

Freedom to Fail: Heidegger's Anarchy

By Peter Trawny, tr. Ian Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner.

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Review by Eric D. Meyer, Independent Scholar

In the Case of Western Philosophy vs. Martin Heidegger. With the publication of the “Black Notebooks” (*Schwarze Hefte, Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 94-96, Vittorio Klostermann, 2014), “The Heidegger Case” is on the docket again, as it has been, countless times, since the Postwar French denazification trials (1945), when Heidegger was convicted of complicity in German National Socialism (aka “Nazism”) and prohibited from teaching for five years, after which he suffered a nervous breakdown and sought psychiatric help. “The Heidegger Case” continued with Jean-Paul Sartre’s exposés of “Heidegger’s Nazism” in *Les temps moderne* (1945--1948); and, as W. Vaughn observes, “[e]ach subsequent [French] postwar decade [has seen] its own unique Heidegger controversy” (“Heidegger’s Endless Trial,” *South Central Review*, Vol. 27, #1, 182), with each generation adding further shocking revelations, until “The Heidegger Case” has eclipsed consideration of his philosophical works.

This postwar investigation culminated in “The Heidegger Controversy” of the 1980s, spurred by the publication of Victor Farias’ *Heidegger and Nazism* (tr. Paul Barrell et al., Temple University Press, 1989), and followed, a few decades later, by Emmanuel Faye’s *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933-1935* (tr. Michael B. Smith, Yale University Press, 2009), with the result that the past 70 years have been an endless denazification trial, without resulting in a clear verdict, *for or against*

the defendant. And now “The Heidegger Affair” has returned to Germany, with reaction to Peter Trawny’s *Heidegger und der Mythos der juedischen Weltverschwoerung* (Vittorio Klostermann, 2104, forthcoming as *Heidegger and the Myth of a Jewish World Conspiracy*, tr. Andrew J. Mitchell, University of Chicago Press, 2016), which prompted Francois Fedier’s defense of Heidegger against charges of anti-Semitism (*Die Zeit*, 9 Januar 2014), and provoked Jan Suesselback’s attacks on Trawny and Fedier (“Hallucination eines philosophischen Raetsel,” *literaturkritik* 5 Mai 2014), after which.... Well, so “The Heidegger Case” goes on!

But now, the prosecution alleges, publication of the “Black Notebooks” will show that “Heidegger’s Nazism” was not simply an eccentric feature of his private thought, but “contaminates” (Trawny’s word) his philosophical corpus, including those works superficially innocent of criminal thoughts, like *Being and Time* (1927). And with the scandalous exposure of his opinions about National Socialism, the Fuhrer, and Nazi race policy, the case against Heidegger will be finally closed, Heidegger condemned as the Nazi anti-Semite he always was, and his philosophical works, purged from the public libraries, consigned to the archives of the criminal case of *Western Philosophy vs. Martin Heidegger*, for the horrible atrocities of the Holocaust or Shoah, where, the prosecution concludes, they finally belong.

Except, of course, nothing of the sort has happened. Those red-letter passages in “The Black Notebooks” allegedly glorifying National Socialism and Adolf Hitler have proved to be caustically critical of Nazism and the Fuhrer, and even the blackest passages allegedly exposing Heidegger’s bigotry against “world jewry” are susceptible of different interpretations, as attempts to displace, rather than endorse, Nazi anti-Semitism. Which isn’t to say that Heidegger is completely innocent of the charges against him, since it is well-known that, during his brief tenure as *Rector Magnificus* at Freiburg University (1933-1934), Heidegger was a member of the

German National Socialist Worker's Party (NSDAP), a supporter of Hitler's dictatorship, and a subscriber to a distinctly un-orthodox version of Nazi Party dogma, before becoming, sometime in the mid- to later-1930s, disillusioned with Nazism, and embarking on the scathing critique of the National Socialist *Weltanschauung* and Nietzschean biological racism which is evident in the 1940s Nietzsche lectures and in "Overcoming Metaphysics" (1936-1946; pub. 1954). It is simply to say that the case against Heidegger has been exaggerated by the professed claimants, and that a balanced assessment of the case against Heidegger still waits to be made, following completion of the prodigious task of actually *reading* the "Black Notebooks" and the *Collected Works* (over 100 volumes!) and distinguishing Heidegger's private thoughts from the scandalous rumors and prejudicial gossip bandied about him: an interminable task that might prove to be, like "The Heidegger Case," an endless trial.

And now one of Heidegger's accusers, Peter Trawny, Director of the Heidegger Institute at the University of Wuppertal and editor of the "Black Notebooks," has written a second book, *Freedom to Fail: Heidegger's Anarchy* (German title: *Irrnisfuge: Heideggers An-archie*), which purports to answer the question: why, if the Nazi anti-Semitism of the "Black Notebooks" is really so damning, would Heidegger allow publication of the *Schwarze Hefte*? And without reversing his judgment on Heidegger's anti-Semitism, Trawny takes a position which, while still far from apologetic, attempts to strike a balance between condemnation and apology, to explain how Heidegger came to commit what he called "his greatest stupidity," and subsequently failed to recant, but remained unrepentant, even after his errancy had been exposed to the condemnation of the international community.

Trawny argues that the key to Heidegger's "Errancy-fugue," his scandalous flirtation with, and indulgence in, catastrophic errors, is contained in Heidegger's statement: "He who

thinks greatly must also err greatly” (9), which committed him to following the sinister pathways of errancy, even when they led to such cataclysmic outcomes as the German defeat in World War II and the Holocaust or Shoah. Trawny even betrays a certain sneaking admiration for Heidegger’s courage in sticking to his errancy, even after his engagement with Nazism became known, setting off the endless repercussions of “The Heidegger Controversy.” And Trawny disengagingly answers the prosecutorial question: “is not Heidegger’s philosophy...finally finished, now...that his engagement with National Socialism has become known?” – with the further questions: “What if philosophy did not stop being philosophy even in its errors, in its errancy, indeed in its madness? What if we had to think about philosophy even in the state of its errancy? *What if, even in errancy, we had to – philosophize?*” (15, italics in original). What if, Trawny asks, we were condemned *to read Heidegger*? Even despite – or maybe *because of* – “Heidegger’s Nazism”?

And with these redirected questions, Trawny points out the crucial difference between Heidegger’s National Socialism and Nazi propaganda, which is that Heidegger attempted to *think* what, for the Nazis, was *simply propaganda*, to expose Nazi anti-Semitism to critical thought, and thereby to neutralize its capacity to bewitch the German *Volk* to follow the Nazi path to self-destructive tragic ruin. Whether Heidegger succeeded in breaking what T. W. Adorno, in “Meditations on Metaphysics: After Auschwitz,” called “the spell” of Nazi propaganda, is, of course, a different question. But the crucial difference between Heidegger’s National Socialism and Nazi racism is that Heidegger’s remarks about “world jewry” are not hate-driven or directed at specific individuals – like his Jewish students, Karl Loewith, Hans Jonas, or Herbert Marcuse, or his Jewish lover, Hannah Arendt – they do not descend from stereotypes to the vilification of Jews as “vermin,” “disease,” or “filth,” as did Nazi propaganda,

nor do they proceed from antipathy toward Jewish culture to the genocidal will to exterminate the Jewish race, as did the Nazi “final solution to the Jewish problem.” Although these stipulations may not be enough to absolve Heidegger from charges of anti-Semitism – “[t]o judge [Heidegger’s remarks on ‘world jewry’] anti-Semitic seems to me unavoidable,” Trawny opines (15) – they demarcate crucial differences between “Heidegger’s Nazism,” and the true-black-and-blue, blood-and-soil, *volkisch* racism of the Nazi Party, the S.S., and Adolf Hitler, which should be taken into account in assessments of “The Heidegger Case.”

Trawny’s essay ventures into those obscure passages in Heidegger’s works where most Heideggerians have feared to tread, because, he argues, it is on these sinister, darksome pathways of errancy where “the controversy surrounding the name of Heidegger [is] gathered” (6) in its blackest light. Trawny thereby risks the *ad hominem* fallacy of confusing Heidegger, the Man, with his philosophical thought, of conflating ““the name of the thinker”” with ““*the matter* of his thinking”” (1, italics in original), and of suggesting that Heidegger himself *endorsed* the errancy which his critical thinking exposed to scrutiny. But, besides the fact that the “Black Notebooks” of 1932-1934 already identify the dangerous pathways of National Socialism as, precisely, the pathways of *errancy*, Heidegger unequivocally declared in “Overcoming Metaphysics” that “Errancy knows no truth of Being” (*The End of Philosophy*, tr. Joan Stambaugh, Harper & Row, 1973, 105); and it is with this condemnation of the “errancy” of National Socialism and Nazi anti-Semitism that Heidegger’s true thoughts probably lie.

Further, Trawny’s Heidegger is a distinctly Nietzschean Heidegger – Trawny even suggests that Nietzsche was Heidegger’s “master” (4) – which is problematic, given that Heidegger’s deconstruction of Nietzsche’s “metaphysics of will” is crucial to his critique of the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*, the Nazi fuehrer-principle, and Nazi bio-eugenic racism in

“Overcoming Metaphysics.” And while Heidegger may have fallen under Nietzsche’s spell in the early- to mid-1930s – the difficult time of the German Depression, of wholesale street-fights between the Nazi S.A. and German (“Spartacist”) Communists, and of Heidegger’s *Rektorate* – his disillusionment with Nietzsche’s metaphysics is increasingly evident in the “Black Notebooks,” and culminates in the critical equation of Nietzsche’s “metaphysics of will” with the National Socialist *Weltanschauung* in “Overcoming Metaphysics.”

But the most questionable assumption of Trawny’s argument is that, for Heidegger, Nazism represented a species of “an-archic freedom” – the freedom of errancy, of catastrophe, of tragedy – when it is clear that Heidegger, like Adorno, considered Nazism the absolute *absence* of freedom, the absolute *un*-freedom, and, therefore, the absolute errancy. “The impossibility of portraying Fascism,” Adorno wrote, “springs from the fact that in it, as in its contemplation, subjective freedom no longer exists. Total unfreedom can be recognized, but not represented” (*Minima Moralia*, tr. E. F. N. Jephcott, Verso, 1974, 144), which explains Adorno’s antipathy to representations of the Holocaust or Shoah, evidenced in his infamous statement that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is impossible.” But Heidegger, in Nazi Germany, not only *recognized*, but attempted *to represent* that total *un*-freedom, as Adorno, in American exile, simply could not; but in representing Nazism *from within*, on its own terms, Heidegger risked condemnation as a Nazi in the postwar world, when the British, French, and American denazification trials began, and former Nazi collaborators sat in judgment on fellow travelers, and condemned those less guilty than themselves, to disguise their complicity in Vichy crimes and Nazi horrors.

The Bremen and Freiburg Lectures, like “Overcoming Metaphysics,” were no doubt written in response to Heidegger’s condemnation by the French denazification committees, but that doesn’t mean they don’t represent his best thought on Nazism, anti-Semitism, and the

Holocaust or Shoah, and don't deserve to be read, not as testaments of errancy, but as the dark truth about those catastrophes and horrors. Heidegger's "Overcoming Metaphysics" and Adorno's *Minima Moralia* are the two critical documents that most scrupulously expose the horrible truth of National Socialism, and they demand to be read, critically, dispassionately, as witness statements from survivors of that terrorist state of absolute *un*-freedom to an un-comprehending postwar public.

What, then, is Trawny's verdict on Heidegger's Nazism and anti-Semitism? In *Heidegger und der Mythos der juedische Weltverschwoerung*, Trawny flatly asserts that Heidegger's thinking of "world jewry" subscribes to the stereotypes of *The Protocol of the Elders of Zion*, and must be judged anti-Semitic, although he is careful to observe that Heidegger doesn't endorse the Nietzschean biological racism of Nazi bio-eugenic policy, but, instead, argues that Heidegger's anti-Semitism is a species of "metaphysical racism" (he calls it "onto-historical racism") opposed to the Nazi type. Trawny's argument resembles that of Robert Bernasconi in "Race and Earth in Heidegger's Thinking During the Late 1930s" (*The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 48, #1, 49--66), which describes how Heidegger's thinking went through a *Kehre* or *Wende* in the mid-1930s, from the existential-ontological thought of *Being and Time* (1927), through the "Nazi" metaphysics of *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935), to the "overcoming of metaphysics" in "Overcoming Metaphysics" (1936-1946). This *Kehre* in Heidegger's thought, Bernasconi argues, was undertaken in reaction *against* the National Socialist *Weltanschauung* and its Nietzschean biological racism, thereby marking a crucial turning-point in "Heidegger's Nazism" which should be taken into consideration before entering a final judgment on "The Heidegger Case."

Whether Trawny agrees with Bernasconi's assessment of Heidegger's anti-Semitism is

questionable. But in a footnote to *Freedom to Fail* (97, n. 86), Trawny confesses he was unable to *prove* that Heidegger had even read *The Protocol of the Elders of Zion*, and although he still finds evidence of Heidegger's anti-Semitism, he claims there is no evidence that Heidegger knew about (let alone endorsed) the SS death camps or the Nazi "final solution to the Jewish problem," before the postwar exposure of Nazi war-crimes. Trawny's conclusion appears to be that Heidegger's Nazism and anti-Semitism were part and parcel of his thinking of "errancy," which Heidegger embraced with a Nietzschean tragic *hubris*, as if the catastrophic ruin of Nazi Germany were simply the errant destiny of the German *Volk*. But it is abundantly clear, not only in the "Black Notebooks," but in "Overcoming Metaphysics," that Heidegger did not simply *espouse* errancy, but, instead, *thought* errancy as the fatal flaw of both the National Socialist Party and the German *Volk*, who embarked on the self-destructive wanderings of the Nazi "triumph of the will," of the German defeat in World War II, and of the Holocaust or Shoah, as if following the sinister call to self-destructive, tragic ruin. Whatever Heidegger meant in his obscure prognostications about German destiny as "the history of Being," it's clear that Heidegger's version of a "spiritual [*geistige*] National Socialism" (cf. *Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. 94, 135--36) was so far distant from what he called "*vulgaernationalsozialismus*" (ibid., 142), as to qualify him, at most, as a fellow traveler among the Nazi Party zealots, despite his errant remarks, in the "Nazi" period of the *Rektorate* and of *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935), about "the inner truth and greatness of the [Nazi?] movement": a Nazi movement which existed only in Heidegger's thoughts, and of which he was the only card-carrying member.

The question of Heidegger's anti-Semitism is more difficult to decide, since if Heidegger's only remarks about the Nazi death camps ("the fabrication of corpses in the gas chambers") in *The Bremen and Freiburg Lectures* are, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe asserts, not

only “scandalously inadequate,” but also “absolutely [technically] correct” (*Heidegger, Art and Politics*, tr. Christopher Turner, Basil Blackwell, 1990, 34), they are more than inadequate as a response to the moral enormity of the Holocaust or Shoah. Although Heidegger was not anti-Semitic, in the vulgar sense, he never spoke out publicly against the Nazi racial policies which he condemned in theory, or against the S.S. death camps to which he directed those scandalous remarks, much less about the extermination of some six to ten million souls, not all of them Jews, in the gas chambers and ovens of the Nazi “final solution.” And so “Heidegger’s Silence” about the Holocaust or Shoah remains a black spot on his dossier, although he still maintains at least a credible claim to being what his defenders and his prosecutors alike, whether ironically or not, are wont to call him: “The 20th Century’s Greatest Philosopher.”