

- ★ **Martin Heidegger, A Political Life** by Hugo Ott, Trans. Alan Blunden, HarperCollins (1993) 407pp, £20.00.
- ★ **Heidegger: Thought and Historicity** by Christopher Fynsk, Cornell University Press (1993) 266pp, £12.50.

Political biographies rarely make for easy reading even when their subject is relatively lightweight, so it should come as no surprise that this work on, as George Steiner expressed it, one of “the two dominant philosophers” of our century, (the other being Wittgenstein in his estimation), is as weighty as its considerable length suggests.

Biographies of politicians can be ethereal things; political biographies of those better known for their work in other spheres than, at least, party politics can appear contrived, modish ‘takes’ on already well-researched areas. Heidegger, of course, has been variously considered both these things: as, if not first-rank politician, then certainly uncomplaining party man; and as (and congruent with his own reckoning) philosopher-beyond-politics.

For an age in which the credo ‘the personal is political’ has become less the philosophy of liberation, more politically correct dogma, the temptation to judge his philosophy by his life is strong. In yielding to this temptation Ott joins the iconoclasts who have in recent times brought us Freud as fraud and Sartre the speed-freak. The philosopher Althusser, we are told, not only murdered his wife but, apparently, failed to read his Marx, while Paul de Man, the Belgian colleague of Michel Foucault, has been revealed as a fascist. Last year Elizabeth Roudinesco, a psychiatric historian, unveiled Jacques Lacan as an avaricious seducer of his female patients, while Michel Schneider has concluded that his system of thought was a “reflection of the taste for constant lying, falsification and disguise which marked his life”.

Now Ott, a professor of economics and social history at Heidegger’s own University of Freiburg, joins this burgeoning sub-oeuvre with his painstaking study of Heidegger as one of the primary instigators of the Nazification of the German universities. Ott is not alone, though, in his speculations about the nature of Heidegger’s relationship with the Nazi Party: Petzet’s *Encounters and Dialogues with Martin Heidegger 1929-1976*, written with the assistance of Heidegger’s family might, for example, be taken as authoritative on this question. In contrast with Petzet’s more personal treatment, though, Ott’s project is to gather together once and for all the remaining archival material and on the basis of this evidence to reach a judgement as to Heidegger’s innocence or guilt.

To be both judge and jury in such a complex case is an onerous task, particularly as much archival material has long since been destroyed, and Ott comes in for some stick from Josipovici, among other reviewers, for his partiality in weighing the evidence. Certainly Ott does not invariably choose his lines of argument wisely and we are occasionally led to question his own position by his evident antipathy to Heidegger. We are not told Ott's religious convictions but reading between the lines it seems that at least some of his hostility to Heidegger has its origin in the philosopher's rejection of his father's Catholicism. This hostility blinkers Ott and results in his making some very strange interpretations of events. Heidegger's commendable refusal to act as a judge for a doctoral thesis with a Catholic theme, for instance, is seen by Ott as "...quintessential Heidegger: at odds with himself, contradictory, underhand, simmering with resentment, equivocal in his judgements, refusing to accept responsibility".

Such effluences aside, the relentlessness with which Ott follows his line to the sentence of 'guilty' is always impressive and never dull until, finally, the reader cannot fail to be convinced of Heidegger's comprehensive complicity with Nazism. While it is a short but impetuous step from rejecting the man to rejecting his works we should not dismiss a thought on the *ad hominem* ground that we wish to dissociate ourselves from its originator. An examination of Heidegger's relationship with Nazism might tell us much about the nature of his specific form of existential philosophy; rather than a parting of our ways this further evidence of Heidegger's complicity should constitute a new beginning to our search for the meaning and implications it embodies. We might conclude that, like so many of us, Heidegger's philosophy expresses his longing for a way of being that he was unable to live out.

Fynsk, in the postface of his revised edition of Heidegger: Thought and Historicity, attempts just such a new beginning. With remarkable linguistic elegance and precision he sets forth what he terms the shift in historical thinking without which the 'Heidegger affair' would not have come to prominence and, berating those he sees as less perspicacious commentators, (among whom he numbers Ott), begins to trace, in contrast to "aestheticizing" readings of Heidegger and the humanistic abstractions which provided their foundations, a fuller philosophical and sociopolitical consideration of the extent and character of Heidegger's engagement with National Socialism.

In this he acknowledges his debt to Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault and Lacan and can be quite scathing on the contributions to the

debate of other thinkers. Indeed, the degree to which Deleuze et al are praised by Fynsk while Habermas, McCumber and Wolin draw his approbation seems to be directly proportional to their success in bringing forward the fundamental displacements that mark the historicity of modern Western political thought.

While we may say that the divorce of thought and politics in readings of Heidegger breaks down when politics and history catch up with the text, this view remains inadequate if we do not go on to consider fundamental shifts in the conception of the political self. Fynsk's is a history of how disclosures became revelations on the ground of the new relation to fascism heralded by poststructuralist thought. It is also the story of the new 'legibility' of Heidegger in the light of this perspective, a 'legibility' posited in relation to Heidegger's burden of guilt. The reason for telling this story cannot be better expressed than in Fynsk's own words:

*I do not think that a simple avoidance or denial of the burden - either in a forgetting of the fascist politics or in a dismissal of the thought - is a viable option. Heidegger's attackers are militating for dismissal. But too many ideological interests are served when the questions Heidegger sought to open are closed down; too much is lost to thought and all that means for cultural and historical reflection.*

Simon Du Plock

★ **The Meanings of Death by John Bowker (1993). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. £6.95**

*EXTINCTION*; n. *The raw material out of which theology created the future state.*  
(*The Devil's Dictionary*, Ambrose Bierce).

With droll humour and characteristic polymathic scholarship, John Bowker begins his study of the wide variety of ways in which different cultures and religions have faced - or avoided - the fact of death.

He begins with the new science of cryonics as merely one of the more recent attempts to avoid the reality of death. Cryonics offers immortality by freezing. Ellinger's evangelical book *The Prospect of Immortality* claims "with your active co-operation, the next death in your family need not be permanent", and, more pungently, " ... we no longer need to take death lying down ...".

Bowker's first chapter outlines the intellectual context within which reflection on death takes place. He casts a wide net that covers, not