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Thinking the Apocalypse: A Letter from Maurice Blanchot to Catherine David

Maurice Blanchot

Translated by Paula Wissing

I prefer to put this in a letter to you instead of writing an article that would lead one to believe that I have any authority to speak on the subject of what has, in a roundabout way, become the H. and H. affair (just as there was a Luchaire affair, a Chaumet affair, and so on). In other words, a cause of extreme seriousness, already discussed many times although certainly endless in nature, has been taken up by a storm of media attention, which has brought us to the lowest of passions, intense emotions, and even violence. I understand why people are talking about Victor Farias, who has contributed some unpublished information—with a polemical intent, it is true, that does not help one to appreciate its true value. But how has it happened that Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's book, published in 1987, was greeted by a silence that I am perhaps the first to break?¹ It is because he avoids anecdotal accounts, all the while citing and situating most of the facts mentioned by Farias. He is severe and rigorous. He lays essential questions before us.

I will not summarize this book (summarizing a philosophical text is impossible, even though Lacoue-Labarthe has rejected the role of philosopher). Heidegger himself did the same: there is no philosophy of Martin Heidegger, for he claimed that metaphysics had come to its end,

1. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique: Heidegger, l'art et la politique* (Paris, 1987). I also cite Lacoue-Labarthe's book, *La Poésie comme expérience* (Paris, 1986), devoted to Paul Celan.

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an end already foretold by Nietzsche, who was still part of it, however. And yet it is undeniable that by joining the National Socialists Heidegger returned to ideology and, what is even more disconcerting, did so unawares. Each time he was asked to recognize his “error,” he kept a stony silence or expressed himself in such a way that he aggravated his situation (for a Heidegger could not be mistaken: it was the Nazi movement that had changed by abandoning its radicalism). However, Lacoue-Labarthe reminds us (I was not aware of it) that *in private* Heidegger, referring specifically to his political involvement of 1933 to 1934, admitted that he had committed “the greatest blunder of my life” (“blunder,” nothing more).² Now, since 1986, we have known, by way of an account by Karl Löwith, that in 1936 (two years after resigning from his post as rector), he was affirming his same faith in Hitler, the same certainty that “National Socialism was the proper path for Germany.”³ It would be worthwhile to quote this overwhelming account, the words of a man whose intellectual and moral probity are unquestionable (and who, moreover, was Heidegger’s disciple or, to be more precise, his student and close associate who had often taken care of Heidegger’s children). While Heidegger was in Rome to give his lecture on Hölderlin, Löwith, who was living there as a refugee in miserable lodgings with almost no books (which moved Heidegger—no, Heidegger was not a book-burner, as Farias suggests), took advantage of a walk to question him on the burning topic that up until then everyone had avoided. I quote:

I steered the topic to the controversy over the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and told him that I did not agree either with the way in which Karl Barth was attacking him or in the way Staiger was defending him, because my opinion was that his taking the side of National

2. To be fair, or to try to be, we must take into account the few reservations Heidegger used (all the while concealing them) to diminish the glorification of National Socialism. As I wrote a long time ago in *L'Entretien infini* (Paris, 1969), it is undeniable that the course on Nietzsche given during the triumph of National Socialism constitutes an increasingly aggressive criticism of the crude way in which the “official philosophy” claimed to utilize Nietzsche.

3. Karl Löwith, *Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach 1933: ein Bericht* (Stuttgart, 1986), p. 57. Löwith’s essay on Heidegger and Husserl, entitled “Mein letztes Wiedersehen mit Husserl in Freiburg in 1933 und mit Heidegger in Rom 1936” (hereafter abbreviated “M”), was written in 1940 as a personal record with no intention for publication. Its tardy publication in 1986 was the result of a decision by Mrs. Ada Löwith.

Maurice Blanchot, one of France’s preeminent writers, has written, among many other books, *The Last Man*, *Death Sentence*, *The Madness of the Day*, and *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*. **Paula Wissing**, a free-lance translator and editor, has recently translated Paul Veyne’s *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?*

Socialism was in agreement with the essence of his *philosophy* [my emphasis]. Heidegger told me unreservedly that I was right and developed his idea by saying that his concept of historicity—*Geschichtlichkeit*—was the foundation for his political involvement. ["M," p. 57]

I interrupt here to stress that Heidegger, then, was accepting the statement that there is a philosophy of Heidegger, which confirms Lacoue-Labarthe's intuition that political involvement was what transformed this thought into *philosophy*. But the reservations and doubts of this "philosopher," as he expressed them at the time to Löwith, are nothing but mediocre political opinions. To continue: "Only, he had underestimated two things: the vitality of the Christian churches and the obstacles that the *Anschluss* would encounter. Which led him to conclude, moreover, that this was excessive organization [he means the administrative structure, I suppose] created at the expense of vital forces" ("M," p. 57). Löwith adds this commentary:

The destructive radicalism of the whole movement and the petit-bourgeois character of all organizations of the "Strength through Joy" type never occurred to him, for Heidegger himself was a petit-bourgeois radical. In response to my remark that I understood many things about his attitude, with one exception, which was that he would permit himself to be seated at the same table with a figure such as Julius Streicher (at the German Academy of Law), he was silent at first. At last he uttered this well-known rationalization (which Karl Barth saw so clearly), which amounted to saying that "it all would have been much worse if some men of knowledge [which was how he termed himself] had not been involved." And with a bitter resentment toward people of culture (*Gebildete*), he concluded his statement: "If these gentlemen had not considered themselves too refined to become involved, things would have been different, but I had to stay in there alone." To my reply that one did not have to be very refined to refuse to work with a Streicher, he answered that it was useless to discuss Streicher; the *Stürmer* was nothing more than "pornography." Why didn't Hitler get rid of this sinister individual? He couldn't understand it. Perhaps Hitler was afraid of him. ["M," pp. 57–58]

Löwith adds, after some comments on Heidegger's pseudoradicalism: "In reality, the program of what Heidegger called 'pornography' was fully applied in November 1938 and became a reality for the Germans. No one could deny that on this point Streicher and Hitler acted as one and the same person" ("M," p. 58).

What can we conclude from this interview? First, it was a conversation; but Heidegger was not one to express himself carelessly, even in conversation. He admitted, then, that he was speaking of *his* philosophy and

that the latter was the basis for his political involvement. This is 1936, Hitler is totally in power, and Heidegger has resigned from his post as rector but distanced himself only from Krieck, Rosenberg, and all those for whom anti-Semitism was the expression of a biological and racist ideology. Now, what did he write in 1945?

“I believed that Hitler, after taking responsibility for the whole people in 1933, would dare to dissociate himself from the party and its doctrine, and this all would take the form of a renovation and unifying with the goal of responsibility for the entire West. This conviction was an error that I recognized after the events of June 30, 1934 [the Night of the Long Knives, the murder of Ernst Röhm, and the dispersion of the SA]. In 1933 I had indeed stepped in to say yes to the national and the social, but not at all to nationalism—nor the intellectual and metaphysical foundations that underlay biologism and the party doctrine.”⁴

If indeed this was his idea, he said nothing of it to Löwith in 1936: he still maintained his trust in Hitler, wore the Nazi insignia on his lapel, and found only that things were not going fast enough but one only had to endure and hold fast.

By saying he preferred the national to nationalism, he was not using one word in place of another; this preference is also at the basis of his thought and expresses his deep attachment to the land, that is, the homeland (*Heimat*), his stance in favor of local and regional roots (not that far removed from Auguste Maurice Barrés’ hatred of the “uprooted,” a hatred that led the latter to condemn Alfred Dreyfus, who belonged to a people without connection to the land), and his loathing for urban life.

But I am not going to develop these points, which, moreover, are well known but make me think that a kind of anti-Semitism was not alien to him and that it explains why he never, despite numerous requests, agreed to express his opinion on the extermination. Lacoue-Labarthe (and not Farias) reprints a terrible passage, which it pains one to repeat. What does it say? “Agriculture is now a mechanized food industry. As for its essence, it is the same thing as the manufacture of corpses in the gas chambers and the death camps, the same thing as the blockades and the reduction of countries to famine, the same thing as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs.” This, according to Lacoue-Labarthe, is a scandalously inadequate statement, because all it retains of the extermination of the Jews is a reference to a certain technology and mentions neither the name nor the fate of the Jews. It is indeed true that at Auschwitz and elsewhere Jews were treated as industrial waste and that they were considered to be the effluvia of Germany and Europe (in that, the responsibility of each one of us is at issue). What was unthinkable and unforgivable in

4. Quoted in Jacques Derrida, *Psyché: Invention de l'autre* (Paris, 1987).

the event of Auschwitz, this utter void in our history, is met with Heidegger's determined silence. And the only time, to my knowledge, that he speaks of the extermination, it is as a "revisionist," equating the destruction of eastern Germans killed in the war with the Jews also killed during the war; replace the word "Jew" with "eastern German," he says, and that will settle the account.⁵ That the Jews, who had committed no other sin than to be Jewish, were for this sole grievance to be doomed to the Final Solution is something, says Lacoue-Labarthe, for which there is no one to answer in history. And he adds, "At Auschwitz the God of the Judeo-Christian West died, and it is no accident that the people whose destruction was sought were the witnesses, in this West, of another origin of God that had been worshipped and had inspired thinkers there—if it is not even perhaps another God, one that remained free of the Hellenistic and Roman distortions of the first."

Allow me after what I have to say next to leave you, as a means to emphasize that Heidegger's irreparable fault lies in his silence concerning the Final Solution. This silence, or his refusal, when confronted by Paul Celan, to ask forgiveness for the unforgivable, was a denial that plunged Celan into despair and made him ill, for Celan knew that the Shoah was the revelation of the essence of the West. And he recognized that it was necessary to preserve this memory in common, even if it entailed the loss of any sense of peace, in order to safeguard the possibility for relationship with the other.

P.S.—A few more words concerning my own case. Thanks to Emmanuel Levinas, without whom, in 1927 or 1928, I would not have been able to begin to understand *Sein und Zeit*, or to have undergone the veritable intellectual shock the book produced in me. An event of the first magnitude had just taken place; it was impossible to diminish it, even today, even in my memory. This is certainly why I took part in the homage for Heidegger's seventieth birthday. My contribution was a page from *L'Attente de l'oubli*. A little later, Guido Schneeberger (to whom Farias owes a great deal) sent me or had sent to me by his publisher the speeches Heidegger made in favor of Hitler while he was rector. These speeches were frightening in their form as well as in their content, for it is the same writing and very language by which, in a great moment of the history of thought, we had been made present at the loftiest questioning, one that could come to us from Being and Time. Heidegger uses the same language to call for voting for Hitler, to justify Nazi Germany's break from the League of Nations, and to praise Schlageter. Yes, the

5. In a letter to Herbert Marcuse, which had been requested and received by him. But as Marcuse does not reproduce the letter, the terms are not exact.

same holy language, perhaps a bit more crude, more emphatic, but the language that would henceforth be heard even in the commentaries on Hölderlin and would change them, but for still other reasons.

Faithfully yours,

Maurice Blanchot
10 November 1987