

Booknotes

The publication of single lectures in hard-back book form clearly tells us something about the way the lectures in question are regarded, by the publishers if not by the wider public. However, just in case we (the wider public) do not realise the significance of Heidegger's lecture entitled *Introduction to Philosophy – Thinking and Poetizing*, the Indiana University Press blazons on the back cover of its 2011 translation HEIDEGGER'S LAST PUBLIC UNIVERSITY LECTURE BEFORE THE END OF WORLD WAR II.

Actually, right at the opening of the lecture, Heidegger announces that human beings are essentially thinkers (=philosophers), and as such already 'in philosophy', 'day and night'; and so they do not need an 'introduction' to philosophy. The substance of what follows consists largely of not entirely digested quotations from Nietzsche. For example: 'Almost 2,000 years and not a single new god!'; 'The human as poet, as thinker, as God, as love, as power...it was the one who had created all that it had admired', though it (the human) 'knew how to hide (this) from itself'; 'let us finally not forget that the English at one time have already caused an entire depression of the European spirit with their profound mediocrity'; 'England's *little minds* are now the greatest danger on the earth. I see more of a tendency for greatness in the feelings of the Russian nihilists than in the feelings of the English utilitarians'.

All right, all this is Nietzsche and not Heidegger, and one may not be in total accord with the English *utilitarians*, who, as George Orwell famously pointed out in his essay 'Wells, Hitler and the World-State' may not have been the atavistic and red-blooded *rosbifs* who were actually defending European civilisation in 1944; but far from distancing himself from these last two Nietzschean pronouncements, it is almost as if Heidegger is sheltering behind them in order to articulate thoughts he doesn't quite have the gall to express *in propria persona* in 1944.

The baseness of Heidegger's own character is hardly a secret. What is more crucial is to understand the extent to which the poetizing, so to speak, of the first two Nietzsche quotations is connected to the political implications of the last two. Needless to say, there is a great deal

Booknotes

of the usual Heideggerian etymological prestidigitation in the lecture, here focusing particularly on the idea in classical Greek the words for 'poetry' and 'making' were linguistically connected, though it is not so clear about why thinking and poetizing are the same. However, for Heidegger, thinking, which guards and shelters being, *is* poetizing, and poetizing is making, so that in 'the nothing of being' (which the strong among us will in order to be able to give free rein to our own willing), we ourselves think/poetize and create. At least the strong ones among us do, the ones who relish the Nietzschean will to power, and who are not hiding from ourselves that what we create (gods, values, scientific truth and so on) is no more than an objectification of our willing.

According to Heidegger in 1944, 'foreigners' say of us Germans that we (Germans) are the people who 'primarily produce thinkers and poets, while they produce machines and fuels'. Ominously, 'it could and will one day certainly be the case that our thinking and poetizing disturbs the foreigners... in their essence, and makes them uncertain, bringing them to the verge of reflection.' In 1944 the uncertainty felt by the foreigners vis-à-vis the Germans was chiefly a sense of vertiginous disgust: how could this people of thinkers and poets and musicians and theologians be doing what they were doing?

Could the answer to this question have had something to do with the fact that they (the Germans, or some of them anyway) really believed the sort of thing Nietzsche and Heidegger were so fatefully telling them? Maybe they (or some of them) believed that they were on the point of bringing some new god – or at least a thousand year Reich, replete with its own pagan mythology – into being? Certainly the Germans at that time showed no sign of being constrained by any of the old gods, or indeed by anything at all beyond their will. After all, thinking and poetizing are essentially forms of creation, not subject to any of the old objectifications or decencies, not subject indeed to any form of constraint by rationality, science, custom, morality, pity or anything else. Indeed recognition of this post-Nietzschean situation demands that all the old comforts and certainties be junked. In the new world limned by Nietzsche and Heidegger, man himself becomes his own god, his own redeemer, his own interpreter of a world he himself thinks and poetizes. Man's task now (or is it *German* man's task?) is to create a world, and a set of values, to replace the worn-out and spiritually useless productions of the old God, including of course its final bloodless and de-sacralised manifestation as enlightenment rationality and English utilitarianism.

From 1944 to 2011, and the lecture is John McDowell's Aquinas Lecture, *Perception as a Capacity for Knowledge* (Marquette University Press, 2011). It is certainly a relief to turn from the dangerously pretentious bombast of an unrepentant Nazi to someone as fundamentally decent and scholarly as McDowell. But for some there may be a sense of disappointment about the lecture itself, which is an attempt to show that our perceptual capacities can both be fallible from time to time, and yet on the occasions when they are not fallible still give indefeasible epistemological warrant for what it is I am perceiving. Thus there are occasions when all I need to say in justification when I think that I am perceiving something green is that I can tell a green thing when I see one. An argument of this sort could be highly relevant to tackling Cartesian or other forms of scepticism. The trouble is that by the time it has got to McDowell, via so many other philosophers and commentators of such formidable sophistication and ingenuity, it is very hard to remember what the problem was originally all about, let alone why it all once seemed so important. In a way McDowell's lecture is as representative of its time and place as Heidegger's was of its. However, at least no one will ever think of republishing McDowell's lecture under a strap line referring to it as the last Aquinas lecture before the London riots or the Breivik massacre (or whatever), which, it might reasonably and unpoetically be thought, is progress of a sort.