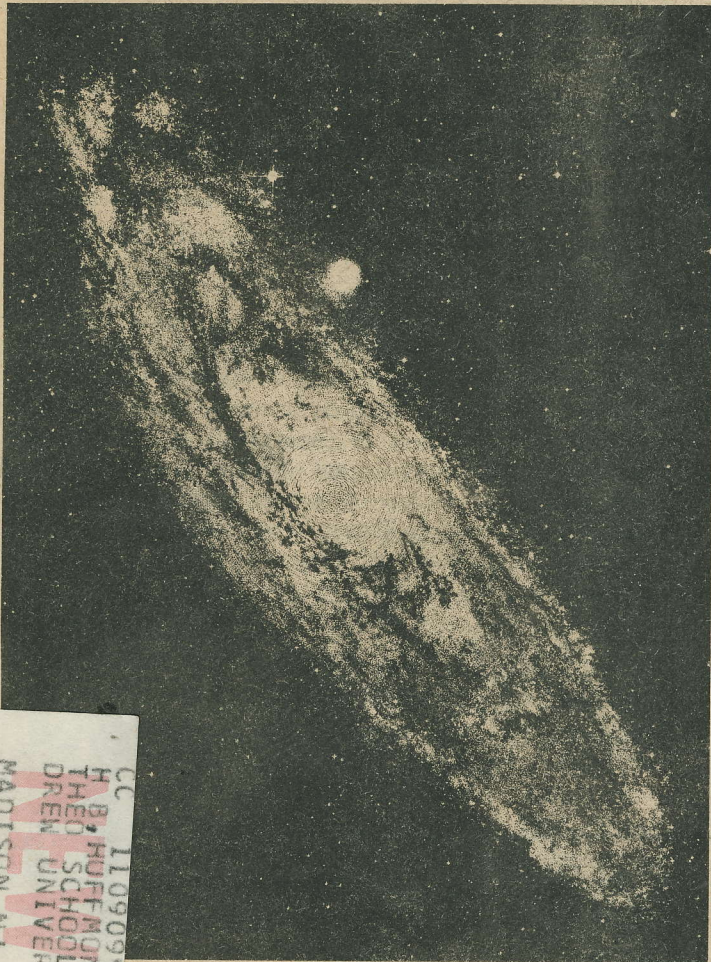

The Christian CENTURY

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READERS' RESPONSE

Heidegger Was Heroic

I VAN STRENSKI, in his article titled "Heidegger Is No Hero" (May 19), raises a number of important points about the complex relations between the life and thought of Martin Heidegger. I certainly agree with Strenski's skepticism about the moral quality of Heidegger's life. The project of *Sein und Zeit* calls for the resolute gathering of the thrown self in such a way that it can become the founder of a new, saving polis. In Heidegger's 1935 lectures, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, he states that a renewal of the spirit of true questioning (*die Seinsfrage*) can save the German nation from the world darkening brought about by America and Russia. Only the Thinker can save the people. Some have suspected that Heidegger has set himself up as a spiritualized Hitler in these lectures.

Yet questioners of Heidegger's moral authenticity must probe more deeply into the years between 1936 and 1946, when he was wrestling with the metaphysics of Friedrich Nietzsche. As is well known, Heidegger saw Nietzsche as the last great metaphysician of the West, the thinker who gathered together the threads of the history of Being into the expression of the Will to Power and the Eternal Return. Nietzsche had brought philosophy to fulfillment by stressing the notion of the Will, which had been evolving since Gottfried Leibnitz.

In confronting Nietzsche, albeit a Nietzsche of his own making, Heidegger placed himself in the position of rethinking his own understanding of Being. The so-called turn in his thinking can be seen as the growing realization that Being could not be characterized as a form of the Will to Power. The collapse or miscarriage of *Sein und Zeit* can be best understood as the collapse of the Will. It should be obvious that this failure has strong political ramifications.

What has excited many people is just this derailment of the ideas of *Sein und Zeit*. Heidegger was forced to confront

his demons as the political nightmare unfolded around him. This confrontation gave birth to the later work, in which the stress falls not on resoluteness but on the release which brings us into the power of the Open. Of course, no one would state that Heidegger was heroic during the Nazi years. One has only to remember the courage of Paul Tillich or the stoic endurance of Karl Jaspers to see the difference between an authentic and an inauthentic response to political reality. Yet Heidegger was heroic as a thinker. To be heroic as a thinker is to press so hard against the reigning categorial schemes that they are forced to give way to something at once more pristine and more enduring.

Yet being heroic *only* as a thinker is not enough. Paul Tillich was heroic both as a creative theologian and as a social-political being. And, as we now know, it almost cost him his life.

As should be obvious, both philosophy and theology are currently experiencing inertia and decay. We are indeed in a waiting period, as both Tillich and Heidegger sensed. The way to overcome this inertia lies, I suspect, in an increased effort to enter the region from which Heidegger's thinking unfolds. The very radicality of the question of the meaning of Being has placed theology over an abyss. The traditional question of the nature and activity of God must be bracketed so as to allow the abyss of Being to stand before it. This radical questioning provides the ultimate clearing through which the tradition can, in time, renew itself.

Heidegger has not given us another categorial scheme with its attendant first principles, but he has put the greatest possible pressure on the schemes we now employ. Like Tillich, he sought the "God beyond the God of theism" in an effort to break free from the premature closure of certain types of thinking. His concern with letting-go (*Gelassenheit*) stands over against our own efforts as both a demand and a challenge. The "Open" (*das Offene*) stands as the ultimate clearing in our lives. The Open opens out the horizontal structures within which we exist. Theology, in its quest for radical theonomy, should now be understood as the celebration of this clearing. From the freeing power of the Open comes the radiance which brings us our true homecoming.

By way of a final warning, however, we should remember the danger of the type of thinking presented by Heidegger. The most detailed warning is still

that of Hans Jonas, who spoke at Drew University in 1964 to a large group of theologians. In his talk (reprinted in the *Review of Metaphysics* in 1964) Jonas warned us about substituting Heideggerian notions for our own Christian categories. In particular, we should be cautious about substituting the Heideggerian notion of the "history of Being" for the Christian notion of revelation. Such an equation places too much emphasis on the individual Thinker who is responsible for the presentation and preservation of the deposits of this history. Further, said Jonas, we must not equate God with Being.

Jonas is certainly correct, yet he fails to see the need to put our very ideas of God into question. The question of Being allows us to do this. Of course, the very term "Being" (*das Sein*) is itself questionable. The Open, as the ultimate clearing away of that-which-closes, is that which is sought by any theology sensitive to the Heideggerian revolution. It is this insight which remains Heidegger's greatest legacy to those of us who labor in the fallow fields of theology.

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I am teaching a seminar on Rudolf Bultmann's theology; thus I'm mindful of a statement of Ludwig Marcuse's about Heidegger that I strongly suspect (as Bultmann also did) comes a good deal closer to the truth than Strenski's article. I pass it on in my own translation from a letter to the editor of *Der Spiegel* in 1966.

There can be no talk of defending Heidegger "against the charge of fascism." For who can cover up for what he did then? All those who know of those distant events merely through hearsay ought to consult the documentary book by Guido Schneeberger, *Supplement to Heidegger* (Bern, 1962) [excerpts from which are available in English translation in *The Worlds of Existentialism*, edited by Maurice Friedman], which was barely noticed in Germany. But this fall into sin has nothing whatever to do with the extraordinary book *Being and Time* (1927). Again and again, the attempt has been made effectively to eliminate this important work *ex post* Heidegger's later development. . . . Right up to today the whipping boy Heidegger has diverted attention from many of the crimes committed by German "poets and thinkers" in the 1930s. The primitive claim, "But he was always a Nazi" (also applied to Knut Hamsun and

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