

The Death of God at Auschwitz?

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Reading Heidegger's reflections of the 1930s on Hölderlin's poetry, I am often struck by the discrepancy between his lofty abstractions and the brutal reality of National Socialism.¹ How could he have possibly imagined, even in the early stages of Hitler's regime, that there existed some inner relation between Hölderlin's "holy wildness" and National Socialism? Why, long after the end of World War II, did he continue to harbor such an ambiguous attitude toward National Socialism? Why did he express a reluctance, bordering on defiance, to condemn the Holocaust, or to grapple seriously with the historical and cultural anti-Semitic issues (not merely the metaphysical ones) that were obviously so central to National Socialism? More broadly, how are we--given such self-damning silence--to evaluate his extraordinary yet idiosyncratic reading of Western history as the unpredictable "play" of being? May we not question the historical judgment of a man who engaged in what Hugo Ott has described as extravagant "self-mythification" regarding his own place in the scheme of Western History? There are no easy answers to these questions.

Heidegger continued to interpret Germany's history in the light of the tragic categories of Nietzsche and Hölderlin even after--and perhaps even especially after--Germany's destruction in World War II. In 1945, for example, Heidegger argued that the war had arisen because of the technological frenzy provoked by the "death of God." This "death," he assured his reader, had nothing to do with "ordinary atheism," but resulted instead from the fact that "the world of the Christian God has lost its effective force in history. (Cf. my 1943 lecture on Nietzsche's word 'God is dead.')

If things had been different, would the First World War have been possible? And even more, had

things been different, would the Second World War have become possible?"² In Heidegger's reading of the period from 1933 to 1945, the Germans, blinded by the death of God, had made a valiant effort to prepare for a new advent of the Divine, but were led astray when the technological Will to Power perverted the National Socialist "revolution."

In La fiction du politique, Lacoue-Labarthe uses Hölderlin's conception of tragedy to provide an alternative to Heidegger's interpretation of what happened to Germany from 1933 to 1945. Lacoue-Labarthe maintains that Auschwitz represents what Hölderlin called a caesura, a radical break in history that occurs when God and humanity become radically separated. "In fact," we are told, "God died at Auschwitz, in any case the God of the Greco-Christian West."³ For Hölderlin, such a caesura, such a radical withdrawing of God, is a basic law of the tragic character of finite existence.⁴ The postwar Heidegger erred by not applying his recurring theme of the death of God to Auschwitz, because--if Lacoue-Labarthe is right--this constitutes what he himself surely had in mind by the radical withdrawal of being and the sacred in technological modernity. Lacoue-Labarthe maintains that in the tragic caesura God reveals Itself as an abyss, a total absence which signals either the possibility for a new beginning or else the end of all historical possibilities. Heidegger, however, believed that the real caesura had already occurred in the death of the Biblical God and the Christian-Platonic table of values, which Hölderlin and Nietzsche had surmised in the nineteenth century. From Heidegger's viewpoint, subsequent events, including world wars and death camps, were not themselves the caesura of which Hölderlin spoke, but instead were symptoms of it. For Lacoue-Labarthe, by way of contrast, there did occur at Auschwitz a radical break between God and humanity, a caesura, from which the West has not recovered.

In the 1930s, Heidegger believed that Hitler represented the leader who was divinely-inspired to lead Germany and the West out of the ontological desert, which

had resulted from the tragic caesura, and into a new historical beginning , which would restore meaning and ontological "weight" to history, human existence, and entities. Emphasizing the role played by the ancient Greeks in Western history, Heidegger either ignored the role played by the Jews in that history, or maintained that its offshoot, Christianity, impeded Germany's attempt at radical ontological renewal. Presumably influenced by Nietzsche's critique of Jewish-Christian "slave morality," including its concern for the weak and oppressed, Heidegger adopted the Nazi attitude that only ruthlessness, martial courage, and hardness could save Germany in its hour of need. Renouncing the moral constraints imposed by a decadent "Christendom," he continued to support the Nazis long after the first concentration camps sprang up around Freiburg in 1933 and long after his own Jewish students had been forced out of their academic posts. To be sure, he could not have predicted in the 1930s that the Nazis would resort to a "final solution" for the "problem" posed by European Jewry, but his fascination with the Greek tradition and his desperate longing for the "complete transformation of German Dasein," prevented him from acknowledging the extent to which anti-Semitism was not an incidental dimension of Nazi Germany. Even with the advantage of hindsight, Heidegger was either unwilling or unable to concede that the attempted extermination of the Jews manifested a dark and unreconciled dimension of Germany in particular and the West in general.

In his postwar writings, Heidegger did suggest that the historical reality of Nazi Germany (if not its "inner truth and greatness") manifested a kind of hubris, an attempt by mortals to raise themselves to the level of the Divine. But Heidegger did not link this hubris with Nazi anti-Semitism; instead, he regarded National Socialism, considered at least in its crude reality, as being akin to liberal capitalism and communism. In his view, these three modern ideologies are metaphysically "the same" insofar as they are manifestations of anthropocentric humanism, the self-assertion of mortal Western "man" against Being. According to Lacoue-Labarthe,

Nazi Germans did in fact exhibit hubris in attempting to constitute their own mythic origin, by “creating” themselves as a national, all-embracing work of art (Gesamtkunstwerk). In this attempt, they defied their own finitude and sought an underived and unmediated existence that is impossible for mortals. Once again calling on Hölderlin, Lacoue-Labarthe refers to a second law of tragedy: namely, that the hero, faced with the absence of God, must finally submit to his own finitude and mortality. The hero’s hubris invites a cleansing punishment. Heidegger agreed that such submission is vital to the possibility of an authentic Volksgeist.

Lacoue-Labarthe argues, however, that Heidegger offered only a partial or confused interpretation of Germany's “tragic” situation. Though finally admitting that the historical reality of National Socialism was an episode in the technological Will to Will that grips anthropocentric modern humankind, Heidegger never conceded that either true National Socialism, or authentic German Geist, or he himself considered as spokesman for being, could have been guilty of hubris. Heidegger’s assessment of German behavior has, not surprisingly, provoked consternation even on the part of those sympathetic to his thinking. If Germany had been guilty of ontological hubris, so Heidegger suggested, Germany would have suffered a cleansing punishment. One might think that such punishment was meted out by the victorious allies, who not only obliterated the Germany army, but who also carried out militarily pointless bombing raids against countless German cities toward the end of the war. Refusing to blame Germany or himself for what occurred between 1933 and 1945, however, Heidegger viewed the destruction suffered by his country not as ontological catharsis, but instead as ontical castigation imposed by the French, English, Americans, and Soviets, nations so seized by technological nihilism that they were incapable of recognizing the importance of what National Socialism had tried to achieve. In July, 1945, after Germany had been crushed by the victorious Allies, Heidegger wrote: “Now everyone thinks of the decline. We Germans cannot go under, however, because we have not

at all yet arisen and must only persevere through the night.”⁵

In Lacoue-Labarthe’s eyes, Nazi Germans did engage in hubristic acts, but the people who really suffered as a consequence of German hubris were, finally, not so much the Germans but the Jews, whom Heidegger conveniently left out of any formulation of the tragic “equation.” In almost a literal sense, according to Lacoue-Labarthe, the Jews were the tragic “purgation” or “cleansing” (catharsis) of Germany and the West. Had postwar Heidegger been more courageous, we are told, he not only would have connected Auschwitz explicitly with German hubris, but would have also regarded the Holocaust itself—not the gradual withdrawal of the biblical God prior to Germany’s attempted “new beginning” in 1933—as a real caesura in Western history.

Questioning Lacoue-Labarthe’s use of Hölderlin’s theory of tragedy to interpret the meaning of Auschwitz, Jean-François Lyotard argues that Auschwitz cannot have represented a tragic caesura because nothing has really changed since World War II: the West has not been released from the technological impulse.⁶ In this respect, Lyotard agrees with Heidegger’s assessment that World War II changed nothing. Moreover, Lyotard asks, if the Germans were guilty of hubris, why did the Jews die in the extermination camps? If the Germans were playing the role of the hubristic hero, why were they not the ones forced to acknowledge their finitude and accept the tragic law of destruction and death?

Lyotard offers a different interpretation of the meaning of Auschwitz, an interpretation informed more by theology than by tragedy. He argues that the Jews died in Auschwitz and other concentration camps because the Greco-Roman West has long resented them as reminders of the impotence of those great projects (commercial, legal, scientific, technological, military, cultural) whose aim is to deny human dependence on the nameless Divine.⁷ The Jews, who experienced the trauma of being uprooted and made hostage to the unnamable Divinity, represent the

memory of the unconquerable obstacle to the Western quest to make everything representable, present, and thus controllable. As bearers of the memory of human finitude and dependence, Lyotard argues, the Jews had to be excluded. In destroying the Jews, then, German National Socialists believed that they were saving the West. The extermination of the Jews, the most extreme attempt to erase this unwanted memory, was carried out in secret so that the very memory of the obliteration of memory would also be forgotten.

In a powerful essay, "Through That Glass Darkly," George Steiner has made a similar point. The Shoah and pogroms, we are told, represent

a desperate endeavor by Christianity and by its pagan-parodistic off-shoots such as Nazism, to silence once and for all the curse of the ideal inherent in the Mosaic covenant with God, in the more-than-humaneness of Isaiah, in the teachings of Jesus the Jew. Eradicate the Jew and you will have eradicated from the within the Christian west an unendurable remembrance of moral and social failure. There is, in consequence, an awful symmetry in the fact that by instituting and allowing the world of the death-camps, European gentile civilization has striven to make it unbearable for Jews to remember. For it is in Judaism that there has been the obsessive, maddening remembrance which Christianity worked furiously to stifle inside itself.⁸

According to Lyotard, World War II was a massive distraction designed to conceal what was really going on, namely, the attempted obliteration of those who act as a thorn in the side of the Christian West by reminding it of its perpetual bad conscience.⁹ According to Lyotard, the Western technological impulse to make everything "present" for use and thus to gain total control over it results from Western

man's attempt to free himself from the stern biblical God's injunction to be perfectly obedient to Divine Law. Lyotard contrasts this theological interpretation of Western history with Heidegger's claim that the technological impulse is a manifestation of Western humankind's insurrection against being. Yet this insurrection itself cannot be explained in terms of human decision; instead, the arrogant, world-conquering human subject itself arose in connection with the self-concealment of being, which defines the history of foundationalist-productionist metaphysics.

Even if Auschwitz cannot be conceived in terms of the artistic laws of tragedy, however, Lyotard still agrees up to a point with a view that can be attributed to Heidegger, namely, that Auschwitz exemplifies the dreadful "art work" typical of the union of art and politics in the technological era. While an authentic work of art--such as a Greek temple--founded a world by letting entities present themselves appropriately and distinctly, the perverse technological work of art--such as a hydroelectric station--differentiates nothing, but rather reveals things indiscriminately as sources of power. Both temple and power station are instances of techne; both reveal entities; but the former constitutes a world, while the latter contributes to an un-world.¹⁰ About a decade after the end of the war, Heidegger commented on "the monstrosity that speaks out of the two titles, 'The Rhine,' as dammed up into the power works, and 'the Rhine' as uttered out of the art work, in Hölderlin's hymn by that name."¹¹

Lyotard rejects Heidegger's view that the Nazi crematoria were metaphysically equivalent to hydroelectric dams. Such a view ignores that the crematoria were for the efficient production of corpses, while dams were for efficient production of electricity. Gliding over such merely "ontical" distinctions is justified, in Heidegger's opinion, because both crematoria and dams are manifestations of the same Western impulse toward total technological domination. In some respects, Heidegger then, would agree with Lacoue-Labarthe that Auschwitz reveals the "essence" of the West,

because at Auschwitz Western humanism's drive toward total domination achieved its apogee: humans disposed of other humans like industrial waste, burning them in crematoria built according to the latest technology. But Lyotard is right in saying that Heidegger went astray in maintaining that death camps, H-bombs, and mechanized agriculture are metaphysically equivalent, for such an assertion ignores the crucial role played in National Socialism by violent anti-Semitism, which reached its grim conclusion in Auschwitz.. By equating crematoria with dams, by saying that they are both manifestations of the Western Will to Will, Heidegger refused to entertain the possibility that there was both a theological dimension and a specifically German dimension to the decisions that led to the crematoria. Moreover, in equating German war deaths at the hands of Russian soldiers with the deaths of Jews at the hands of Nazi functionaries, Heidegger failed to see that while both events were slaughters, the German soldiers died as combatants, but the Jews died as innocent victims of state-organized anti-Semitic violence.

Heidegger's insensitivity to this issue may be less surprising when we consider how seldom in his writings he commented on the concrete aspects of human personality and social interaction. Even his political speeches about the need for a new workers' society are remarkably devoid of practical insight and specific recommendations. Edith Wyschogrod has argued that Heidegger could speak of crematoria and hydroelectric dams in the same breath because of his focus on the history of productionist metaphysics. His concern with the transformation of things -- how they are produced, analyzed, and used--in Western history led him to neglect the transformation of social institutions and practices. "The priorities established remain nothing short of astounding. For Heidegger, such facts as the damming of the Rhine are important data attesting devastation, but the unnumbered dead of the two world wars and the creation of death and slave labor camps as institutional forms are never so much as mentioned in his major essays." ¹²

Heidegger's equation of death camps and power plants confirms, in Lyotard's eyes, the hypothesis that Heidegger was like other Germans in wanting to forget the historical significance of the Jews. Yet Lyotard allows that Heidegger, by claiming that Western humanity had forgotten the originating event and thus ended in technological nihilism, may have appropriated the role of the Jewish prophet for his own ontological purposes: just as Jewish prophets reminded their people to remember the unnamable Origin, so too Heidegger reminded his people to remember the nameless Origin. The crucial difference here, of course, is the difference between Jerusalem and Athens--the difference between captivity by the Divine and enthrallment to Being. According to Lyotard, Heidegger's scandalous postwar silence about the Holocaust revealed his refusal to deconstruct his most basic assumption: that the history of the West is identical with the history of being initiated by the Greeks. The history of the Jews, however, testifies that there is yet another dimension to that history: faithfulness to the Divine Law.

Lyotard's critique of Heidegger is reminiscent of Emmanuel Levinas's famous charge that Heidegger went astray, despite his brilliance, by elevating being above the moral law, ontology over ethics. To some extent, Heidegger was following his predecessors Hegel and Nietzsche in claiming that the world-historical individual is "beyond good and evil." By portraying ethical matters as secondary considerations which arise within and which are limited to a particular historical world, however, Heidegger ran the risk of justifying whatever ethical form of life happened to emerge in a world "founded" by a new work of art. The demented "world" of National Socialism reveals what may be "justified" when ontologico-aesthetic considerations are allowed to triumph over liberal-democratic norms and over the "decadent" Jewish-Christian religious beliefs from which those secular norms were in part derived.

In his "Letter on Humanism" (1946), Heidegger defended his views on ethics and, indirectly, his self-understanding regarding his role in National Socialism. He

explained that he did not intend to develop a systematic ethics, since he regarded ethics as a branch of metaphysics.¹³ Modern ethical systems were concerned with “values,” which he regarded as positions posited by the human subject (collectively or individually) in order to enhance the Will to Power. The idea of “ethics,” then, was part and parcel of the nihilistic modern age. Instead of ethics, what Western humanity needed was a new ethos, a new way of dwelling on the earth that would establish proper limits for human behavior. Such an ethos could come only as a gift; it could never be founded by merely human actions. For Heidegger, Hölderlin’s poetry held open the possibility of the arrival of a gift that would restore meaning and order to a technologically powerful but nihilistic world. Heidegger, then, did acknowledge the importance of establishing limits and law for human conduct. To this extent, his view can be said to agree with that of Lyotard. He also believed, however, unlike Lyotard, that the “law” (not the Law) governing a world is historical, not eternal. In his Schelling lectures (1936), Heidegger forcefully articulated Schelling's view that “evil” arose from human self-assertion over against the Divine Law. If Heidegger had a theology, it would be close to the one developed by Schelling. But, for Heidegger if not for Schelling, this “law” to which humans are called upon to submit was bound up not with the Eternal Divine but with historically limited gods--manifestations of “holy wildness.”

Heidegger’s thought, including his critique of modernity, can be understood in part as his agonized response to a widely shared concern about the “disenchantment” of the world in technological modernity. By disclosing the cosmos as little more than matter in motion, modernity has not only encouraged an unprecedented assault against nature, but also invited modern societies to treat their own populations as the most important “raw material.” Today, especially in view of institutionalized social and ecological violence, not least in the former Soviet bloc, even many leftist thinkers concede that Enlightenment modernity’s metaphysical and

political principles must be revised and possibly even transformed if emancipatory ideals are ever fully to be realized. Heidegger maintained, however, that modernity's very idea of "freedom" was misguided. The modern subject understands freedom as unbinding its animalistic cravings for security and for material consumption.

Enslaved by such cravings, the "clever animal" (Nietzsche) totally mobilizes society and turns the planet into a titanic foundry.

By the way of contrast to modern humanists, Heidegger defined freedom as the ontologically disclosive capacity granted solely to human existence. To be free means to "let things be," i.e., to let them manifest themselves in ways that accord with their own possibilities. Genuine freedom and authenticity, then, involve submitting to the ontological power at work through human existence. There would seem to be clear parallels between this idea of authenticity and the Christian idea that salvation means submitting to the will of God. In supporting Hitler, however, Heidegger maintained that the widespread hunger for a new meaning-restoring "mythology" could not be fed by the biblical religions, whose God had vanished from the world. Instead, Heidegger sang the praises of Hölderlin's "coming god," the Dionysian, who would restore ontological weight to things rendered one-dimensional by technological modernity's constricted understanding of being.

Heidegger's meditations on Hölderlin reveal ties to early German romanticism, which longed for an artistic, poetic, or mythic "reason" to temper the abstract rationality of modern science and commerce. That elements of such romanticism can be discerned not only in Heidegger's work, but also in the writings of Nazi ideologues has led some to conclude that German's reactionary and irrational movements were the "culmination" of romanticism. Manfred Frank has replied, however, that early German romantics often had broadly democratic political attitudes that were simply incompatible with the authoritarian irrationalism and racism of later völkish movements, including National Socialism.¹⁴ Furthermore, as Kathleen Wright has

pointed out, Heidegger's commentaries on Hölderlin ignore that romantic poet's passionate interest in the French Revolution's democratic ideals, which were anathema to Heidegger and other "conservatives revolutionaries."¹⁵ Insofar as they establish significant differences between early German romanticism and National Socialism, Frank and Wright may be read as attempting to remove the shroud of suspicion that surrounds today's continuing longing for a new self-understanding, one that would restore a sense of connectedness among humans, on the one hand, and between humankind and nature, on the other. Even though acknowledging the importance of that longing, however, Frank and Wright warn that those who criticize modernity's totalizing control-impulse and simultaneously call for a meaning-restoring mythology, should not only keep in mind the laudable emancipatory goals of modernity, but should also heed the political lessons taught by, and ponder the self-delusion involved in, Heidegger's support for National Socialism, Europe's last great mythic revolt against modernity.

The self-deluding and self-mythifying Heidegger believed that he had been destined to proclaim the saving vision of his hero, Hölderlin, and that he himself was thus the world-historical figure who would transform the fate of the West. Consider Heidegger's astonishing account, presented in 1942, of the "destiny" linking him with Hölderlin: "Perhaps Hölderlin, the poet, must become the determining destiny [*Geschick*] of confrontation for one who thinks [Heidegger], whose grandfather, according to the records, was born in a manger [*in ovili*] (in the sheep-fold of a farmer), which lay in the upper Donautal near the edge of a stream under the cliff. The hidden history of saying knows no accidents. All is destiny [*Schickung*]." ¹⁶ The grandson of the man born in a manger in Hölderlin's beloved Swabian countryside knew that he was destined to change the course of history! Even as Germany was being destroyed in 1944, Heidegger did not hesitate to say, "In truth, however, my works belong not to my person, but instead they serve the German future and belong

to it. Their safe-keeping should demand a corresponding carefulness.”¹⁷

Heidegger’s postwar utterances never deviated from the conviction, described by Ott as showing “monstrous hubris,” that his vision of history remained the key to the past and future of the West.¹⁸ Given Heidegger’s apparent hubris and his refusal, even at the urging of his old friends Karl Jaspers and Rudolf Bultmann, to acknowledge some measure of guilt for the role he played in promoting German’s catastrophe, we may readily see why his critics have been so suspicious both of his understanding of Western history and of the interpretation of modern technology he derived from it.¹⁹

Many contemporary critics, including a number of French theorists influenced by Heidegger, join him in maintaining that the French Revolution’s “terror,” the Soviet Gulag, Nazi extermination camps, and American economic imperialism are all metaphysically “the same,” i.e., symptoms of modernity’s totalizing rationality, which justifies its horrendous means by appealing to the noble end of “perfecting” humankind and society. Though rightly criticizing this dark side of modernity, these critics not only ignore modernity’s positive achievements, but also view modernity in terms of a “leveling gaze” (Jürgen Habermas) that ignores significant political and historical differences between liberal capitalism, Soviet communism, and German National Socialism. Moreover, Heidegger and his contemporary theoretical followers ignore the extent to which Enlightenment modernity contains within itself at least some of the political and ethical principles necessary not only for criticizing its own excesses, e.g., Soviet totalitarianism, but also for opposing the racist authoritarianism embodied in National Socialism.

As I noted earlier, by the early 1940s, Heidegger apparently concluded that such voluntarism was a manifestation of the metaphysical Will to Power at work in all of technological modernity, including the historical reality of National Socialism. In his idea of Gelassenheit, the later Heidegger presumably abandoned the voluntarism and subjectivism that led him to believe that existential resoluteness and hardness

was needed to help initiate the new beginning proposed by Hitler. Though not wishing to underestimate the importance of Heidegger's apparent renunciation of the subjectivism that he associated with his early support for Nazism, I also refuse to overestimate the political significance of this philosophical shift. After the war, he portrayed democratic ideals as tolerable only until a new god arrived to save the West from the nihilism represented by those allegedly bankrupt ideals. Further, though conceding that I myself might well have failed to display any particular moral courage in the face of National Socialism, and though admitting that I have no authority on the basis of which to make a moral assessment of Heidegger's behavior, I am unwilling to concede that such assessments are inappropriate on the part of various communities attempting to come to terms with Heidegger's actions, and perhaps especially on the part of contemporary philosophers who may once again be faced with the prospect of succumbing to the temptation of supporting (even if only by failing to protest) morally unacceptable solutions to difficult political circumstances.

Heidegger himself, by refusing to speak of the horrors to which National Socialism led, by refusing to acknowledge any moral responsibility for having helped to consolidate Nazi power at a crucial historical juncture, and by refusing to renounce unequivocally his support for Nazism, invited a skeptical response to his notion that genuine freedom involves submitting to the call of being. For Jews and Christians, such submission is appropriate not in respect to impersonal "being," but only in respect to the personal Biblical God, Who commands people to love their neighbors as themselves. Submitting oneself to being, so Jews and Christians would argue, amounts to surrendering to merely temporal-historical forces, whose hubristic and violent record is all too clear. For those who retain a commitment to modernity's emancipatory ideals, moreover, the idea of submitting to "the call of being" is all too consistent with anti-democratic, reactionary movements led by elites who--supposedly "inspired" by mysterious revelations--seek to save the world by

remythologizing it.

Despite progressive suspicions of today's widespread longing for spiritual and ontological renewal, such longing is an understandable response to a secularized world that has often failed to elicit adequate respect not only for human life, but for the rest of life on Earth. National Socialism triumphed in part because liberals and leftists alike either ignored, or else dismissed as "irrational" and "reactionary," the crucial issues of purpose and meaning, themes which the Nazis were happy to appropriate. Fearing the potentially suicidal consequences of technological modernity's treatment of nature, many people are once again seeking a new mythology, often in the guise of a "new ecological paradigm," that would disclose once more the sacred dimensions of all life. Theodore Roszak has recently stated that "What Auschwitz was to its human inmates--an expertly rationalized, efficiently organized killing ground--our urban-industrial system is fast becoming for the biosphere at large, and for ourselves as an inseparable part of that environment."²⁰ Though politically perceptive new paradigmers such as Roszak affirm cultural pluralism and democratic practices, even Roszak does not seem to recognize the extent to which the Nazi "religion of nature" sharply contrasted the allegedly decadent, life-hating, anti-naturalistic, urban-oriented Jews with the vital, life-affirming, naturalistic nature-inspired Aryans.²¹ As Edward Pois has pointed out, National Socialism proved so appealing to many Germans because it promised them relief from the stringent ethical demands imposed by the transcendent Divine on an imperfect humanity, and because it offered a radically immanent nature mythology that promised a more "natural" way of life with close ties to local culture, traditions, and land--if only the Germans would live according to "nature's laws."²²

Just as there are parallels between the attempted Nazi annihilation of the Jews and other genocidal projects in human history, so too there are parallels between the Holocaust and today's destruction of thousands of species. But there are differences

as well, differences that may help Western humankind better to understand its own destructive and self-destructive impulses. Arguably, the Jews remind Western humanity not only of the limitations of all historical projects, but also of the difficulties involved in living as historical people with profound obligations to a transcendent extra-historical domain. Today, some radical ecologists attempt to blame the ongoing destruction of the biosphere on a patriarchal culture that has been deeply influenced by the idea of a wholly transcendent biblical God Who lacks any relationship to Creation. Arguing that the biblical God displaced the Goddesses of an earlier age, ecofeminists often maintain that Western patriarchal religions emphasized cultural binaries, such as divine male mind vs. created female body, eternity vs. finitude, culture vs. nature, which eventually justified modern "man's" attempt to dominate nature. Countless wars have been fought, pogroms carried out, and natural wonders decimated by patriarchal egos who proclaimed the "greater glory of God," but who were in fact motivated by desire to deny their own mortality and finitude. By projecting mortality upon an enemy to be slain, upon a land to be conquered, or upon a woman (or some other "inferior") to be dominated, the patriarchal ego reassured itself about its own survival.²³ To the extent that patriarchal biblical religions are other-worldly in orientation, and to the extent that they invite domineering attitudes toward non-believers and nature, those religions are problematic. An acceptable alternative, however, is not to be found in a wholly immanent, nature-worshipping religion that regards all talk of the transcendent dimension as a sign of life-hating, patriarchal decadence.

In the racist naturalism favored by so many Nazi ideologues, and which he himself rejected, Heidegger recognized this problematic "immanentism." Hence, he criticized modernity's death-denying ego-subject not because this subject was the culmination of the patriarchal craving for transcendence, but instead because the modern subject had become a death-denying, power-craving animal that denied any

transcendent domain, and installed itself as the ground for all meaning, purpose, and value. For Heidegger, modernity went astray not because it renounced the transcendence spoken of by biblical theology, but instead because it was blind to the truly transcendent: being as such. Maintaining that being absolutely transcends entities, Heidegger held that Western metaphysicians and theologians went astray by equating being with the highest entity (God, Platonic forms, Will to Power). Neo-Hegelian claim that evolutionary trends in human history are manifestations of the Divine coming to self awareness in Creation, but Heidegger could not take seriously the possibility that anthropocentric humanism, instead of being the final stage in the degenerative history of Western metaphysics, might be a temporary stage in the evolution of a postmodern awareness that deconstructs dualism and re-establishes a relation with the transcendent.²⁴ But what is meant by the "transcendent" in this connection is not what Heidegger meant by that term. Rather than take seriously alternative conceptions of transcendence, he tended to lump them into the same metaphysical heap.

In his concept of the fourfold of earth and sky, gods and mortals, Heidegger sought to reconcile transcendence and immanence, but this attempt met with only limited success. There are other attempts to achieve such a reconciliation. For example, a number of contemporary theologians, including some feminists, propose that an evolving awareness might move beyond the polarity of absolute transcendence and complete immanence, a polarity that has had such tragic consequences for human history. Presumably, a more evolved awareness would recognize that humankind participates simultaneously in the transcendent and the immanent, in the eternal and the historical, in the spiritual and the incarnate. Such awareness would be consistent with the theological doctrine of "panentheism." As opposed to pantheism, which identifies the spatio-temporal domain with the Divine, panentheism asserts that the Divine includes the spatio-temporal domain but is not

identical with it. If there is an "evolution" of consciousness, perhaps it involves a growing sense that all life is incarnate spirit. Awareness of participating in the eternal might make it possible for the ego to affirm its mortal, incarnate status and also to surrender some of its control obsession, which is manifest in binary oppositions between mind and body, male and female, "man" and nature. These days, versions of this evolutionary-developmental view of human history, especially as informed by contemporary developments in cosmology, is finding favor among those who promote a new ecological paradigm and a post-patriarchal sense of the Divine.²⁵

Hostile both to traditional biblical religions as well as to progressive, evolutionary, neo-Hegelian appropriations of them, however, Heidegger invented his own "private religion," according to which the gods name the meaning-giving powers that appear in the historical dawn initiated by the "destiny of being." He believed that only these new gods, constituted by a new disclosure of transcendent being, could "save us" from the nihilism of technological modernity. Neither Heidegger's gods nor the biblical God forestalled the horrors of the twentieth century, including Auschwitz. Yet the widespread sense that the sacred has vanished from the world does not mean that this baleful condition is permanent ; the sacred sensibility may return, though there is no guarantee that this might occur before humankind has managed to engineer its own destruction and that of many other terrestrial forms of life. No one can say whether the Divine will manifest itself again, though I for one hope that the next manifestation would emphasize the interpenetration of the immanent and transcendent in a way that undermines old dualisms and fears. Those who hope for major spiritual changes, however, need to pay special attention to Heidegger's political experience, which shows that even the most intellectually gifted can be tempted to heal their own existential agony by surrendering to charismatic leaders who promise salvation, but deliver death and destruction.

¹An earlier version of this essay appeared as part of Chapter Eight of my book, Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1990). See also my essays "Ontological Aestheticism: Heidegger, Jünger, and National Socialism," in Philosophy and Politics: The Heidegger Affair, ed. Tom Rockmore and Joseph Margolis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); "The Thorn in Heidegger's Side: The Question of National Socialism," The Philosophical Forum, XX (Summer, 1989), pp. 326-365; "The Search for a Heideggerian Ethics," in Ethics and Responsibility in the Phenomenological Tradition (Pittsburgh: The Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center of Duquesne University, 1992). The recent secondary literature on Heidegger's politics is vast, but see John D. Caputo, Demythologizing Heidegger (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1994); Hans Sluga, Heidegger's Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1993); Tom Rockmore, On Heidegger's Nazism and Philosophy (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992); Richard Wolin, The Politics of Being (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); and Frank Schalow, "A Question Concerning Heidegger's Involvement in National Socialism," Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology, 24, No. 2 (May, 1993), pp. 121-139; Thomas J. Sheehan, "Heidegger and the Nazis," The New York Review of Books, XXXV, No. 10 (June 16, 1988), 38-47).

²Martin Heidegger, Das Rektorat 1933/34. Tatsachen und Gedanken, ed. Hermann Heidegger (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983), p. 25; "The Rectorate 1933/34. Facts and Thoughts," trans. Karsten Harries, The Review of Metaphysics, 38, No. 3 (March, 1985), p. 485.

³Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, La fiction du politique (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1987), p. 62; see Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political, trans. Chris Turner

(Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 37. See also Lacoue-Labarthe, L'imitation des Modernes (Paris: Galilée, 1986).

⁴Lacoue-Labarthe, La fiction du politique, pp. 64ff; Heidegger, Art and Politics, pp. 41-46.

⁵Cited by Hugo Ott, Martin Heidegger; Unterwegs zu seiner Biographie (Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 1988), p. 157.

⁶Jean-François Lyotard, Heidegger et "les juifs" (Paris: Galilée, 1988); Lyotard, Heidegger and "the Jews", trans. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

⁷Lyotard, Heidegger et "les juifs", p. 45ff; Heidegger and "the Jews", p. 22.

⁸George Steiner, "Through That Glass Darkly," Salmagundi, No. 93 (Winter, 1992), p. 45.

⁹Lyotard, Heidegger et "les juifs", p.55; Heidegger and "the Jews", p. 28.

¹⁰I am grateful to Hubert Dreyfus for this comparison.

¹¹Martin Heidegger, "Die Frage Nach der Technik," Vorträge und Aufsätze, Vol. I (Pfullingen: Günther Neske, 1967), p. 15; "The Question Concerning Technology," in The Question Concerning Technology, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 16.

¹²Edith Wyschograd, Spirit in Ashes: Hegel, Heidegger, and Man-Made Death (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 188.

¹³Charles M. Sherover has written several interesting essays in which he attempts to develop an existential ethics based on Heidegger's thought. For example, see "Founding an Existential Ethic," Human Studies, 4 (1981), pp. 223-236. See also Frank Schalow, The Renewal of the Heidegger-Kant Dialogue: Action, Thought, and Responsibility (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), and Charles Scott, "Heidegger and the Question of Ethics," Research in Phenomenology, XVIII (1988), 23-40.

¹⁴Manfred Frank, Der kommende Gott: Vorlesungen über die Neue Mythologie (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982).

¹⁵Kathleen Wright, "Heidegger's Hölderlin and the Mo(u)rning of History," forthcoming in a special issue of Philosophy Today in honor of the 150th anniversary of the death of Hölderlin.

¹⁶Cited in Ott, Martin Heidegger, p. 20. Heidegger originally made this statement in his 1942 lecture course, Hölderlins Hymne "Der Ister", but the statement was not included in the version published in volume 53 of his Gesamtausgabe.

¹⁷Ott, Martin Heidegger, p. 157.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 159.

¹⁹On Heidegger's postwar relation to Jaspers and Bultmann, see Ott, Martin Heidegger.

²⁰Theodore Roszak, The Voice of the Earth (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), p. 73.

²¹On the political dangers posed by the search for a new paradigm, see my book, Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

²²Edward A. Pois, National Socialism and the Religion of Nature (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1986). This book is highly recommended.

²³See Katherine Keller, From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

²⁴See Ken Wilber, Up From Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution (Boston: Shambhala, 1981).

²⁵See my essay "Quantum Theory, Intrinsic Value, and Non-Dualism," Environmental Ethics, X (Spring, 1988), pp. 3-30.