

Walter Kaufmann

GERMAN THOUGHT TODAY

A DECADE after World War II, the situation in Germany is almost the exact reverse of what it was after World War I. Then she was economically prostrate and unable to achieve political stability, but few countries could equal her vitality in music, painting, poetry, and architecture, or theology, the novel, and philosophy. Today it is the economic and political recovery of Western Germany that nobody would have considered possible a dozen years ago; but there are no cultural achievements of comparable significance.

Even those Germans who are concerned about the current bleakness in the arts and *Geisteswissenschaften* generally share in the popular repression of any memory of the Hitler years. One simply does not mention the loss through emigration of Freud and Mann and Zweig; Buber, Barth, and Tillich; Hindemith and Schoenberg; Carnap and Cassirer; the Bauhaus architects, and countless others. People much prefer to blame the heavy losses of *potential* geniuses during the war. This dodge, of course, fails to explain why Germany is holding her own in the natural sciences. The striking fact that the sciences and the theatres flourish in Eastern Germany, too, reminds us that both can survive totalitarian regimes; but the humanities cannot: they are all but dead in Eastern Germany, and in Western Germany they have not recovered from the blow that Hitler dealt them. Western Germany is doing a brisk business on all fronts, but culturally she is living on her capital.

This thesis might be illustrated in a great many ways. Think of the challenge represented by the dozens of bombed cities: it has been met economically, but not artistically. The thriving stores and hotels that flourish in the ruins of yesterday around the

great cathedrals are, at best, not too offensive; but they certainly do not merit a second look. One is stunned by the amount of rubble that has been cleared away, by the evidence of prosperity, and by the lack of all creative imagination.

There are scores of repertoire theaters, but they rely largely on classics, and the few living authors are generally French or American. Bert Brecht, who returned to East Berlin from California, was the outstanding exception: now that he has died, nobody in Germany would claim that there is another German dramatist of equal stature—one to compare with Sartre or with Anouilh, with Miller or with Williams. Nor is there a German poet to rank with Benn, who died this summer, not to speak of Rilke or George who published some of their best verse after World War I.

It would be tedious to survey field upon field. Instead I propose to look a little more closely at philosophy. This is by no means unfair, for the picture in philosophy compares favorably with that in most other areas. Where else can the Germans still boast of two such names as Heidegger and Jaspers?

II.

Outsiders are apt to think that Jaspers and Heidegger belong to the same school of thought (namely, existentialism) and that they are presumably equally influential. Both assumptions are quite wrong. Existentialism is a label which both men repudiate. Moreover, each of them repudiates the other. For several years now, both of them have published book upon book—Heidegger usually slim essays of well under a hundred pages, Jaspers bulky tomes which range from 300 pages to over 1,000. Jaspers no longer reads Heidegger's publications, and Heidegger reciprocates. Even so, both find their readers—but by no means the same readers. At the German universities, for example, you will find scarcely a course that deals with Jaspers, even briefly, but a great many that deal with Heidegger at length.

Not since the death of Hegel has a German philosopher during his own life wielded an influence comparable to Heidegger's. This is partly due to the fact that so many chairs of philosophy are occupied by his old students, while not one such chair is held by one of Jaspers' or of Nicolai Hartmann's or Cassirer's students. To understand this situation, we must keep in mind the methods followed at the German universities, which are remarkably different from our own.

III.

The forte of the German professor and student of the *Geisteswissenschaften* is, in one word, *referieren*—which means reporting, summarizing, outlining. Those addicted to this method generally read a manuscript: the German *Vorlesung* (lecture) is, much more often than not, quite literally a *Vorlesung*—a reading out loud. And the students try to copy into their notebooks as much as possible of what the professor reads out of his. Of necessity, he reads either what he has already published, or what he is about to publish, or what he himself does not consider good enough to publish. Today it is the last technique that is by far the most popular. It should be added that most professors do not repeat their lectures, and that practically none offers the same courses year after year as is so often done at American universities. As a result, most German professors are busy during the term writing their lectures for the week and have no time to talk with students. Indeed, at the best universities the students have exceedingly little contact with their professors.

The classes are generally large, and the professors have a direct financial interest in attracting a great many students since the students still pay *Hörgelder*. There is, moreover, a close relationship between the size of a man's classes and his prestige. Given a wide-spread interest in Heidegger, it is therefore tempting for philosophy professors to announce a course of lectures featuring Heidegger's name in the title. A course on more prosaic subjects is likely to attract few students.

By far the most philosophy courses are historical, and there are hardly any courses at all on such subjects as ethics, theory of knowledge, logic, or philosophy of science. Told that we have such courses, a German professor told me that these subjects were dated by Heidegger; and a German student, who was working on his doctoral dissertation with a professor who had spent the war years teaching philosophy in the United States, exclaimed: "Apparently, you are still in the 18th Century!"

The few courses that have systematic rather than historical titles usually turn out to be historical surveys. And almost invariably the Herr Professor *referiert*. Needless to say, his summaries and paraphrases are by no means always unexceptionable. But the students are not likely to notice this, seeing that there are no reading assignments or discussion groups.

In place of the latter, the professor usually offers a seminar in connection with his course of lectures, and some of the more advanced or specialized students come to that, too. Often, these seminars are much too large for any discussion. In a theology seminar I have seen as many as 200 students, and that was too much even for the professor. He admitted only one-third of these as active members, made them sit in the front rows, and then asked them specific questions about the text at hand, while the rest listened reverently from the back rows.

In the seminars a text is read: sometimes a whole book, sometimes a few pages. The professor offers his interpretation and assigns topics for reports which are read by the students and criticized by him. If the text is French, Latin, or Greek, a good deal of time may be spent on the mechanics of translation; and in any case the discussion is almost invariably about points of interpretation. Sometimes one overhears students wondering whether the professor's reading of a certain sentence is really tenable—but in conversation with each other after the seminar is over.

To be suitable for a seminar, a text must, of course, be diffi-

cult—a condition met admirably by the works of Heidegger. In this respect, Jaspers is unquestionably inferior to him. Moreover, Jaspers' books are full of reports of what other people have said, according to Jaspers; and these summaries, while often very questionable, are almost without exception very clear. Small indeed is the temptation for the German teacher of philosophy to summarize Jaspers' summaries. What matters most to Jaspers, to be sure, is the appeal to the reader to change his life, but this hortatory element of all his writings lends itself still less to classroom presentation.

Heidegger deals no less often with what others have said, but never to summarize or paraphrase it, let alone to make it clear. What Heidegger holds up to scorn is precisely the superficiality of all the clear interpretations of the past, and his own exegesis is invariably much darker than the text from which he took off. He himself says that he sets out on the way toward that point from which the right questions may some day be asked, and what seems obscurantism to those who do not like him seems exciting and profound to many a German student and professor.

Close criticism of a text is practically unknown. The task is to understand it. Before you could possibly criticize Heidegger or Hegel, Kierkegaard or Kant, Pascal or Plato, Aristotle or Augustine—to name the approved philosophers who are studied widely—you would have to read all their writings in the original to begin with. For you must understand before you can presume to criticize. Asked whether he agrees with Kant, or even whether he considers a particular argument sound, the student who has studied Kant for one or two semesters is most likely to repudiate this question as ridiculous, naive, and utterly sub-philosophic. If you tried to press the point by presenting the student with some contradiction between two of his approved authorities to show him that he cannot agree with both Kant and Leibniz on some point, he would, no doubt, dodge into history. He would explain that Kant did not really criticize Leibniz but only the school

philosophy of his own time, or he might enter into an exegesis of the two apparently conflicting texts: in either case he would end up by pointing to the need for further study of the historical background. The result is almost certain to be inconclusive: what will be established is the need for more historical research.

There are two acceptable attitudes toward the great philosophers: either uncritical empathy or wholesale rejection in the name of history. In the latter case, the key word is *überholt*, dated. Kant is dated by idealism, idealism is dated by existentialism, and the big question is whether Heidegger is possibly already *überholt*. Detailed criticism of an argument is almost unknown among German philosophers today.

The professors themselves are authorities and firmly convinced for the most part that their students are in no position to discuss with them, let alone to criticize them; and in philosophy at least there is a strong tendency to exclude rival points of view. Professor X's mission is to turn out *X-Schüler*, and his success and prestige is measured in large part by the number of people, and especially *Privatdozenten*, who will say for the rest of their lives—much as an American might say, "I went to Harvard"—*Ich bin X-Schüler*, I am a student of X. As long as X was Kant or Hegel, or even Husserl or, for that matter, Heidegger, this may have made some sense. Today, however, it often sounds ridiculous.

If these attitudes, so different from those cultivated at American colleges and universities, produced a wealth of sound and interesting historical studies, the situation would be very different from the way it is in fact. The Hegelian tradition which established Germany's supremacy in the historiography of philosophy is decidedly a matter of the past. Not only are there no heirs today to Zeller and Erdmann, Fischer and Windelband, with their great scope, but the profoundly uncritical climate of thought favors unsound studies.

The very alternative of empathy and criticism is unsound. If we really wish to understand a text, we cannot dispense with

criticism: we must find out with what problem the author tried to deal, and this leads to the question how successfully he dealt with it. That, however, is decidedly not the approach cultivated at the German universities today, and this is due above all to the precedents set by Heidegger and Jaspers.

IV.

Heidegger has done more than any other man to establish the philosopher's immunity from criticism and the standards of mere correctness or accuracy. What he is after is truth (not correctness), and truth was to the Greeks *aletheia* which, he says, means unconcealedness or openness. It is, no doubt, ironical that a philosopher who speaks so much of unconcealedness and openness should be so lacking in openness—not only openness to criticism and to other ideas but also candor, for example about his intellectual debts and his political past. He has consistently resisted all suggestions from his friends and former students that he should make some frank statement about his behavior during the Hitler years and his notorious lecture on *Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität* (Verlag Wilh. Gottl. Korn, Breslau 1933). You might as well expect the Delphic oracle to criticize itself.

Heidegger thrives on the fascination of ambiguity, he loves mystery, and he never tires of insisting that he is misunderstood. He claims that his interpreters, including his old friends and students, have quite failed to get the point of *Sein und Zeit*, the early work on which his reputation largely rests. If he were right, could we help concluding that he is a virtuoso of concealment?

In conversation he will hint that Hegel's most profound ideas are to be found in relatively little known drafts, antedating his first book, while the best of Nietzsche is to be found in incompletely published notes which are now inaccessible in Eastern Germany. Heidegger has photostats of this material hidden in a safe place: there can be no thought of publication now. Why?

because nobody knows Nietzsche's handwriting well enough. Actually, the top expert on Nietzsche manuscripts is a professor of philosophy at Darmstadt, in Western Germany: Karl Schlechta.

Heidegger's penchant for the obscure is evident in his historical studies, which form the bulk of his work since *Sein und Zeit*. Above all, he has concentrated his attention on the hymns of the schizophrenic Hölderlin and the fragments of the pre-Socratics, but he has also published interpretations of Rilke, Nietzsche, Hegel, and Kant. There can be no doubt at all about his preference for pliant notes and fragments. On the sole surviving sentence of Anaximander he has written a famous essay of forty-eight pages, and in his widely discussed exegesis of "Nietzsche's Word 'God is Dead'" he systematically ignores the over-all development of Nietzsche's thought as well as the context of the many notes he cites to prove that Nietzsche was the last great metaphysician of the West. Rilke scholars are impressed by the great erudition of these efforts; Nietzsche experts find his Rilke exegesis most suggestive; and the classical philologists reserve their admiration for his modern studies. In this respect there is a certain parallel to Toynbee.

Unfortunately, in Heidegger's case, too, the abysmal unsoundness of his method is rarely noted. What meets the eye is that his interpretations are vastly more interesting than the often pointless summaries and paraphrases of his colleagues. That his exegeses are untenable seems to matter less than that they are exciting. But it is hardly difficult to be exciting and even original if one spurns mere correctness.

Heidegger hopes to crown his life's work with a major book on the pre-Socratics. Substantial samples of this effort have by now been published in various collections, notably in *Holzwege* (1950), *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (1953), and *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (1954). Devoted former students who are now full professors and still yield to none in admiration for the early *Sein und Zeit* confess, though for the most part only privately over a

glass of wine, that they are appalled by these interpretations; and those who pride themselves on being classical philologists as well as philosophers insist that his readings are based on outright mistakes. When such mistakes are pointed out to him in manuscript, he is said to respond gruffly, "So it is all wrong"—and then the text appears in print without the least alteration.

Heidegger claims that philosophy is much more closely related to poetry than to science, but his prose fares no better if we judge it as poetry. His realm is the realm of magic.

During the winter semester 1955-56, he offered a course of lectures for the third time since the war and the first time in three years. He spoke for 45 minutes every Friday afternoon on *Der Satz vom Grund*, which might seem to mean "the principle of (sufficient) reason." *Satz*, however, can not only mean sentence or principle, but also, if rarely, jump or leap, though *Sprung* is a more common word for that. Before long, Heidegger announced: "*Der Sprung ist der Satz aus dem Grundsatz vom Grund in das Sagen des Seins.*" Surely, this is closer to *Finnegans Wake* than to the *Critique of Pure Reason*; but is it poetry? Would it not be far more accurate to say that Heidegger refuses systematically to distinguish between mnemonic devices and arguments?

From the beginning of the semester until the end, Heidegger filled not only the aula of the university of Freiburg but also two other large auditoria to which his lectures were carried over a public address system. He did not play up to the crowd but read his manuscript slowly and clearly without any gestures. The atmosphere in the aula was electric when he entered, though many people slept during the lecture. In the two other auditoria, on the other hand, there were some students who were able to transfer into their notes his Greek quotations. The course of lectures will soon be published.

The size and persistence of the audience gives some indication of the prestige of philosophy in Germany, which is com-

parable to the prestige of democracy in the United States. The Germans tend to think of philosophy as something peculiarly their own. Indeed, as they see it there are only two kinds of philosophy: Greek and German. Medieval philosophy and French philosophy are more or less marginal phenomena, while English-speaking philosophy is all but a contradiction in terms. As for Hume, we all know that he aroused Kant.

Generally, there is a tremendous interest in all things American, but this does not carry over into the ranks of German professional philosophers. Decidedly, they are not interested in what goes on in American philosophy. Speaking at the *Amerika-Häuser* which are scattered all over Western Germany, I drew large and interested crowds, including many students; but in conversation with German professors of philosophy, it was invariably I who asked all the questions. Unlike their colleagues in literature and the social sciences, they carry a chip on their shoulder. They have Heidegger.

V.

Jaspers' lack of influence among German philosophers is almost total. To the best of my knowledge, there are among German teachers of philosophy today one Jaspers-Schüler and one Hartmann-Schüler, and both are unable to obtain a chair. In courses Jaspers seems to be ignored entirely, but in conversation his steady stream of books insures him some attention. The professionals, however, are ill disposed toward his recent publications.

His latest book, published by Piper in Munich shortly before Christmas 1955, is a full-length study of *Schelling* (346 pp.). What excited the most interest was the question whether this is an oblique polemic against Heidegger. Those close to Jaspers vouch that it is not. But the fact remains that the central portion of the book deals with Schelling's question, why there is any being at all and not rather nothing—a question widely associated with Heidegger who has devoted two books to it without ever

mentioning Schelling in this connection. It is also striking that Jaspers comments at length on Schelling's interest in politics, by way of criticizing him, and most people had not even been aware that Schelling had had any such interests.

What puts off the German philosophers more than anything else is Jaspers' insistence on criticizing the men with whom he deals; but his criticism does not take the form of any detailed analysis of arguments. Schelling, for example, is condemned for his attempt to offer spurious knowledge—a point which Jaspers has made elsewhere against Heidegger. Schelling's entire philosophic enterprise is thus rejected.

Jaspers' frequent insistence on "communication" invites comparison with Heidegger's talk of "unconcealedness": what Jaspers so beautifully calls "a loving struggle" is almost nowhere in evidence in his own work. He never appears as a combatant who exposes his own views to the point of view which he attacks. He writes as a judge and passes sentence from an unquestioned base of unique moral integrity that he is quite unwilling to concede to his victim. Nothing shocked the German philosophers more than his proclamation at the 100th anniversary of Schelling's death: "He lacked a noble soul"—unless it was Jaspers' critique in his book of Schelling's first marriage.

Much more serious, though not widely noted, is the basic unsoundness of Jaspers' whole approach. He completely disregards Schelling's intellectual development—a failing which this book shares with his two earlier books on Nietzsche. This is fatal in the case of two men who in their late works reached positions so different from their early works that they felt called upon to criticize their early books. Another and smaller point deserves notice only because no critic seems to have taken exception to it, and some young German scholars seem to follow Jaspers' precedent. Although he acknowledges the expert and reliable help of a Privatdozent who assists him with technical details, Jaspers says on the last page: "My Schelling quotations are not philo-

logically exact. Omissions are throughout not indicated by any dots. Words have been transposed wherever the context of my presentation made this convenient."

Jaspers' failure to do justice to points of view different from his own and his lack of any talent for communication are most glaringly in evidence in his book on *Reason and Anti-Reason in Our Time*, where Marx and Freud are pictured—to a German audience in 1950!—as *the* two representatives of anti-reason in our time. His professional colleagues, however, are much more embarrassed by Jaspers' polemic against Bultmann, published in a little book on *Die Frage der Entmythologisierung* (Piper 1954). Here he deals with a contemporary with whom it is relatively easy to communicate, as I know from first-hand experience: Bultmann readily understands objections and is quite willing to discuss them with the utmost fairness. In the book, however, no communication is established.

VI.

Bultmann's program of demythologization, which has stirred up German Protestant theology, was first presented in a short essay in 1941. Since then, no German theologian has had any other idea which has attracted a comparable amount of interest. Bultmann's idea is that Christianity represents a call to make a decision. To present this call, theologians and preachers must demythologize the challenge, stripping away the myths which are merely the language of the age in which Jesus and the early Christians lived.

Among these myths Bultmann mentions the "three-storey view of the world" with a heaven above us and a hell beneath. Recently a bishop in Norway was almost deposed over the question of demythologizing hell, and the problem was discussed at the German universities, too. The discussion was centered in the interpretation of specific passages in Scripture, notably the question whether the fire in Luke 16 means real fire or not. The com-

patibility of some form or other of eternal agony and punishment with Christian love and God's love was not even mentioned, nor was Bultmann's declaration that he should not care to go to heaven if he believed that even a single soul was suffering eternal punishment. What interests people is exegesis; and demythologizing, no less than Heidegger's essays on Hölderlin and the pre-Socratics, fits in with this preoccupation.

That Jaspers' polemics are above comparison with the often minute squabbles that have filled many an issue of the journals scarcely needs emphasis. What is distressing is that he should give most of his time and energy to historical and critical studies without ever producing either a definitive critique or an exemplary historical study. One feels, however unjustly, that one has the right to expect more from him, and then is disappointed. His colleagues, however, have long ceased being disappointed. They are resigned and take his preoccupation with history for a sign that he has nothing more to say.

VII.

Occasionally we are told that philosophical anthropology is the great new development in German philosophy. Hence I welcomed Michael Landmann's little survey of *Philosophische Anthropologie*, published last year in the well-known Sammlung Göschen. The book is subtitled: "Human Self-Interpretation in History and the Present"—and deals, alas, mainly with history. One certainly does not get the impression that contemporary German philosophers are making major contributions to man's understanding of himself.

Among the most respected German professors of philosophy today are two who have returned from the United States since the end of the war: Max Horkheimer in Frankfurt and Karl Löwith in Heidelberg. Horkheimer has concentrated on administrative achievement and done many striking things. To mention only two, apart from his Institute for Social Research, he organ-

ized two series of lectures during the summer term of 1956, featuring many scholars from outside Germany. One series was devoted to Freud to commemorate his 100th birthday; the other series, which is to be continued, is intended to promote some knowledge of Jewish history, philosophy, and religion.

Löwith's first book after his return was a slim volume in which he collected three essays on *Heidegger*. Although this book marked his break with Heidegger, it has contributed to the *mystique*. The theme is that Heidegger, although he is the only genuine thinker in our paltry age, has grievous faults. In the winter semester Löwith lectured to approximately 200 students on "Introduction to Modern Philosophy: From Nietzsche to Heidegger." Clearly, he reinforced the impression that Heidegger marks the culmination of modern philosophy. Indeed, he explained at the outset that he would deal mainly with Nietzsche, leave Heidegger to the very end, and mention only two other philosophers in passing: Dilthey and Bergson. That is the picture of modern philosophy drawn by a scholar who spent a decade in the United States.

VIII.

The most important philosophic publications in Germany today offer us material written in the 19th Century, if not before. There are, for example, the Hegel volumes in Felix Meiner's Philosophische Bibliothek, notably including the first three volumes of a projected 4-volume edition of *Briefe von und an Hegel* and an 800-page volume of Hegel's *Berliner Schriften: 1818-1831*, both edited by Johannes Hoffmeister who died last year. Both include hitherto unpublished material as well as previously widely scattered items and fascinating editorial notes which throw a great deal of light on the whole period. In the *Berliner Schriften*, for example, we find new material concerning Schopenhauer's habilitation at Berlin where he hoped to displace Hegel—who served on his committee.

Another collected edition which is likely to prove interesting is Karl Schlechta's three-volume edition of Nietzsche. The third volume, due before the end of 1956, is to include a new arrangement of Nietzsche's notes, including those previously printed as *The Will to Power*, as well as a long editorial report on Nietzsche's manuscripts and the history of their previous publication.

Outside the field of philosophy, the situation is not far different. The major literary event is a new edition of Rilke's works. Hitherto, new material was generally amalgamated with old material, and any complete library of Rilke's works ran into a great many volumes which were highly redundant. Now that the copyright is about to expire, the Insel-Verlag has announced a new edition in five volumes of about 900 pages each, on thin paper. Rilke's translations, his diaries, and his vast correspondence are to follow later. The edition runs far behind schedule, and at this date only a single volume has appeared which contains all the books of poetry which he himself published, superbly indexed and with the dates of composition furnished for every single poem. Volume two should do as much for the *Nachlass*; volume three for the poetic *juvenilia*; and four and five for the prose.

Could it be that the Germans, once the people of *Dichter und Denker*, composers and historians, have today become a people of businessmen and editors?

It may be questioned whether the situation is not after all the same as elsewhere, not excluding the United States. The age of James, Royce, and Santayana, Whitehead and Dewey is passed. Even so the picture is not at all the same. In the United States, there is a vitality in philosophic discussion, and enthusiasm coupled with critical power, which, quite apart from our occasional constructive efforts, represents an altogether different atmosphere. And it is the same in literature. I do not mean that we have two big names, like Hemingway and Faulkner. We have a wealth of young writers who, no less than our philos-

ophers, are enthusiastic critics. And what has atrophied in Germany is the spirit of criticism. Surely, this is due to the Hitler years, and the atmosphere is not likely to change as long as any memory of the recent past is repressed.

“‘I have done that,’ says my memory. ‘I could not have done that,’ says my pride and remains inexorable. Finally, my memory yields.” Thus wrote Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*; and the trouble is that it is not only the memory that yields. The whole fiber does. The economic recovery is deceptive. Culturally, Germany is living on her capital.