidegger, in fact, became a convenient scapegoat whereby the triumphant liberal capitalism of the 'new world order,' post-1989, could consolidate its position in the media and academy, tarring forms of radical critique with the fascist brush, especially when a second scandal arose concerning the war-time journalism of the deconstructionist critic Paul de Man. Such American complacency, writes Spanos, forgets 'the mass destruction of civilian populations in Vietnam, Dresden and Hiroshima', falsely bolstering the moral authority of the West as victor of the Cold War (Spanos 1993: xiii).

The controversy is not only about Nazism and Heidegger. It is also necessarily about the nature of reading, interpretation, textual meaning, authorial responsibility and the reader's responsibility. This is why, over and above the immense questions that Nazism raises, the Heidegger controversy is not peripheral to a book aimed principally at readers concerned in some way with literary theory. Spanos still endorses Heideggerian thinking as a basis for a kind of oppositional cultural criticism. In other words, in most of Heidegger's work a specific politics is not built fixedly into Heidegger's texts but these still produce readings that allow a critique of modern industrial society which many on the left find profound. The actual history of Heidegger's reception is a forty year witness to this and is surely already a refutation of claims that Heidegger's thinking is inherently fascistic.

What everyone would like of course, is to read Heidegger's texts and to be able to put what is complicit with Nazism on one side and the rest on the other. Is this possible? Unfortunately, probably not. The difficulty is engaged in Michael E. Zimmerman's *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art* (1990), one of the few books that people approaching Heidegger will find clear and authoritative. Zimmerman recognizes the way the issue of reading Heidegger, especially work of the 1930s, poses questions of the nature of textual meaning. Zimmerman endorses the statement by the contemporary French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930– ) that Heidegger's texts are 'polysemic,' of multiple meaning, adding:

They can be read profitably without regard to their [immediate] political implications, but they can and should *also* be read in terms of those implications. His thought cannot be reduced to the level of an ideological 'reflex' of socio-political conditions, but on the other hand it cannot be regarded as wholly detached from such conditions. Heidegger argued that because creative works – including philosophical ones – have a measure of autonomy, the author's views about those works are not privileged.

(Zimmerman 1990: 38)

Heidegger's importance as a thinker for some on the radical left is a dramatic confirmation of Zimmerman's last point. Yet the intractable difficulty of this issue also appears in the peculiar strategy of presentation adopted in Zimmerman's book. One half devotes itself to a lucid account of the kind of cultural politics in which Heidegger's work can be placed in the 1920s and 1930s in Germany, the decadence of the Weimar Republic, the general disaffection with modernity, the disillusion with democracy, the hopes for national renewal, the influence of the work of Ernst Jünger on the place of technology in the modern social and political economy etc. Here, Zimmerman's is a mode of writing very familiar to workers in modern literary studies. Heidegger's texts are placed in a context of historical debate that renders them – or seems to render them – masterable as part of the cultural politics of their day. The arguments about technology, about the hopes for a revival of the power of art, all seem to fall into place in the intellectual life of Germany at this time. The second part of Zimmerman's study is more strictly 'philosophical', working through Heidegger's arguments with productionist metaphysics, its history, its culmination

in technology and in thinkers such as Jünger for whom humanity is the 'labouring animal,' etc. This is all extremely helpful, yet the division of Zimmerman's book into two parts simultaneously represents and evades the major problem in writing on Heidegger and cultural history: that Heidegger's own arguments are directed partly against the very kind of reading that Zimmerman's first section employs, namely the reduction of a poetic or philosophical text to being a function of social and historical debate, the supposed expression of its age and, with this view, the exaltation of the historian of such texts to a commanding overview whose objectivizing assumptions are not at stake. Zimmerman knowingly practices upon Heidegger exactly the kind of historicist reading that Heidegger refuses and tries to refute in the case of Hölderlin, Plato and others.

So, as Zimmerman would no doubt be the first to acknowledge, his contextualizing of Heidegger's lecture on Hölderlin's 'Germania' is a partial reading. To read only with a view to its most immediate context necessarily construes Heidegger's text as only a historical document with a particular cultural programme, and not, for example, as a movement of thought with truth claims we still need to confront. The lecture emerges as a topical programme of German renewal, based on Hölderlin, and in debate with the racist poetics of contemporaries of Heidegger, such as E. G. Kolbenheyer's version in 1932 of an 'expressivist' poetic according to which the poetry is a necessary 'biological' expression of a people (GA 39: 27). Zimmerman brings to life what Heidegger's listeners would have picked up in 1934–5. However, the difficulty – or importance – of reading Heidegger is that one cannot stop there, for deep assumptions about historicism and interpretation are exactly what is at stake in Heidegger and why he still engages us. If he were just the diminishing figure of historical perspective there would be no controversy. More than any other body of thought, Heidegger's is remarkable for the way it questions and rereads its context or any context in which one would wish to contain it.

Baldly speaking, Heidegger's concern is with *Geschichte*, a deep historical context we still share. Such fundamental assumptions about being change rarely and thus lie outside 'history' in its more quotidian sense, but when they do shift they change everything with them. Zimmerman, conventionally and lucidly, reads in terms of *Historie*. Such a reading makes itself vulnerable to the Heideggerian charge that its historicism indulges fundamental assumptions about being,

objectification, historical meaning etc. that the lecture explicitly contests. Heidegger attacks that approach which 'situates itself by principle and from the first outside of the matter it judges and considers, making of it a simple object of its opinion' (GA 39: 28).

Yet does this mean we must simply side with Heidegger against Zimmerman's approach in that part of his book? It is hard to see how anyone can yet deal fully with this question. It would require engagement in philosophical issues at Heidegger's own level, with comparable acumen of thought and depth of reading in the history of philosophy. Very few are equal to this. On the other hand, the last thing anyone wants to merely to take Heidegger at his word. There is an impasse here.

Any writing on Heidegger has to think through this issue in some way or another. Zimmerman's double strategy of presentation – cultural history in part one, issues in philosophy in part two – is one way of dealing with it. It may be in tension with Heidegger's thinking, but it also responds to the impossibility of deciding where, in Heidegger's texts, one can say that such or such a concept or argument is 'fascist' or not. This is especially problematic of texts from the mid-1930s when Heidegger was developing a critical position in relation to Nazism. There is no simple test or rule that would decide for us once and for all whether elements in 'The Origin of the Work of Art' might be complicit with Nazism or not. Not only is the reading of Heidegger's texts an open-ended and often difficult process, but such readings we might undertake cannot but engage with – or assume – issues in the nature of interpretation on which Heidegger already has much to say. After all, are we even so sure we know exactly where fascism ends and other less vilifiable modes of thought begin? Jacques Derrida points out that Heidegger is far from alone at this time in diagnosing a deep and possibly terminal crisis in the idea of Europe, or in calling for a radical revolution and revaluation at the deepest level. Does such a comparable sense of extreme crisis in Edmund Husserl, Paul Valéry and other great thinkers at this time not blur the issues (Derrida 1989: 61)?

Derrida concludes that Heidegger's modern reader is placed in an impossible but also unavoidable position. We are pulled in opposite directions by two opposed demands; first, that of the need to condemn at once every mark of complicity with Nazism in Heidegger and yet, second, that of the demand for patient thought and rereading of the texts, which means of course keeping open in many circumstances

the decision as to what is complicit and what is not. There is no rule that would decide for us:

why isn't the case closed? why is Heidegger's trial never over and done with? . . . we have to, we've *already* had to, respect the possibility *and* impossibility of this rule: *that it remains to come*.

(Derrida 1995: 193–4)

In this respect, the reading of Heidegger becomes an extreme example of the ethical dilemma of reading more generally, in any significant text. We are torn between conclusive interpretation or judgement and openness and re-reading. This intractable difficulty continues to be endured in Heidegger's legacy. There is no pat 'Students' Introduction' formula for this issue. Its strain is one reason debate about Heidegger so easily becomes polarized, and tempers frayed. Each reader must confront the issue anew, as his or her circumstances best allow.