

Being is Evil:

Boehme's Strife and Schelling's Rage
in Heidegger's "Letter on 'Humanism'"

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In 1947, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Heidegger publicly addressed the concept of evil. He did so in "Letter on 'Humanism'" and the passage in question is so enigmatic that it has been largely ignored in spite of the evident importance of the topic. In fact, there is reason to believe that Heidegger did not mean his readers to understand this part of the text at that time. The keys to understanding the passage were not provided until much later. These keys are to be found in the lectures on Schelling from 1936, first published in 1971 (GA 42), and in "Evening Conversation in a Prisoner of War Camp in Russia, between a Younger and Older Man," dated 8th May 1945, the day on which the Allied Powers accepted the unconditional surrender of Germany, but not published until 1995 (GA 77).¹ I am leaving for another occasion the question of how these sentences might impact the debate around Heidegger's politics. In the present essay, I will confine myself to the task of trying to understand the four sentences on evil from "Letter on 'Humanism'" using these additional resources.²

The sentences in question read: "With healing, evil appears all the more in the clearing of being. The essence of evil does not consist in the mere badness of human action, but rather in the malice of rage. Both of these, however, the healing and raging, can essentially occur in being only insofar as being is itself what is in strife. In it is concealed

the essential provenance of nihilation [*Nichtens*]” (GA 9: 359/272). I will take each sentence in turn, but first I must say a word about “Evening Conversation.”

I

Heidegger’s “Evening Conversation” opens with a discussion of the experience of healing, a discussion that begins with the younger prisoner of war announcing that he has had an experience of the vast Russian forest that was enigmatic to him but that gave him a sense of healing (GA 77: 305/133). The older of the two men identified this sense of healing with a sense of freedom in spite of the fact that they were both prisoners of the Russians. He was also the one who introduced into the conversation “the devastation [*Verwüstung*] of the earth and the annihilation of the human essence,” saying that devastation here meant that “everything – the world, the human, and the earth – will be transformed into a desert [*Wüste*].” This, he added, is something evil (GA 77: 211/136). According to “Evening Conversation,” the nature of the devastation as something evil becomes more apparent in the experience of the forest as healing. The desert and the forest are both vast expanses where “nothing is encountered that bends our essence back on itself” (GA 77: 205/132), but only the experience of the forest is described as healing. This suggests that if we could come to understand the relation of the forest to the desert, then we might have some understanding of the first of the four sentences on evil in “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” the sentence which reads “With healing, evil appears all the more in the clearing of being.” The relation between the forest and the desert comes into focus when we approach it through the transformation that the idea of the devastation undergoes in “Evening Conversation.”

This transformation begins when the devastation is no longer conceived exclusively in terms of “what is visible and tangible” but as something evil (GA 77: 207/133). The transformation is marked by the way that the devastation is no longer conceived in terms of a body count or in terms of the destruction of cities, but is referred instead to the desert understood as “the abandoned expanse of the abandonment

[*Verlassenheit*] of all life” (GA 77: 212/137). The pursuit of what are ordinarily conceived to be the highest goals of humanity – progress, equal employment opportunities for everyone, the uniform welfare of all workers, and so on – conceal the devastation (GA 77: 211/136). This means that one can spread devastation under the guise of doing good. As the younger man explained: “Under the appearance of a secured and improving life a disregard – if not indeed a barring – of life could occur” (GA 77: 213/138). Heidegger’s central point here was that these efforts to improve life, arising as they do out of a high regard for life, belong to the annihilation of the human essence insofar as they take life as the ultimate value. This takes us to the heart of Heidegger’s confrontation with Nietzsche where, on the basis of his account of the history of being, he proposed that, beginning with Hegel, but culminating in Nietzsche, being is thought of as life (GA 47: 318/157). Indeed, in “Evening Conversation” it is said that in occidental thinking “life” coincides with “being” since ancient times (GA 77: 213/137). If we put all that together, we can see that Heidegger, speaking through the older man, suggests that if what are often conceived as the highest goals of humanity can also be seen in terms of the abandonment of life and thus in terms of the abandonment of being, then being is ambiguous (GA 77: 213/138).

The desert is Heidegger’s word for “the deserted expanse of the abandonment of all life,” that is to say, of the abandonment of being (GA 77: 212/137). But to complete the transformation of how Heidegger thinks the devastation, he recognized that to think it in terms of the abandonment of being is already to think it being historically (*seinsgeschichtlich*), and that is to think it in terms of the clearing of being, which, from Heidegger’s perspective, is already to think it in terms of a healing insofar as the clearing is what occidental thinking failed to think and so is what points beyond the history of Western metaphysics as such. The desert and the forest are not simply opposed to each other. In Heidegger’s metaphors (if one were allowed to speak of such a thing, which of course Heidegger resists), the forest is associated with the clearing. Heidegger’s frequent association of the experience of the

clearing with the free points in the same direction, given the claim that the experience of the forest is described as an experience of freedom. Hence one can say that it is in and out of the experience of the forest that the desert is experienced as such. The forest and the desert are intimately connected.

This means that when in “Letter on ‘Humanism’” Heidegger wrote that “With healing evil appears all the more in the clearing of Being,” he was not only summarizing the fundamental thrust of the first part of the “Evening Conversation,” but also formulating what he elsewhere called “the saying of a turning.” This interpretation is supported by the way he had introduced the idea of healing earlier in “Letter on ‘Humanism’” by suggesting that what is distinctive about the world-epoch in which we belong is the closure of the dimension of healing, a dimension that remains closed “if the open region of being is not cleared and in its clearing is near to humans” (GA 9: 351–52/267). The experience of healing is thus an indication of a transformation in the relation to the open region of being, that is to say, to the clearing. This interpretation is vindicated by the later stages of “Evening Conversation” where healing is characterized as a transplanting into knowing. To be sure, at the point of the conversation the discussion has come to focus on the Germans and the knowledge in question is that by which “we, as those who wait” are beginning “to turn and enter [*einzukehren*] the still-withheld essence of our vanquished people” (GA 77: 234/153). “Letter on ‘Humanism’” is often read without reference to the Second World War, but as soon as its close connection to “Evening Conversation” becomes apparent, this is no longer possible, and its highly problematic character becomes apparent.

II

The second of the four sentences reads: “The essence of evil does not consist in the baseness of human action, but rather in the malice of rage [*es beruht im Böartigen des Grimmes*]” (GA 9: 189/272). Understanding this sentence must also begin with a reading of “Evening Conversation.”

The introduction of “the malice of rage” into “Letter on ‘Humanism’” echoes the shift in “Evening Conversation” from the discussion of evil to a form of malice in which rage is uppermost (GA 77: 208/134). When the older man suggested that the devastation of the earth and the annihilation of the human essence were evil, the younger man proposed this shift to a discussion of malice so as to mark a turning away from issues of morality. The shift is necessary to avoid misunderstanding: evil cannot be reduced to the morally bad and insight into evil is not granted to those who consider themselves morally superior (GA 77: 209/134). Heidegger here rejected morality as a product of devastation, which it is most of all when morality is directed to world order and world security. This may well strike us as outrageous in the context of the war that had just ended, especially given his expressed desire to separate his discussion of from “the moral badness of the supposed originators of this devastation” (GA 77: 209/134), but we cannot see here the legacy of Nietzsche. On the contrary, Heidegger considered Nietzsche’s doctrine of discipline and breeding (*Zucht und Züchtung*) as an extreme affirmation of morality in the precise sense in which he was dismissing it. According to the younger prisoner, “the realm of pure will to power is least of all a ‘beyond good and evil’ – if there otherwise can at all be a beyond-evil” (GA 77: 209–10/135). Indeed, in the same place the will itself is said to be evil, but what is meant is not a judgment on the human will as such, but *will* as a word for being, in the same way that *life* is a word for being.

What then is to be understood by “the malice of rage”? In “Evening Conversation” the younger man offered this account:

Malice is insurgency [*Auführerische*], which rests in furiousness, indeed such that this furiousness [*Grimmige*] in a certain sense conceals its rage [*Ingrimm*], but at the same time always threatens with it. The essence of evil is the rage of insurgency [*Aufruhr*], which never entirely breaks out, and which, when it does break out, still disguises itself, and in its hidden threatening is often as if it were not (GA 77: 207–8/134).

A little later in the dialogue the younger man adds “The rage [*Grimm*] which essentially prevails in evil lets loose the insurgency and the turmoil [*Wirrnis*] that presages on all sides” (GA 77: 208/134, tm). These sentences do not on their own offer much clarity and the keywords – “rage” and “insurgency” – quickly disappear from “Evening Conversation.”

To understand what was meant by both the “malice of rage” and “the insurgency” we must go back behind both “Letter on ‘Humanism’” and “Evening Conversation” to Heidegger’s 1936 lectures on Schelling’s *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. Heidegger read Schelling’s essay as an essay on evil and it is, like these two other texts by Heidegger, about evil as, in Schelling’s own words, “a universal activity,” “an unmistakable general principle,” and not a discussion of how evil becomes actual in individuals.⁵

Heidegger tried to distill into the word *Aufbruch* what was for him most productive in Schelling’s account of evil. The term can be translated by “insurgency,” “uprising,” “revolt,” “sedition,” “insurrection,” “upheaval,” or “furor,” but its meaning must be established by the context. Heidegger attempted to summarize Schelling’s account of evil early in the lecture course in the formulation “Evil is the insurgency [*Aufbruch*] that consists in perverting [*Verkehrung*] the ground of the essential will into the reversal [*Umkehrung*] of God” (GA 42: 184/106, tm; see GA 86: 223). The word *Aufbruch* is not found anywhere in Schelling’s text, but the notion of perversion is important there. Schelling referenced Franz Baader’s account of evil as “a positive perversion or reversal of the principles” as a way of not thinking it as in straightforward opposition to the good.⁴ Heidegger also inserted the word *Aufbruch* into his interpretation of Schelling’s account of “the ruin [*Zerrüttung*] of beings”⁵ to make the point that this perversion is not simply negative. This insurgency against the primal being is rather “negation placing itself into dominance” (GA 42: 247/143).

The word *Grimm* appears twice in Schelling’s essay and it too was borrowed from Baader, indeed from the very same place in which the latter presented evil as “a positive perversion or reversal of the principles.” Baader had borrowed the word *Grimm* from Jacob Boehme, who

would have found it in Luther's translation of the Bible.⁶ On the second occasion that Schelling used the word *Grimm*, he did so in his own voice: "even the most dissolute and false life still remains and moves within God to the extent that he is the ground of existence. But it [this life] perceives him as consuming rage [*Grimm*] and is posited by the attraction itself in an even higher tension against unity until it arrives at self-destruction [*Selbstvernichtung*] and final crisis."⁷ What is at stake here for Schelling in his account of God's consuming rage is the claim that evil is necessary for the revelation of God and that every essence can only reveal itself in its opposite.⁸ Schelling initially presented this as a formal argument, but he subsequently followed it up in terms of an account of the experience of evil. He described how evil provokes feelings of terror and horror, whereas weakness or incapacity leads only to feelings of regret.⁹ He argued that these feelings can be explained only if we recognize that sin strives to profane what Baader called the mystery, that is to say, the *centrum*, which Schelling also identified with the primal will of the first ground.¹⁰ But Schelling added that this terror can *only* be explained because "the bond of the dependence of all things and the being of God which is before all existence" is revealed in sin.¹¹ Hence God as the ground of existence is accessible to "the most dissolute and false life" as consuming rage through sin. Schelling's discussion of rage is in this way part of a larger account of how what appears negative can also be taken as something positive. By adopting the word *rage* Heidegger evoked that discussion, leaving us with the question of how much of that account Heidegger retained in 1947.¹²

Heidegger in 1936 was quite explicit about his need to distance himself from Schelling's account. He insisted that by interpreting evil as sin Schelling took the question in a Christian direction. Heidegger, by contrast, wanted to take this questioning of evil toward what he called "the essence and the truth of Being," even while admitting that to do so was one-sided (GA 42: 252–3/146). Furthermore, his rewriting of Schelling's account of decision in terms of resoluteness and his further rewriting of resoluteness in terms of *Inständigkeit* represented another departure from Schelling, as did the substitution

of the moment (*Augenblick*) for eternity and the disappearance of the account of the terrible in God. Nevertheless, in the context of his reading of Schelling's essay Heidegger wrote that "evil itself determines a new start [*Ansatz*] in metaphysics" (GA 42: 168/97). This formulation does not repeat the phrase "another beginning" that Heidegger had already introduced in the previous year in *Introduction to Metaphysics* to indicate his own efforts (GA 40: 42/43), but it gave to Schelling's essay a unique significance.

The fact that Schelling fell back into "the rigidified tradition of Western thought" by remaining attached to the idea of a system only succeeded in bringing to the fore the difficulties already found at the beginning of Western metaphysics, thereby established the need for "a second beginning" in relation to the first (GA 42: 279/161). In other words, even though Heidegger was more reserved about Schelling when he returned to him in 1941 (GA 49), one can still read Heidegger's comments on evil in 1945 and 1947 as an attempt to make good on the promise to make a new start through the reading of Schelling given in the 1936 lectures.

What was Heidegger attempting when he retained from Boehme and Schelling the word *Grimm*? Heidegger was correct in saying that for all his originality Schelling followed his predecessors by presenting his essay as an attempt to reconcile the capacity for evil with a God who is regarded as pure goodness.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that Schelling approached God with an extraordinary conceptual novelty by deploying a distinction between being in so far as it exists and the ground of existence, which he had already developed in his philosophy of nature. He argued that God has the ground of existence in himself but that this ground, which precedes God in existence and to which he also gives the name "nature," is not God.¹⁴ One formulation he introduced in an effort to make this idea more accessible was to present the ground as "the yearning the eternal One feels to give birth to itself."¹⁵ However, at this point Schelling introduced the term *will*, a term that, as we saw in "Evening Conversation," not only belonged to

the abandonment of being but could also be understood as a word for evil (GA 77: 210/135).

For Schelling God is the unity of the two principles: being in so far as it is and the ground of existence. Evil is their perversion. Among human beings the principles are not indissoluble as they are in God, except in their spirit, and it is through their severability that evil becomes actual. What appealed to Heidegger in his reading of Schelling's essay was how what was initially presented as the opposition (*Gegensatz*) of good and evil became transformed into a duality which was separate from all opposition.¹⁶ Schelling had been forced at the beginning of the essay to treat opposition and duality as synonymous, but once he had the resources in place to separate them, he had set himself the task "to seek that which lies outside of, and beyond, all opposition."¹⁷ Heidegger shared that ambition, even though his detailed presentation of Schelling in the 1936 lecture course stopped well short of the end of the essay where this happens.

When Heidegger wrote in "Letter on 'Humanism'" that "The essence of evil does not consist in the baseness of human action, but rather in the malice of rage" he was drawing on Schelling in an effort to move the discussion of evil away from its actuality in individuals toward evil as a universal activity. But he was also attempting to follow Schelling in the way he took up evil as a general principle that is "everywhere locked in struggle [*Kampf*] with good."¹⁸ Schelling did not see this struggle as a war. He wrote: "The passions against which our negative morality wages war are forces of which each has a common root with its corresponding virtue. The soul of all hate is love, and in the most violent wrath [*Zorn*] only the stillness of the most inner *centrum*, attacked and excited shows itself."¹⁹

Schelling's reference to the *centrum* returns the reader to Baader's account, as found in his discussion of rage cited earlier. This account, which highlighted the return of the *centrum* from the periphery, derived from Boehme.²⁰ Everything points to Boehme as a crucial figure in helping these three thinkers – Baader, Schelling, and Heidegger – move from a perspective that highlighted the kind of negative opposition seen

in war to the model of strife, which is what Heidegger now turned to in order to think what he had earlier in the conversation referred to when he said with reference to the thinking of being as life that “the being of all that is remains ambiguous” (GA 77: 213/138).

III

The third sentence of the paragraph reads: “Both of these, however, healing and raging [*das Heile und das Grimmige*], can essentially occur in being only insofar as being itself is in strife [*das Sein selber das Strittige ist*].” Heidegger in *The Origin of the Work of Art* had employed the word “strife” to avoid a rigid opposition of world and earth so as to think them “in the intimacy of their simple belonging to one another” (GA 5: 35/26–7). This is why he returned to it in *Letter on Humanism* to suggest that strife governs the relation of healing and raging.²¹

Schelling had referenced “strife” in his *Philosophical Investigation into the Essence of Human Freedom*. For example, he wrote: “For every essence can only reveal itself in its opposite, love only in hate, unity in strife [*Streit*]. Were there no severing of principles, unity could not prove its omnipotence; were there no discord, love could not become real.”²² But Boehme had already proposed that life is *streitig* or strifeful.²³ It seems that again Boehme, not Schelling, was Heidegger’s main inspiration here, even if he seemed more ready to accuse Boehme of thinking metaphysically in his account of freedom as belonging to the ground of being than he was to accuse Schelling of doing so on the same subject (GA 86: 232).

Heidegger read Boehme alongside Schelling.²⁴ When Heidegger in 1936 – as part of his exploration of the possibility of a specifically German philosophy – praised the boldness of Schelling’s thinking, he said it was only the continuation of an attitude of thinking which began with Meister Eckhart and is uniquely developed in Jacob Boehme (GA 42: 204/117). Boehme’s role was crucial. Contrary to a widespread impression, *Gelassenheit* is more Boehme’s word than it is Eckhart’s.²⁵ More pertinent in the present context is the fact that Heidegger in his notes on Schelling from the early 1940s quoted from Boehme’s *The Way*

to Christ: “And the visible world is a revelation of the inner spiritual world, out of eternal light and out of eternal shadow, out of spiritual workings. It is a counterthrow [*Gegenwurf*] of eternity, with which eternity has made itself visible.”²⁶ This led Heidegger to ask: “From where and how is evil and torment [*Qual*], wrath [*Grimm*] and the anger [*Zorn*] of God?” Once more attempting to move beyond a negative oppositional thinking toward one based on strife, he answered his own question as follows: “Everything reveals itself only in its counterthrow [*Gegenwurf*] – the good only in evil – light only out of darkness – Spirit only in terms of the base” (GA 86: 232). Heidegger found in Boehme a different sense of the word *Gegenwurf* from that which had its source in Tauler and Seuse, where it was employed as a synonym for *objectum* (GA 6.2: 267/N3: 220). It is clearly not in that sense, but rather in the Boehmian sense, that in “Letter on ‘Humanism’” in the same passage where Heidegger famously called the human being “the shepherd of being,” he also called the human being “the ek-sisting counterthrow of being” (GA 9: 343/260).²⁷ And one suspects that for Heidegger what matters is which – being or the human being – is at the centrum and which at the periphery. Heidegger – with Boehme’s assistance – attempted to move away from human subjectivity in order to think the human being as belonging to being as its counterthrow, just as in Boehme the visible world belongs to eternity as its counterthrow.

IV

The fourth sentence says of the strife: “In it is concealed the essential provenance of nihilation [*Nichtens*].” The reference to the nihilating in being was Heidegger’s way of linking the discussion of evil to his thinking of the nothing that had been the topic of “What is Metaphysics?” in 1929. That he should attempt this is not surprising, given that “Letter on ‘Humanism’”, taken as a whole, represents Heidegger’s main attempt to reread his own thinking being-historically from the perspective of another beginning. The remainder of the paragraph from which these four sentences are drawn are devoted to integrating the thinking of the nothing from the 1920s into the thought of

the abandonment of being. He wrote: “The nihilating in being is the essence of what I call the nothing. Hence, because it thinks being, thinking thinks the nothing” (GA 9: 360/273). *Being and Time* took as its starting-point the long-forgotten question of being, which implied that the question at least had been remembered so it could be asked anew. This begged the question of how it came to be remembered, but it is a question that he subsequently called *die Kehre*, the turning, which he referred to the history of being. In “Letter on ‘Humanism’” Heidegger offered his best answer of how it was possible that in “What is Metaphysics?” he thought the oblivion of being (*Seinsvergessenheit*) as the nothing and then re-thought it being-historically as the abandonment of being (*Seinsverlassenheit*) (GA 9: 306/233).²⁸

In “Letter on ‘Humanism’” Heidegger proposed that his own thinking of the nothing was made possible by the strife that joined the healing and the raging in a kind of intimacy. In other words, the thinking of *Being and Time* was, from this perspective, already in a sense a thinking of evil. A being-historical thinking of evil is possible only in and out of the healing. That the nothing comes to dominance, that the thinking of being happens in our time as a thinking of the nothing, shows the dominance of what he called the unhale (*Unheil*). The unhale or un-healing, in the sense of “the closure of the dimension of the holy [*des Heilen*],” is what is distinctive of this world epoch (GA 9: 352/267). This lies behind Heidegger’s summary of his reflections on evil in the sentence “Being first grants to healing ascent [*Aufgang*] into grace, to raging its compulsion [*Andrang*] to the unhale” (GA 9: 360/273, tm). Being grants the healing that enables evil, the unhale, to appear in the clearing of being.²⁹ In other words, Heidegger’s own thinking of the nothing arose from and was a response to the dominance of evil, even if the manner in which he did so was itself, on his own account, to be understood as the happening of a healing.

When a human subject carries out nihilation, it is in the sense of a denial.³⁰ By contrast, when Da-sein nihilates it is “inasmuch as it belongs to the essence of being as that essence in which the human being ek-sists” (GA 9: 190/273). This ek-sisting is “the ek-sisting counterthrow

of being” mentioned earlier and takes us beyond Dasein as the thrown project (*geworfene Entwurf*) because it highlights the importance of the manner in which Dasein belongs to being. One can approach this from within Baader’s framework in terms of what stands at the center and what at the periphery. Or, one can approach it in terms more reminiscent of Boehme, as when Heidegger responded to Boehme by writing that “everything reveals itself only in its counterthrow [*Gegenwurf*] – the good only in evil” (GA 86: 232).

The fourth sentence of the sequence that I have isolated from “Letter on ‘Humanism’” Heidegger says in effect that one must look behind the thinking of the nothing to the strife between healing and the raging for the origin of the nihilating. Being is this strife. But what does that mean for the thinking of evil, especially if one understands as a healing the remembering of what was forgotten in metaphysics (GA 6.2: 439–448/EP 75–83)? The sentence, “With healing, evil appears all the more in the clearing of being,” is already an answer, albeit one that had already been taken a step further still in the unpublished “Evening Conversation.”

We have already seen how in “Evening Conversation” Heidegger declared the will to be evil. He meant that insofar as Western metaphysics, thought being-historically, culminates in evil, then Western metaphysics culminates in evil. Indeed, a contemporary text, “The Anaximander Fragment,” said so directly: in the collapse of thinking into the sciences and into faith the destiny of being (*Geschick des Seins*) is evil (*böse*) (GA 5: 353/266). However, the further consequence that he drew in “Evening Conversation” and put in the mouth of the younger prisoner was that “malice, as which the devastation occurs, may very well remain a basic trait of being itself” (GA 77: 215/139). Heidegger acknowledged that to think that evil dwells in the essence of being represented a challenge. In that text the immediate emphasis was on not becoming pessimistic, but it is also the case, as I have already emphasized, that the claim can be approached only insofar as one has learned to think otherwise, both being-historically and outside of rigid oppositions. Insofar as Heidegger can be read as saying that being is evil, it is, of course, not an identity

statement. This is already reflected in his comment in the treatise *Das Ereignis* about “an ‘epoch’ in the history of being.” He wrote: Being conceals its essence after its emergence in the first beginning; the concealment lets come into being – i.e., now, into ‘power’ – the abandonment of beings by being in the form of beingness as machination. The ‘*agathon*,’ the ‘good,’ ‘is’ its essence: ‘evil’” (GA 71: 17/10). That in the time of *Machenschaft* the essence of good is evil means that being withholds itself and the nihilating comes to dominance. But to think this not in terms of opposition but in terms of perversion is possible only insofar as the reversal is happening, because the malice of rage appears in a manner divorced from all morality only with healing.

Because Heidegger seems to have left the thinking of evil to one side after he wrote “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” it is possible to argue that it occupied him for only a brief interval and that it can be dismissed as a dead end among the thought paths he pursued. But there is reason to believe that it is more fundamental than that insofar as it is intimately connected with the thought that governs the turning, *die Kehre*. In this regard Heidegger loved to quote Hölderlin’s lines from the poem *Patmos*:

*Wo aber die Gefahr is, wächst
Das Rettende auch.
But where the danger lies, there also grows
That which saves.*

These lines are most often cited from their appearance in “The Question concerning Technology” (GA 7: 29/28, 36/34), but their appearance in “Why Poets?” from 1946, is more revealing for an understanding of “Letter on ‘Humanism.’” After quoting Hölderlin, Heidegger there commented “Perhaps any salvation [*Rettung*] other than that which comes from *where* the danger lies is still within the unhale [*Unheil*] (GA 5: 296/222, tm). It is a thought rephrased close to the end of the essay: “The unhale, as the unhale, traces the healing for us” (GA 5: 319/240, tm).

Heidegger’s insight that when divorced from the will, the thinking of evil as the insurgency of a perversion turns into a conversion, came to him during the course of his profound confrontation with the thought

of Boehme and Schelling. It is his insight into the turning, the turning thought being historically. What emerges most clearly is that one can follow this line of thought only insofar as one has met the challenge of abandoning oppositional and calculative thinking. One should not be surprised to find that Heidegger did not expect the readers of "Letter on 'Humanism'" to be ready for the idea that being is evil thought in this way. Insofar as they did not, then they would not have understood that for the Heidegger of "Letter on 'Humanism'" the thinking of the nothing in *Being and Time* and in "What is Metaphysics?" was already, in a sense unrecognized by Heidegger himself at the time he wrote those works, a thinking of evil. Writing for posterity, he wrote this while holding back the keys that would have allowed his contemporaries to unlock his train of thought there.

There is perhaps no better indication of the gulf separating him from even those who had followed his thought closely than the fact that in 1987 Emmanuel Levinas could ask of *Being and Time* "Can we be assured, however, that there was never any echo of Evil in it?"⁵¹ For Levinas this meant reading Heidegger against Heidegger, reading him with profound suspicion because his silence about the death camps long after the war was over seemed to indicate that he consented to the horror. No doubt Heidegger would have dismissed Levinas's question as moralistic. But one cannot help but wonder what Levinas might have said in return if he had recognized that, in the four sentences from "Letter on 'Humanism'" that I have been investigating, Heidegger made the shocking claim that it is only insofar as there is an echo of evil in *Being and Time*, that this thinking of the nothing can be said to be a thinking of being at all. According to "Letter on 'Humanism'" the very legitimacy of *Being and Time*, the sense in which it can account for its own possibility, depends on the degree to which one can track the traces of the unhale in it.

NOTES

- 1 That the Schelling lectures on their own are not enough is well-illustrated by the difficulty Werner Marx has interpreting the discussion without GA 77: *Gibt es auf Erden ein Mass?* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1983) 18–19; *Is There a Measure on Earth?* trans. Thomas J. Nenon and Reginald Lilly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 30–31.
- 2 One important publication that does take account of these two volumes of GA in order to understand these sentences from “Letter on ‘Humanism’” is Aleš Novák, *Heideggers Bestimmung des Bösen* (Nordhausen: Traugott Bautz, 2011), 99–106. See also Bret W. Davis, *Heidegger and the Will* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 293 and Bernd Irlenborn, *Der Ingrim des Aufbruchs. Heidegger und das Problem des Bösen* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2000), 222–23.
- 3 F. W. J. Schelling, Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit in *Philosophische Schriften* (Landshut: Philipp Krüll, 1809), 451; *Philosophical Investigation into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 40.
- 4 Schelling, *Freedom*, 367/35. Baader reprinted the essay in which this phrase is found, “Ueber Starres und Fliessendes,” in *Beiträge zur dynamischen Philosophie im Gegensatze der mechanischen* (Berlin: Realschulbuchhandlung, 1809), 149.
- 5 Schelling, *Freedom*, 38/34 at GA 42: 248/143.
- 6 Boehme seems to have taken up the word from Luther’s translation of Psalm 90.7: Martin Luther, *Die gantze Heilige Schrift*, Bd. 2 (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1974), 1045. Jacob Boehme himself wrote: “we lie captive in God’s wrath [*Grimm*] between anger and love in great danger.” *Sex puncta theosophica, oder Von sechs Theosophischen Punkten*, Sämmtliche Werke VI, ed. K. W. Schiebler (Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1846), 357; *Six Theosophic Points*, trans. John Rolleston Earle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971), 47.

- 7 Schelling, *Freedom*, 493/66, tm.
- 8 Schelling, *Freedom*, 452/41.
- 9 Schelling, *Freedom*, 475–476/55.
- 10 Schelling, *Freedom*, 442n and 445/35n and 37.
- 11 Schelling, *Freedom*, 476/55.
- 12 One clear difference between Schelling and Heidegger might well be that for the former we need evil for good to reveal itself, whereas for the latter it is with healing that evil appears all the more in the clearing of Being.
- 13 Schelling, *Freedom*, 26/24.
- 14 Schelling, *Freedom*, 429–30/27.
- 15 Schelling, *Freedom*, 431–32/28.
- 16 Schelling, *Freedom*, 497/69.
- 17 Schelling, *Freedom*, 511/77.
- 18 Schelling, *Freedom*, 451/40.
- 19 Schelling, *Freedom*, 461/46.
- 20 On the *centrum* in Boehme, see *Aurora*, ed. Andrew Weeks (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 20.
- 21 Heidegger described the strife of world and earth here as a *Gegen-einander* but not as a *Gegensatz*.
- 22 Schelling, *Freedom*, 452/41, tm.
- 23 Boehme, *Sex puncta theosophica*, 355; *Six Theosophic Points*, 44.
- 24 The only extended study of Boehme and Heidegger I am aware of is Hans-Joachim Friedrich, *Der Ungrund der Freiheit im Denken von Böhme, Schelling und Heidegger* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: frommann-holzboog, 2009). Unfortunately, it does not take account of GA 77 and it was too early for GA 86. Furthermore, it does not mention the four sentences from “Letter on ‘Humanism’” with which I am concerned here.
- 25 See, for example, *Von wahrer Gelassenheit*, in *Der Weg zu Christo, Sämtliche Werke I*, 97–98; trans. 85–136. It seems that the word *Gelassenheit* appears in only one of Eckhart’s authenticated texts where it is introduced as a synonym for *Abgeschiedenheit*: *Die Rede der Unterscheidung, Die deutschen Werke*, Band 5 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1936), 283; *The Complete Mystical Works*

- of *Meister Eckhart*, trans. M. O'C. Walshe (New York: Crossroad, 2009), 514.
- 26 Jacob Boehme, *Der Weg zu Christo*, Sämtliche Werke 1, ed. K. W. Schiebler, zweite Auflage (Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1860), 144; *The Way to Christ*, trans. Peter Erb (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 185–86, tm. In the same section of GA 86 there is a further quoted phrase from Boehme: “Die Qual des Abgrund.” It is not from *Aurora*, as the editor suggests, but from *Von dreifachen Leben des Menschen*, Sämtliche Werke IV, ed. K. W. Schiebler (Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1842), 25. Heidegger omitted the final words from that sentence. They read: “since the self-will and the released [*gelassener*] will work one with another, as [do] evil and good.” One can speculate that Heidegger stopped the quotation early because he sought to divorce *Gelassenheit* from the will.
- 27 For this reason, Heidegger in his own copy of *Brief über den “Humanismus”* annotated the phrase “the ek-sisting counterthrow of being” with the comment “besser: im Sein qua Ereignis” (GA 9: 342/260).
- 28 See further Robert Bernasconi, *The Question of Language in Heidegger’s History of Being* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1985), especially 54–57.
- 29 The close association of the unhale with evil in the sense of malignancy (*der Böartige*) is made clear from some notes on Sophocles’ *Ajax* that Heidegger made for a lecture on the Anaximander fragment (GA 78: 305 and 307).
- 30 Heidegger is probably thinking of Sartre’s account according to which the origin of negation is traced to the freedom which reveals itself in anguish: Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 71; *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 34.
- 31 Emmanuel Levinas, “Comme un consentement à l’horrible,” *Le nouvel observateur*, no. 1211 (28 January 1987): 83; trans. Paula Wissing, “As If Consenting to Horror,” *Critical Inquiry* 15: 2 (Winter 1989): 488.