

The New York Review of Books

VOLUME 27, NUMBER 19 · [DECEMBER 4, 1980](#)

Caveat Lector: The New Heidegger

By [Thomas Sheehan](#)

Gesamtausgabe (Collected Edition) projected 70-volume set
by Martin Heidegger
Vittorio Klostermann (Frankfurt), 8 volumes are now in print of a

Oliver Wendell Holmes once wrote that "philosophers were hired by the comfortable classes to prove that everything is all right." But Martin Heidegger, at least for a while, seemed to be the rare exception.

In the late 1920s, when German philosophy meant either Edmund Husserl's rarified analyses of pure consciousness or the dying strains of neo-Kantianism, Heidegger's *Being and Time* landed on the European consciousness like a bomb. It purported to be an ontology, a study of "being as such," but it read like a mixture of Jaspers, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. It proposed to "destroy" the history of Western philosophy in order to show that, lurking beneath the tidy surface of reason, science, and faith, the ultimate determinants of reality were negativity and finitude. To that end, Heidegger meticulously described what he took to be the structures of man's fallenness, guilt, and temporality, and argued that a "passionate freedom toward death" was the authentic position that opens up all realms of meaning.

Heidegger was roundly attacked as a nihilist and an irrationalist, whereas he contended that he was simply excavating the pre-Socratics' penumbral awareness of the dark side of the world. Reading *Being and Time* against the backdrop of the crumbling Weimar Republic, Herbert Marcuse, who was then Heidegger's student at Freiburg, found the book to be "an academic liberation." "Here at last," he wrote, "was a *concrete* philosophy that talked about existence, *our* existence, and about anguish, concern and ennui." It was, as he thought, a "new beginning."^[1] But Marcuse, like many others, soon found himself disillusioned as Heidegger's existential analyses began to give way to abstruse interpretations of romantic poetry, the pre-Socratic thinkers, and "being itself." Above all there was Heidegger's brief compromise with the Hitler regime.

On April 22, 1933, in an effort to safeguard the University of Freiburg from Nazi pressures, the academic senate unanimously elected Heidegger to the rectorate. His first act in office was to forbid anti-Semitic propaganda on the campus, but within two weeks he had joined the Nazi party. He later claimed that he did this only to smooth relations between the beleaguered university and the regime. Nonetheless, he threw himself into supporting the new government with more than the required fervor and, worst of all, campaigned for Hitler's decision to pull out of the League of Nations on November 12 of that year. During that winter Heidegger strongly but unsuccessfully opposed the regime's attempts to remove two anti-Nazi deans whom he had personally appointed (Wolf and Möllendorf), and he resigned the rectorate in protest at the end of February, 1934. (Widespread rumor to the contrary, he did not bar his Jewish mentor, Edmund Husserl, from using the university libraries.)

The Nazi programs in favor of the Volk seem to have attracted Heidegger. It is clear that he believed in some form of "national socialism" as a cure for Germany's economic ills, even though he quickly took his distance from Hitler.^[2] In 1935, he spoke about the "inner truth and greatness of this [National Socialist] Movement, namely the encounter between global technology and modern man." After resigning as rector, he spoke out against the regime in philosophical lectures—too cryptically, some say; quite courageously according to others—and paid for it by having his lectures audited by Nazi spies and ultimately by being drafted into the *Volkssturm* in 1944, at the age of fifty-five, to work on construction projects on the Rhine. In 1945 the French occupying forces suspended him from teaching while allowing him to stay on at Freiburg University as a research professor. In September of 1949 the *Lehrverbot* was removed, and two years later Heidegger was granted emeritus status.

As Heidegger's influence waned in postwar Germany, it grew in France and America. Since 1945 almost 4,000 books and articles about him have appeared, including a good number in Japanese. The more obscure and oracular his language became, the more followers—and detractors—he drew. His more enthusiastic supporters call him the greatest thinker of the century, if not of the last two millennia, whereas A.J. Ayer calls his work "nonsense," and Professor Paul Edwards considers it "humbug and mystification."^[3]

A veritable cult, which in fact he disowned, has grown up around him. A photo album of him at his Black Forest retreat has appeared since his death in 1976; personal notes and dedications are carefully preserved by their recipients; pages of his bad verse are earnestly reprinted as if they had poetic merit. At his worst Heidegger tended to disappear into clouds of verbal incense stoked with etymologies of Old High German words. At his best he was a brilliant reader of the history of philosophy and a creative and revolutionary interpreter of man's relation to what he called "the presence of things." At his best and worst he remained a single-minded and notoriously difficult thinker.

Controversial in life, Heidegger is proving to be no less so in death. He left behind him reams of unpublished and barely decipherable manuscripts of his lecture courses, seminars, and conferences. Klostermann Publishers in Frankfurt is now putting out these texts, along with his already published works, as Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe* or Collected Edition, a vast seventy-volume undertaking that was begun in the last year of Heidegger's life but will stretch into the next century.^[4]

Unfortunately this project, which should round out and clarify Heidegger's complex thought and stand as a monument to his achievement, is turning into the biggest stir over philosophical editing since Karl Schlechta discovered some years ago that Nietzsche's posthumous publications had been grossly distorted by his sister. In Heidegger's case there is absolutely no question of bad will on the part of his editors,

but there are serious doubts about the philological and critical status of the published volumes. The effective, if not titular, director of the Collected Edition, Professor Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, correctly insists that Heidegger did not want a philologically belabored, historical-critical edition of his papers and books. He wanted readable texts that would present the subject matter clearly. But granted that, scholars are questioning to what degree the edition is critical at all.

The fifteen-odd volumes that have appeared in very rapid succession since 1975 are riddled with errors about such simple matters as the dates of the texts between their covers or the place they were originally published. The new German edition of *Being and Time* twice mistakes the name of the journal in which that work first appeared (pp. vii and 580). The new edition of *Wegmarken* gives two different dates for the original draft of Heidegger's Plato essay (pp. vii and 483), misses by three years the date of the latest text in the volume (p. 485: 1964, not 1961), and, intentionally or not, omits the epigraph of Heidegger's essay on Jaspers. One can add to this an erratic footnote logic whereby sources are sometimes given, sometimes not, and, when given, occasionally provide incorrect information or refer to editions that Heidegger could not have used.^[5]

Heidegger's already published works, moreover, are being reissued under the rubric of "unchanged editions" when in fact by Heidegger's own wishes, hundreds of unacknowledged changes have been made in the texts. (This could pose a problem for Harper and Row's forthcoming retranslation of *Being and Time*: Which text will be used? Will textual variations be noted?)^[6]

The result is that a good number of German scholars are claiming that the Collected Edition is a botched job and that a truly critical version of these texts will be delayed for some fifty years. One German philosopher has called the whole venture "a scandal," and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Society, imperfectly comparable to the National Endowment for the Humanities), after commissioning six separate evaluations of the project, has decided not to give it financial support because basic critical standards are not being met.^[7]

The chief object of the controversy is Heidegger's heretofore unpublished lecture courses from 1923 through 1944. The importance of these courses is beyond question. They show how Heidegger's thought developed, the sources of much of his arcane terminology like *Ereignis* ("appropriation") and *Gestell* ("framework"), and how his thought forms a unified if wide-ranging whole. But the problem with these courses is that Heidegger's own manuscripts for them are often either sketchy or garnished with clarifications that he added later. Moreover, because he often extemporized in the classroom, the very careful notes or *Nachschriften* made by his students during the lectures take on critical importance. These notes, especially those of Simon Moser and Helene Weiss, are often word-for-word records of what Heidegger said and in some cases were subsequently reviewed and corrected by him. Therefore the editors of the published volumes are rightly using these *Nachschriften* to fill out Heidegger's original manuscripts. While all that is to the good, the reader who has no access to all these manuscripts has no way of telling how much of the published version comes from Heidegger himself and how much from his students' notes, or above all from the final editors, who are allowed to add to, subtract from, and rearrange the texts in the name of "readability."

Without going into tedious detail (there are scores of instances), I shall give some examples. In *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, a lecture course from 1927 that was published in 1975, three lines are taken from the lecture of May 28 and inserted into the lecture of May 25 at p. 153, lines 21-23. Likewise, the reader has no way of knowing (and according to the guidelines that Heidegger is supposed to have left, is not supposed to know) that on p. 204, in the middle of line 9, Heidegger took a two-week break, June 2-15, and then started up again with a 1000-word summary of the course to date that is now missing, or placed elsewhere in the volume.^[8]

And in the recently published 1925 text called *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs*, the reader who has no access to the manuscripts could not know that the third paragraph on p. 275 was transferred there from its proper place at p. 276, line 20, or that on p. 349, lines 18-20 were transposed to that place from line 26. Again, the important Greek word *phronesis* (roughly, "self-concern") is omitted on p. 419, line 32, even though Simon Moser (p. 446 of his *Nachschrift*) and Helene Weiss (p. 564 of hers) testify that Heidegger added this important clarification in his lecture of July 30. Scholars well know the importance of this word for tracing Heidegger's debts to Aristotle.^[9]

Such facelifts and transplants in the Heideggerian corpus are not arbitrary choices made by individual editors but were supposedly encouraged by Heidegger himself in the controversial rules he is said to have laid down for the Collected Edition. The issue has a long history. As a guest in Heidegger's Freiburg house in 1971 I studied some of the manuscripts that he jealously guarded: tightly scribbled folio sheets with minuscule additions and substitutions made over the years. At that time he had not yet decided what to do with the papers, but it was clear that he opposed the idea of having them published soon after his death, that he wanted access to them to be restricted, and that he certainly wanted no collected edition of them. But in October of 1973 he was prevailed upon by his son Hermann, and in the following spring signed a contract with Klostermann for the *Gesamtausgabe*. But he was adamant: no historical-critical edition, no brackets or elaborate footnotes. It's not clear, however, whether he wanted indices to the volumes. (For the Japanese edition of the *Gesamtausgabe*, edited by Professor Hartmut Buchner and others, some of these restrictions have been eased.) He is reported to have sketched out some guidelines for the project, but these much-debated rules have never been made public, and the various editors who have seen them give contradictory accounts of their contents.

One example concerns the illuminating summaries that Heidegger was accustomed to give at the beginning of new lecture hours. Anyone who has studied the notes from Simon Moser and Helene Weiss and then compared them with Heidegger's manuscripts knows that these summaries are often invaluable pedagogical recapitulations of his thought. But three different editors give conflicting reports about what Heidegger wanted them to do with these summaries.^[10] Professor von Herrmann says that Heidegger's guidelines require that these summaries, when they are not simply repetitions of lectures, be removed from their place and inserted piecemeal into the relevant parts of the text. (While this practice may smooth out the text, it robs these passages of their pedagogical force as summaries.) But another editor, Professor Susanne Ziegler, says that Heidegger wanted all summaries and recapitulations to remain as such in the text; and yet another editor, Professor Manfred Frings, received personal instructions from Heidegger not only to keep the summaries intact but to acknowledge them with titles as summaries. The readability of Fring's volume (two courses on Heraclitus from 1943-1944, published in 1979) shows the value of that practice. The "guidelines" do not seem to guide in any clear direction. Surely controversy could be avoided and consistency in the volumes could be achieved if the guidelines were made public.

These may seem like trivial matters, but one has only to recall what Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche's edition of her brother's works did to his reputation for decades (or what the editing of Marx's Paris Manuscripts has meant to Marxist theory) to realize that the issue goes beyond philology. In Heidegger's case the discernment of shifts in his thought often depends on the dating of his manuscripts, and that in turn sometimes hangs on a simple word or sentence. Moreover, a final judgment on Heidegger's political views in the Thirties—a matter which haunts Heidegger's reputation as much as Nietzsche's supposed proto-Nazism haunted his—still awaits an exact editing of his courses from 1934 through 1944. Professor Carl Ulmer of Vienna has recently charged that two sentences were omitted from the 1971 edition of Heidegger's course on Schelling, and that these sentences prove that Heidegger supported Hitler well through the Thirties. Heidegger is supposed to have said in 1936:

The two men who have initiated a counter-movement against nihilism—Mussolini and Hitler—have both, in their own and essentially different ways, learned something from Nietzsche. But with that, the authentic metaphysical scope of Nietzsche has not yet come into force.^[11]

The date, the tone, the context of these sentences are important for their meaning. Do they constitute a political endorsement? Were they omitted from the 1971 publication by Heidegger's own decision or, as some claim, by his editor, Hildegard Feick, without Heidegger's knowledge? One would like to see the original text in order to make a judgment, but it seems that there is no *habeas corpus* in the case of Heidegger's manuscripts. By his decision they are being kept from the public eye in the German Literature Archives at Marbach in West Germany, where only a select few have access to them. Heidegger opposed a historical-critical edition because he feared that the philological apparatus would get in the way of the philosophy he was presenting. Ironically the questionable status of the texts has sparked the very controversy about philology that he wanted to avoid.

But in fact, most of his followers seem content to have any text from Heidegger, regardless of its dubious provenance or editorial history—just as readers of English editions of his works have long tolerated the scandalous practice whereby translators and publishers drop out whole paragraphs of the original texts without so much as an acknowledgment. If Ralph Nader can get General Motors to recall cars, Heidegger scholars might consider asking Harper and Row to recall books.^[12]

It seems that a truly critical edition of Heidegger's works, both in German and in English translation, will have to wait until well into the next century. Meanwhile, the bar is open. How do you like your Heidegger—straight, or with a dash of corrective editing?

Notes

[1] Herbert Marcuse, "Enttäuschung" in *Erinnerung an Martin Heidegger*, ed. Günter Neske (Pfullingen: Neske, 1977), p. 162.

[2] Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (Yale University Press, 1959), p. 199. See Karl A. Moehling, "Heidegger and the Nazis," in *Heidegger, the Man and the Thinker*, ed. Thomas Sheehan (Chicago: Precedent, 1980), pp. 31-42.

[3] A. J. Ayer cited in *L'Espresso* (Rome), May 25, 1980, p. 199. Paul Edwards, *Heidegger on Death: A Critical Evaluation* (La Salle, Illinois: Hegeler, 1979), p. v.

[4] The Collected Edition is in four divisions: I. Already Published Writings; II. Lecture Courses from 1923-1944; III. Unpublished Treatises; IV. Notes and References. The first will be comprised of sixteen volumes, the second of forty volumes, the third of at least ten volumes.

[5] E.g., in *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (1975), note 1 on p. 6 is wrong, and the reference that Heidegger himself gave (June 18, 1927) for the Rilke quote on page 246 was the 1927 edition, vol. I, pp. 64-67, and not the 1953 edition as the published version has it. In *Wegmarken* (1976), p. 120, the Hegel reference is wrong, and so on.

[6] Textual changes in all the German editions of *Being and Time* are noted in Rainer A. Bast and Heinrich P. Delfosse's *Handbuch zum Textstudium von Martin Heideggers "Sein und Zeit"*, vol. I (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1980), esp. pp. 359-365 and 387-402. See by the same authors, "Philologisches zu den beiden Neuauisgaben von 'Sein und Zeit,'" *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, 86 (1979), 184-192.

[7] See Hans-Martin Sass, "Heideggers Konzept der Phänomenologie," *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, II, 3 (1977), 70-75, and Jürgen Busche, "Wie lesbar darf ein Philosoph sein?" in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 21, 1978.

[8] Other examples of lecture breaks and displaced summaries: pp. 20, line 7; 368, line 4; 380, line 20; 393, line 24; 418, line 3; 440, line 26. Albert Hofstadter's careful translation of the final version of this course will appear in 1981 with Indiana University Press as *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*.

[9] On p. 349 some of Heidegger's later changes are introduced into the text (line 18: "Orientierung" is changed to "Bewandtnisganzheit") and some not (passim: "Entdecktheit" is not changed to "Erschlossenheit").

[10] See respectively *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (1975), p. 472, *Hölderlins Hymnen "Germanien" und "Der Rhein"* (1980), p. 295, and *Heraklit* (1979), p. 403.

[11] Ulmer's charges, with the omitted text, appeared in *Der Spiegel*, May 2, 1977, p. 10.

[12] One candidate might be *What Is Called Thinking?* (1968), which, despite the translators' elaborate praise for Heidegger's careful use of words (see their introduction), omits whole sentences and paragraphs on pp. 61, 76, 124, 144, 157, 207, and 236, and invents lines 1-6 on p. 139. *Identity and Difference* (1969) omits four sentences at p. 42, line 3, and two sentences at p. 36, line 14. *On the Way to Language*

(1971) drops out sentences at pp. 123, line 12; 170, line 31; and 172, line 3. *On Time and Being* (1972) invents two sentences on p. 19, lines 14-17. *The End of Philosophy* (1973) omits a sentence at p. 18, line 8, adds a misleading word ("future") at p. 19, line 20, and drops an important phrase ("as *causalitas*") at p. 18, line 1. In *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (1977) I challenge anyone to translate the last twelve words on p. 49 back into the German.

Letters

April 2, 1981: Richard Rorty, [Being True to Heidegger](#)

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