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Review

Martin Heidegger and the First World War

William H. F. Altman. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. 350pp.

David A. White *

The subtitle of this work is “*Being and Time* as Funeral Oration.” This addition helps a reader to appreciate that the book functions on various levels: scholarly, to the extent that it offers a reading of selected details in Heidegger’s first major work; historical, in that Altman asserts with great vigor that *Being and Time* should be seen as a “funeral oration” for those who died in World War One; biographical, in that we read much about Heidegger’s personal actions in political and academic contexts leading to and during both WWI and a decade after the conclusion of the “Great War”; psychological, in recurring speculation aimed at what was happening causally and emotively in Heidegger’s mind when he made certain practical decisions or wrote certain texts; autobiographical, in that the reader frequently learns how the author feels concerning many of the subjects discussed or mentioned in this work; and unabashedly normative: for Altman, Heidegger, “the Nazi philosopher” (64) and “little magician of Messkirch” (198, also 283), is a “liar” (109, 269, 281), a “shirker and malingerer” (256), “in denial” (263 fn25), a “guilty sinner” (268), “shameless” (272) and the “guiltiest of men” (283)—indeed, Altman concludes that Martin Heidegger “...cannot and must no longer remain Germany’s last great philosopher” (286—the book’s final words).

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This confluence of diverse narrative modalities is arresting and impressive. But it is also disturbing if one assumes that these approaches differ among themselves (perhaps significantly), and that each plane of analysis incorporates its own principles of structural correctness and rules of rightness regarding evidence and justified implications. If the book as a whole is to be granted a hearing as a uniform project, presumably such an ensemble of disjoint styles of discourse constitutes a branch of “intellectual history.”

A brief summary of the work is in order. In the first chapter, Altman reviews what Heidegger said in 1933–34 about WWI, including in this material a speech given on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his high school graduation (the speech is usefully included as an appendix). Subsequent chapters review events in Heidegger’s life in reverse chronology, including a biographical account of what Heidegger did between 1914 and 1918. A chapter on methodology (chapter 4) leads into the terminological core of the work, i.e., the discussion of *vorlaufende Entschlossenheit* (“anticipatory resoluteness”) as that notion is developed in *Sein und Zeit* (*SZ*). The next chapter is devoted to reflections on *SZ*’s Section 74—for Altman, the “politically decisive” segment of the entire work (149). Chapter 7 contains the most concentrated treatment of analogies and similarities between *SZ* and Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address as a paradigmatic funeral oration (the Pericles of Thucydides and Aristotle’s position on this type of rhetoric are also cited). The work concludes with a chapter on Heidegger’s “war guilt,” in which Altman treats “the lost World War as a personal crisis in Heidegger’s life that continued to exercise long-lasting *psychological* effects on his thinking that extended to *Being and Time* and beyond” (xvi—italics in text).

Altman’s scholarship is voluminous (with an important omission discussed below), especially regarding material detailing Heidegger’s personal and professional life. The work includes in excess of a thousand footnotes, many of them discursive or with quotations (some quite extended) from various texts and letters. It may also be mentioned that throughout this study, Altman introduces incidental references and allusions to a number of other works by Heidegger, the most noteworthy are the Hölderlin Lectures of 1934–35 (chapter 4) which Altman reads in ways which support his contention that Heidegger’s prose can readily be connected to themes associated with WWI. For anyone with a special interest in Heidegger’s readings of poetry, whether Greek or German, the discussions and background material pertaining to Hölderlin are

valuable and constitute a suggestive interpretive base for determining the import of Heidegger's many writings on this important poet.

Since all this discussion is in service to Altman's main thesis and since his conclusions concerning the ultimate import of *SZ* are unusual, Altman's methodology deserves additional and sustained comment. First, it is axiomatic for Altman that any attempt to "depoliticize" Heidegger is a fundamental error in interpretation (54–55, 63). Heidegger is necessarily a product of his time and Heidegger's time included the publication of *Sein und Zeit* (1927) sandwiched between two World Wars and the rise and fall of National Socialism. Thus, second and in a related vein, Altman frequently cites—and roundly dismisses—the interpretive principle of distinguishing between "Heidegger the man" and "Heidegger the thinker" (e.g., 235, 264–65). Heidegger the man in his lived and practical decisions as would-be warrior, pedagogue and university administrator (also as husband) fully informs Heidegger the thinker and author of philosophical texts as well as commemorative speeches.

Such a holistic interpretive approach leads Altman to maintain that the complex vocabulary and explicitly layered distinctions Heidegger instituted in his putatively most "technical" work represent only a surface dimension of this text. For Altman, the "terminological opacities" (xv, 114–15, 262) endemic to *SZ* must be read with a "transparency" which will guide the determination of its proper sense. Throughout the book, Altman records various transparent renderings of Heideggerian discourse and distinctions. But access to such transparency was hard won. In the preface, Altman speaks of how he, "weaned on a harmless Heidegger," had to work through various later Heideggerian writings in order "to *break through* to the meaning of earlier" works (xvi—italics in text), *Sein und Zeit* in particular.

Altman appeals often to the notion of transparency (e.g., 114–15, 140, 146, 164, 170, 182, 271). However, although it stands as the pivotal hermeneutical element in Altman's mode of interpretation, transparency is never made a subject of thematic analysis other than its manifestation as a consistently denigrating attitude toward reading *SZ* as "strictly" philosophical in the traditional sense. At one point, Altman does assert that "transparency" means precisely "penetrating the opaque technical language [i.e., of *SZ*] to the *experienced reality* of our life" (114—italics in text). But the way in which Altman assigns specific identities and significance to the technical terms from *SZ* that he chooses to discuss leaves the reader with the impression that reading a text with transparency will

reveal what the employer of transparency wants that text to reveal. Thus Altman asserts categorically: "...I am claiming that the World War is both *decisive and primordial* for understanding 'the nature of *Being and Time*' as well as for rendering it transparent" (197—italics in text). And later: "My approach [to *SZ*] affirms the real-historical fact that the War was a catastrophe of...epic proportions; it likewise denies the intellectual-historical possibility that Heidegger's thinking can be adequately understood without it" (244–45).

The notion of transparency becomes even more intricate when, in the book's final chapter, "War-Guilt," Altman introduces a "second level of transparency" (256); the first level made "the World War visible behind the technical terminology of the text" of *Sein und Zeit*; on the second level, "Heidegger the Man" is "brought out of the ontological shadows in which he conceals (but reveals) himself" (256). In general, Altman's actual usage of the notion of transparency entails analysis moving from (a) the surface significance of a text, especially if the author explicitly announces such significance, to (b) the text's "deeper," more profound and expressive meaning. How then is the transition between the two levels accomplished? How would a reader, when construing a text by means of the designated sense of transparency, cope with a multiplicity of possible interpretations? These questions, representative queries from basic hermeneutical theory, are never raised.

We may also wonder whether such transparency is transferable to other philosophers. Is it possible to formulate Altman's performance with respect to *SZ* into a principle of interpretation? Thus should we determine the significance of *any* philosophical work regardless of authorship necessarily in conjunction with certain world events which preceded and followed that work? Consider the fact that Altman states axiomatically that WWI affected "*everyone*" (83—italics in text). If therefore a philosopher were to maintain, for example, that his or her work is intended to raise and resolve issues pertaining to fundamental ontology, that is, to an analysis of Being in the broadest accessible sense, should this statement of intent be subsumed and effectively negated by the sweep of whatever (a) has happened or importantly (b) will happen in the world? Alfred North Whitehead's *Process and Reality*, a work of speculative splendor developed on many levels of high abstraction, appeared in 1929, two years after *Sein und Zeit*. Recall Altman's axiomatic claim that WWI affected everyone. Would relevant political events, as exemplified in Heidegger's case by two World Wars and a corrupt but

short-lived regime, be as cataclysmic and as personally destructive for Whitehead's system as they were for Heidegger? Or is the geographical given that Heidegger lived and worked in Germany whereas Whitehead thought and wrote in England a sufficient difference as far as the applicability of transparency with respect to historical events is concerned?

If this principle can indeed be generalized to pertain to the philosophical efforts of an entire tradition (regardless of its length), then metaphysics in the standard sense is fundamentally impossible, its import always and necessarily superseded by events usually described as "social" or "political." We may cautiously infer then that whether Altman's multi-faceted approach to *SZ* can be established as a reliable principle of interpretation regarding the work of other philosophers is perhaps moot. But Altman is undeniably certain of the relevance of this principle if Heidegger is the philosopher surveyed under its scrutiny: "As a general statement: *if* the Funeral Oration metaphor is a useful hermeneutic device for thinking about Heidegger's thought at least as late as 1943, then it may well remain useful, at least in a negative sense, for thinking about Heidegger's thought after that time and therefore about his *Denkweg* as a whole, not least of all when, after Germany's second defeat, he, e.g., deplores atomic technology and the senselessness of World Wars" (247—italics in text).

Altman proposes to filter Heidegger's entire "way of thinking" through the metaphor of a Funeral Oration. However, at times Altman is also willing to admit that Heidegger's thought preserves a distinct philosophical dimension existing and functioning apart from psychological considerations pertaining to the "lived" reality of its author. Thus the opacity of language in *SZ* "...allows Heidegger to escape (at least on a philosophical level) from any voice that could reproach him with War-Guilt" (268). Also, Heidegger's treatment of death and related concepts is "...complex from a philosophical standpoint but crystal clear from a psychological one..." (283). These exceptions raise the following question: if the text of *Sein und Zeit* is admittedly philosophical at some points, could that text be commensurately philosophical at other points, perhaps even as a whole?

We will consider this possibility in consequence of the following textual data. The opening two-plus lines of *Sein und Zeit* are not German but Greek, in particular a quotation from *Sophist* 244a (at 134 fn106, Altman cites, but does not discuss, Heidegger's own reference to this passage in his *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*).

Heidegger immediately follows these Greek lines with a German translation. The version of this passage in Macquarrie and Robinson's English translation reads: "For manifestly you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression "*being*" [*seiend*]. We, however, who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed." In the next paragraph, Heidegger writes that we, in Heidegger's time, still do not have an adequate understanding of what the *Sophist* identifies as "being." Heidegger's next sentence: "So it is fitting that we should raise anew the *question of the meaning of Being*" (*Sein*—all italics Heidegger's). Now consider the preface to Altman's book. His opening sentence (xiii) asks whether Heidegger was an "apolitical thinker" or, a contrasting query, whether there was "a genuine commitment to National Socialism basic to his thinking?" Contemporary scholars hold strong views on both sides of this question, but Altman insists (xiii) that "the result will ultimately be settled, long after my generation is gone, first by indifference and finally by silence." But is a question that will slide into a period of indifference and then exhaust itself without remainder—no matter how energized its status may now be in certain scholarly circles—ultimately a serious *philosophical* question? Just how important is "the Heidegger case" to philosophy?

In the acknowledgments (x), Altman cites Plato as one of the "pre-War authorities" who helped point the way toward executing his historical approach to *Sein und Zeit*. Plato is also mentioned in tones of the highest respect later in the work (especially at 284); indeed, Altman personally attests to the epochal significance of Plato in the annals of philosophy by having recently written a large commentary on Plato's *Republic*. Recall then that the passage from the *Sophist* appearing at the outset of *Sein und Zeit* raises a fundamental question in the area of philosophy now identified as metaphysics. Heidegger ratifies the importance of the very same question, then announces on the first page of *Sein und Zeit* that he will pursue this question, albeit in roundabout if not "existential" lines of analysis, throughout the rest of a very long book. Why then would it not be more central to the burdens and goals of philosophical thought to read and attempt to interpret *Sein und Zeit* by following the Platonic origin of the problem in conjunction with Heidegger's forthright assertion that his work—all of it—belongs to precisely the same tradition of inquiry?

The publication in 1968 of Heidegger's "*Zeit und Sein*" ("Time and Being," a lecture originally given in 1962) reinforces the relevance of this interpretive approach. Including translations, Altman's bibliography contains 47 primary sources for Heidegger,

but neither “*Zeit und Sein*” nor Joan Stambaugh’s English translation (published in 1972) is among them. In addition, Altman does not discuss or indeed even mention this text in the body of his book. “*Zeit und Sein*” is important with respect to Altman’s agenda for two reasons.

First, the lecture lacks reference to the “existential” notions so prevalent in *Sein und Zeit*. These programmatic omissions thereby sidestep any links (e.g., guilt, anxiety, conscience, resoluteness, death) to the direct experience of such immediately intense realities as warfare and the subsequent lure to connect a reading of a work containing such notions to a particularly vivid, indeed horrific historical event. Second, if the complex abstractions introduced in “*Zeit und Sein*” are taken to fulfill the complementary sections “missing” from *Sein und Zeit*, then the existing sections of the latter should be read as Heidegger explicitly indicates, i.e., as prolegomena to an analysis of ontological dimensions and realities of a uniquely fundamental sort concerning “the meaning of Being.” In sum, Heidegger addressed in a work published in 1962 what he omitted in another work appearing in 1927—events occurring in Europe during this period as well as the inherent complexity of a millennial-old philosophical issue account for the extended period of silence on this matter. It follows that the “metaphor” of a Funeral Oration (we have seen Altman himself use this rhetorical term on 247) becomes considerably less viable as a hermeneutical device for establishing a “transparent” understanding of *Sein und Zeit* once “*Zeit und Sein*” is recognized and given its due regarding the tradition of metaphysics and its ongoing interest in the question of the meaning of Being.

The reader must determine whether Altman’s presentation of such diverse material is sufficient to dislodge or even affect Heidegger’s status as a thinker devoted to raising and incisively addressing those questions of abstract dimension and concern which have animated the philosophical enterprise since antiquity. But assume that Altman is correct in his surmise that the case of Heidegger, if not Heidegger’s work, will soon vanish from the scene. One could maintain that Altman’s book remains of value by virtue of its long-range implications. The juxtaposition of a set of complex particular circumstances—all details pertaining to “the case of Heidegger” including the considerable material Altman gathered relating Heidegger to WWI—with the broader and more traditional concerns embodied in the western tradition of philosophical speculation invites us to rethink just what philosophy is and what we should expect it to accomplish.

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Should the structure of philosophizing necessarily include individual characteristics incarnated in the psychological profiles of its authors as well as repercussions from the historical, cultural, political and social conditions which circumscribe their work? Does this subtle and complex ambiance affect the nature of philosophical inquiry or, from a traditional perspective, can the import and value of philosophy continue to be detached from these surroundings? These questions as derived from Altman's book represent a signal subject for additional reflection.