

under the sociological style, the text itself becomes an equal blasphemy against each possibility it represents. Jesus and Allah appear along an undifferentiated horizon, to be treated with polite dispassion. Peter Berger, whose work is sociology, quite naturally considers such treatment conducive to an understanding which is "mellow," and reasonable. But in the long run, if there are any gods, it may not behoove us to be too detached and mellow regarding them. Perhaps it is best to see *The Heretical Imperative* as the summary report of a group of Anglo-American theologians and sociologists who are intrigued by religious thought but repelled by religion. Nietzsche observed that in modernity God is unacceptable not to reason but to taste. The faint odor of that apothegm hangs over *The Heretical Imperative*.

Reviewed by JAMES PATRICK

The Master of Astonishment

Martin Heidegger, by George Steiner,
New York: Viking Press, 1978. 173 pp.
\$10.95.

GEORGE STEINER has written an introduction to the work of Martin Heidegger which should make further introductions unnecessary until such time as much more of Heidegger's very substantial corpus is published and we have had time to come to terms with it. Professor Steiner's book is an interpretive, critical, yet essentially sympathetic exposition of Heidegger's thought. Not only does the content of that thought emerge, but through the sensitive use of quotation its texture is also communicated. Steiner skillfully blends together the philosophical, literary, theological, personal, political, and other influences which can be discerned in Heidegger's work. Steiner clearly loves his subject. This does

not stand in the way, however, of a rigorous probing of the complex, enigmatic, and deeply disturbing relation of Heidegger to National Socialism ("his complete silence on Hitlerism and the holocaust after 1945...is very nearly intolerable"). (An admittedly speculative interpretation of this relationship is given which I find plausible.) In short, Steiner's book, in which there is not a wasted page, is a small masterpiece of expository writing at the introductory level.

Steiner leads the reader into Heidegger's work by means of an extended discussion (comprising much of Chapter 1) of the problem of "how to read a page of Heidegger." In effect this is an examination of some basic Heideggerian terms as they are developed up to 1935. The result is not a series of definitions but rather an integrated sketch of the early Heidegger, together with an evaluation of that thought and a placing of it within the history of Western philosophy.

In this examination the term of all terms is "Being." This is the "one question" to which Heidegger addressed himself, and to which Steiner and "every reader of Heidegger must address himself." Heidegger came to, was overwhelmed by, this question early, most probably in his late teens. Brentano's influence helped bring him to this question, as did probably Heidegger's relaxation of a strict Catholicism into a "secular, yet patently related, sense and vocabulary of the absolute." Also a factor, and one less frequently noted, was his almost uncanny personal sensibility to the grain and substance of physical existence. Heidegger was a man "literally overcome by the notion of 'is', a man inexhaustibly astonished by the fact of existence, and haunted by that *other* possibility, which is nothingness...." His ceaseless, circling question was, "Why is there? Why is there not nothing?" It is also, appropriately, the ceaseless, circling question of Steiner's book.

One way of gaining some comprehension of the overarching thesis of Steiner's book and of Heidegger's work can be achieved through attending in turn to three inter-

related questions: How did we in the West come to be forgetful of Being? How does the situation of man in the West reflect the forgetting of Being? Has Beingness passed totally from human reach?

How did we in the West come to be forgetful of Being? To remember Being is to ask ceaselessly the question, "What is the Being which renders possible all existence, which is the *is* in every essent?" This is the question, Heidegger maintains, which was addressed by the pre-Socratic philosophers, although Steiner provocatively suggests that this "locating" of the question in the pre-Socratics is partially metaphorical. The ability to remember or to ask the question was lost in the development of Western metaphysics, beginning with Plato and Aristotle, which in effect directed us away from Being to a preoccupation with that which is taken to be "outside of ourselves," for example, "beings," "ideas," "Spirit," "*elan vital*," and so on.

How does the situation of Western man reflect the forgetting of Being? It is reflected precisely in the preoccupation with that which is taken to be "outside of ourselves," for this is the foundation of that familiar "objective viewing" ("there are things, and things, and more things") which uproots man, consigning him to curiosity, Cartesian abstractive appropriation, and self-scattering. In developing this position, Heidegger places the greatest stress upon language. The forgetting of Being is entrenched in language. "Being," in its original usage, suffused with the "strength of calling, and presentness" has become vacuous; the word "is" diminished to a mere copula. Steiner develops this important dimension of Heidegger's work at length and with force.

It is along these lines, then, that Heidegger answers the two questions concerning the forgetting of being. The answer or answers tell *how* or *what* has happened; that is, a process is described, or, better I think, a story is told. It is the story of a grievous loss, the loss of Being through our forgetfulness. It is a story of how we moved from a (partially metaphorical?) "place"

where we were mindful of Being to a present "place" where we have forgotten Being. *Why* we would make so grievous a move is not addressed, at least not directly. Steiner's comment upon this whole matter is especially illuminating and helpful:

And when Heidegger intimates a condition of language in which the word was immediate to the truth of things, in which light shone through words instead of being fogged or bent by their dusty use, he echoes exactly Mallarmé's quip made in 1894...that "all poetry has gone wrong since the great Homeric deviation." Where Heidegger posits a numinous verity of language in Anaximander, Parmenides, and Heraclitus, Mallarmé names Orpheus—of whom, to be sure, no word has survived. The degree to which this "primalism," this axiomatic intuition of an earlier stage of authenticity in human affairs—which Heidegger shares with the Marx of the 1848 manuscripts, with the Freud of *Totem and Taboo*, and with the Lévi-Strauss of *Mythologiques*—represents a secular variant on the scenario of Eden and Adam's fall is an absolutely pivotal question. Its investigation would lead to the root of modern culture.

Steiner assumes, and I think correctly, that Heidegger's story *is* a "secular variant" of the scenario or myth of Adam. (It is "secular," presumably, because of the absence of explicit, traditional God-talk.) The only question is of the "degree" to which this is true. In my judgment the correspondence between the myth of Adam and Heidegger's story (myth, really) is very close. Heidegger's story is a quite pure secular variant of the myth of Adam. It is not possible to substantiate this judgment here, but some indication that it is the case emerges when we turn to the last of our three questions: Has beingness passed totally from human reach?

The answer to that question is complex and ambiguous, as Heidegger was aware and as Steiner makes clear in the fine discussion with which he concludes his book. If we were able to reach or unite

ourselves with Being (*ousia*) again, this would be a "homecoming" understood not simply as a "return," but as that which is "both the process and the goal of authentic being." Hence, homecoming is both a return to that which we never experienced but which we "remember" in our estrangement, and also the completion and fullness which lies beyond our estrangement. Indeed, Heidegger associates *ousia* with the *parousia* (the inbreaking of God's victorious reign), which is so intimately linked with both the Jewish and the Christian developments of the Adamic myth. However, *parousia* is for Heidegger, who is determined to work outside of theological categories, that which "is present to us. It stands firmly by itself and thus manifests and declares itself. For the Greeks, 'being' basically meant this standing presence."

Heidegger is uncertain if even the best thought can help us to that homecoming, but it is otherwise with the great poets—these are the prophets, the seers, those who "name the holy." Heidegger "is confident that *Sein* has found its dwelling and its celebration in the work of the great poets." It is this confidence in and wondering passion for the great poets which informs Heidegger as a reader of their poetry; a reader who is, in Steiner's judgment, "at certain moments...like no other in our time, a reenactor of the poem's genesis and meaning who towers above the tired bric-a-brac of literary criticism and academic commentary. Linguistics and the understanding of literature have until now scarcely begun to grasp the wealth and consequence of his proposals."

The glimpses provided by the great poets aside, however, the question remains, Has beingness passed totally from human reach? Is there a way out of our captivity to the Cartesian ideal of abstractive appropriation? At the end of his book Steiner poses the question squarely in regard to Heidegger's work: Where does one stand on the Heideggerian claim "to have initiated 'the thinking of Being'?" Heidegger, recognizing that the status of the claim was ambiguous, returned to the issue during the last few years of his life and retraced his

steps: *Sein und Zeit* was not meant to arrive at a new definition of Being, but it was to prepare *Dasein* ("our-being-there") "to apprehend, to hear the word of Being"; to this end it asked, What is "is"? In the process of working through that question one recognizes

that human speech, either through some inherent limitation or because the impress upon it of conventional logic and rational grammar is too incisive, cannot give an answer that simultaneously *answers to*, is authentically *answerable to*, the nature of the question, and satisfies normal criteria of intelligibility. This, says Heidegger, leaves only the resort to tautology.

Heidegger is left with the tautology: "*Sein ist Sein* ('Being is Being')."

Does this mean that the entire Heideggerian enterprise is vacuous? The positivists and others have said so. Steiner disagrees. He judges, and I would agree, that what Heidegger has produced is a "post-theology," and as such participates in the most active element in modern Western thinking (Marx, Freud, Nietzsche). *Sein ist Sein* is "the absolute equivalent to the Self-utterance and Self-definition of the Deity—*I am that which I am....*" The quest for "homecoming" is an eschatological quest, and like all eschatological quests is always approximated but never fully realized. All theologies and post-theologies, and especially those with a strong eschatological element, mount a stringent critique of the idolatries with which they find themselves engaged. The specific idolatry which Heidegger engages is the patent one of Cartesian abstractive appropriation—the dogmas of which we modern idolators have come to perceive as "obviously true." (The dogmas of any idolatry are always thought to be "obvious" by those who hold them.) Martin Heidegger is "the great master of astonishment, the man whose amazement before the blank fact that we *are* instead of *not being*, has put a radiant obstacle in the path of the obvious."

Reviewed by W. TAYLOR STEVENSON