

# NOTES ON FICTION AND PHILOSOPHY

BRIAN EVENSON

In a very real way, what readers see in a work of fiction is determined by the models they employ as they approach it. There is little possibility that the reader will have an unmediated experience with a text simply because no reader is, ultimately, unmediated; we read from contexts, from positions, and as we read we consider books we've read before, books we've heard about, movies, classes we've taken, people around us, the dog down the street, etc. Probably our biggest difficulty with acknowledging fiction's present involves the insistence of the models of the past, which, like Melanie Klein's part objects, we have internalized and which seem to speak to us from within with a voice of authority. Thus, to move to an understanding of late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century fiction, the first step is to move out of the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.: to let go of the Aristotelian notions that still dominate most thinking about fiction in writing workshops today. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of the institutionalization and burgeoning of writing programs here has been that most of these programs are much less interested in pointing to fiction's present—let alone fiction's future—than in preserving fiction as an eternal past tense. Discussions of setting, plot, character, theme, etc., their parameters derived from Aristotle, seem hardly to have advanced beyond New Criticism's neo-Aristotelianism; and when a workshop student says "I didn't find the character believable," usually the model for believability is firmly entrenched in 19<sup>th</sup> century notions of consistency that have probably less to do with how real 21<sup>st</sup> century people act (not to mention 19<sup>th</sup> century people) than with specific, and often dated, literary conventions.

I am of the opinion that the most authentic service a writing program can do writing students is to give them an aesthetic base, introduce them to different philosophies and aesthetic ideas—current as well as past—making available to them different models for understanding fiction. For, just as what readers see in a text is determined by the models they bring, consciously or unconsciously, to

bear on said text, so too the writer's ability to construct and revise his own text is determined by the differing philosophical and aesthetic ideas he has both consciously or unconsciously internalized. What is important is not so much finding the *right* model—there isn't one—as allowing writers to locate themselves within a field that contains varied philosophical and aesthetic possibilities, and to see their own position as always potentially fluid. Indeed, if there is a future in fiction, I think it lies in the active dialogue that can occur between fiction and philosophy/theory, a dialogue in which each prods the other toward new possibilities, where each poses questions that the other is compelled to answer.

With that in mind, I want to begin with a philosophical notion and consider what questions it poses for a fiction writer, how it provokes in a writer what might seem to a philosopher a somewhat eccentric response. I want to start with Heidegger and a concept from one of his lesser-known works and apply a gentle and at times non-philosophical pressure to it. In doing so I'm less interested in either presenting myself as Heideggerian or giving a serious philosophical critique of Heidegger than in simply seeing where one idea can take us, seeing "what happens next."

In his book *Holzwege* [Woodpaths] (1950), Heidegger suggests:

"Wood" is an old name for forest. In the wood are paths that mostly wind along until they end quite suddenly in an impenetrable thicket.

They are called "woodpaths."

Each goes its peculiar way, but in the same forest. Often it seems as though one were identical to another. Yet it only seems so.

Woodcutters and foresters are familiar with these paths. They know what it means to be on a woodpath. (3)<sup>1</sup>

For Heidegger, thought is a path proceeding through a dark wood (echoes of Dante here), an unpredictably winding path which can be made neither straight nor wide without impairing its ability to function as path. For Heidegger, to think Being is to be "highly errant," to accept a wandering of sorts in which thought nonetheless does not eschew its path (185). As he admonishes in "The Thing" (1971), "Stay on the path, in genuine need, and learn the craft of thinking, unswerving, yet erring" (186). Following a woodpath is unswerving

---

<sup>1</sup>This translation of the forward is that provided in Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (1977).

errancy for by staying on the woodpath we travel towards we know not where, winding about, entering and leaving unexpected clearings, seeing exposed to us at each turning a different portion of the forest.

Heidegger's notion is an intriguing one, and analogous notions abound throughout his work, a work that is crucial to any number of schools of 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century philosophy. But, on a practical level, the woodpath is likely to raise simple questions for a lay reader, questions that, for a writer, can serve as an aesthetic provocation. For Heidegger, the woodpath is something that winds to and fro through the forest, ending "quite suddenly in an impenetrable thicket." This is an idealized version of the woodpath—if an actual woodpath seems to end suddenly in an impenetrable thicket, it is likely one has lost track of the path. In other words, to have ended in an impenetrable thicket is as much a function of the way in which one understands the woodpath as it is a function of the path itself. We are perhaps led to the thicket by our own error, by having lost the trace, by having accepted as trace what is offered as mere decoy or distraction. It indicates a problem in our understanding of what the path is. The idea that the path leads to impenetrable mystery is the sort of idea that would come neither from the forester nor the woodcutter familiar with the forest, but from a city dweller lost in the woods.

"Woodcutters and foresters are familiar with these paths. They know what it means to be on a woodpath," Heidegger suggests (1950, 3). However, again there is a space that we might wriggle into. Heidegger doesn't acknowledge that foresters and woodcutters, "know what it means to be on a woodpath" in radically different ways.

The forester is, by one definition, an inhabitant of the forest. By another, he is a person trained in forestry or forest lore, someone who cares for the forest. In both these senses taken together, the forester as inhabitant and the forester as one who cares for the forest, we do not seem to be too distant from Heidegger's better known idea of dwelling. The thinker as forester dwells as the guardian of Being. For Heidegger in "The Thing," such "Guardianship of Being is not fixated upon something existent. The existent thing, taken for itself, never contains an appeal to Being" (1971, 184). For this reason the thinker does not attempt to guard Being as one might guard an object defined by value. Rather, guardianship is a "watchfulness for the has-been and coming destiny of Being" (184). Admits Heidegger, such thinking is both a wandering and a following of a path: "As a response, thinking of Being is highly errant and in addition a very destitute matter. Thinking is perhaps, after all, an unavoidable path, which refuses to be a path of salvation and brings no new wisdom" (185). The forester, too, is a wanderer of sorts, highly errant and, in a sense, destitute. He looks not to get out of the forest (for he has no idea of salvation) but only to care for the forest. His task takes no reward as a claim, asserting itself

only as a scrutinizing and continuous movement through his environment.

Certainly this is a valid notion of a certain kind of artist, and it is perhaps not surprising that Heidegger, with his own intense interest in poetry, seems so taken with this notion of care. But as the underside of any notion of care comes a notion of hurt, and it is this latter notion that strikes me as more relevant to fiction's present, because so often ignored in literature's past. In traveling from place to place, the forester crushes plants underfoot, pushes back vines, removes dead wood. Following in the traces that animals have made, he makes the path his own, cultivating a smoothed out corridor that, though it moves through the forest discreetly, cuts through it nonetheless.<sup>2</sup>

This notion of hurt invites thoughts of the other sort of person who Heidegger claims knows the woodpaths, the one who his commentary largely ignores: the woodcutter. When the woodcutter enters the wood, he is in search of something that he can take out again, either firewood or wood of finer quality for building purposes. He learns the path of the forest so that the forest will offer up to him what he needs. The woodcutter is not an inhabitant of the forest in the sense that a forester is. He is he who takes. But, nonetheless, he knows how to follow the same paths the forester follows. If needs be, in search of wood the woodcutter's axe will cut a path into the supposedly impenetrable thicket. He has no qualms about taking what he needs and reappropriating it for a new context.

I should say that one of the reasons that Heidegger discusses the forester a great deal and the woodcutter almost not at all is that such a method of cutting one's own path is for him a divergence that limits one's understanding of Being. For Heidegger (1971), it is "all the more strictly true that each man gets farthest if he goes only as far as he can go on the way allotted to him" (95). One pursues a path and, by means of this pursuit, reaches "into the abyss, to attend there to intimations and signs" (95). The Being revealed lies in the truth that comes about in following the path itself.

I would agree that truth comes from this process rather than as an end result, both for thinkers and, more importantly in terms of our context, for writers. If we make a bee-line for the impenetrable thicket and clear the thicket to open up its mystery, by so doing we destroy its mystery, disperse its truth. The process of unveiling itself is more important than that which lies behind the veil. In fiction I would argue that style constitutes the veil and that, in fiction, there is ultimately nothing behind this veil.

---

<sup>2</sup>Indeed, the thinker, it might be said, is he who follows animal tracks through the forest of Being. There is something bestial about thinking. From here, one might perhaps move to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of becoming animal but that is beyond the purview of this essay.

Nevertheless, there is nothing that demands that the writer stay upon a path that has been "allotted to him" (by what agency or power so allotted, Heidegger does not say) nor that he or she should be circling around a particular thicket. The thinker does not have to stay upon a given path—Heidegger, with his own departure from the path of traditional thought, is one of the philosophers who knows this best—and by cutting new paths he potentially discovers new thickets that he might choose to leave untouched. The woodcutter's axe opens spaces that have been ignored by past errancy, reveals paths which have been hitherto blocked up.<sup>3</sup> The writer who cuts his own paths shall find truth in the process of that cutting if he understands such cutting as a process rather than as directed toward a goal. I would argue that the woodcutter both knows how to pursue a path and knows that, when the usefulness of the path comes into question, he can strike out on his own and start cutting; and that the woodcutter is a more of an apt figure for the contemporary writer than is the forester.

Beginning with a lesser-known Heideggerian notion, we've started to provoke ourselves elsewhere by focusing on some of the things that Heidegger is less interested in. This is an act of bricolage, an attempt to borrow what's needed so as to get somewhere new, but it is also something that, for me, comes fairly directly out of the fact that I was reading Heidegger for the first time around the same time that I was reading Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard, with the collision of the writer and philosopher provoking new possibilities. Bernhard's work is in part a response to Heidegger, and some of his books deliberately pose problems or questions that Heideggerian philosophy would have difficulty answering, and these problems are simultaneously philosophical and aesthetic. This, I think, is as it should be. Indeed, if your fiction poses problems that a particular philosophical stance provides perfect answers for, then your work is not really posing problems; you are serving instead as a missionary for a theory.

Having moved from the forester to the woodcutter, in the place of Heidegger's *Holzwege* as an exemplary term we might substitute the title of one of Bernhard's books: *Holzfällen* (Cutting Timber).<sup>4</sup> The thinker comes to cut, to move beyond the forest of Being. This woodcutter thinking taken to its limit is the philosophy which Nietzsche calls in *Twilight of the Idols* philosophizing with a hammer. It is a philosophizing which intends to clear a space for things to come, and I

---

<sup>3</sup>Heidegger's approach to Greek philosophy intends to do just this—he wants to open up pathways to early Greek thought which reveal their relation to our own paths, a relationship long obscured.

<sup>4</sup>The American title of the work is translated not as *Cutting Timber* (which the British translation uses) but *Woodcutters*.

think it is practiced by contemporary fiction writers much more frequently than by contemporary philosophers per se.

Such philosophizing is nihilism in the sense that Heidegger defines it in his Nietzsche lectures: "that historical process whereby the dominance of the 'transcendent' becomes null and void, so that all being loses its worth and meaning" (1982, 4). Nihilism in its most extreme form has no lesser goal than razing the forest of Being. But such is an extreme form of nihilism, the nihilism of the woodcutter gone mad, striking out at all around him: if we shift our metaphors, this is the artist as killer.<sup>5</sup> Still, there are subtler forms of nihilism. To cut timber (*holzfällen*) is not necessarily to decimate a forest. We also cut wood so as to glimpse or come to a place where a woodpath will not allow us to go. We cut wood to gain a passage into the depths of the woods, or a passage through the wood to a landscape lying outside the wood. In gaining passage, we destroy some of the forest, but such path-making moves beyond the forest—we organize the forest in our own way instead of allowing ourselves to be organized by it.

In Bernhard's novel *Correction* (1979), Roithamer takes as a project to inflict his will upon a forest. With money from an inheritance, he decides to "build his sister a cone, a cone-shaped habitation, and not only that, but most incredible of all, to erect this giant cone not where such a house might normally be located, but to design it and put it up and complete it way out in the middle of Kobernausser forest . . . all at once the road through the Kobernausser forest was actually being built, a road that would go to the exact center of the forest at an angle he had calculated for months" (11). Instead of moving about on woodpaths, Roithamer cuts directly to the center of the forest and there prepares to establish his sister in the perfectly shaped cone. He tells his sister nothing of this, his plan being to surprise her with the cone, a cone that will bring her, he feels, "the highest, supreme happiness" (246). Yet, when he speaks to her of it, "the effect of the Cone on my sister was devastating . . . from that moment on, everything led to her certain death" (267).

Roithamer's solution is to understand the forest by clearing a space in its center and there establishing not himself, but an object of personal value: his sister. The Cone is a dwelling place for his sister, the center of all his efforts, all of his (small b) being. In fact, he puts his entire being into the project to such an extent that, when his sister suicides, leaving the Cone empty, Roithamer kills himself in turn.

One might argue that when we attempt to establish at the center of our understanding of Being that which is constructed of values, we put ourselves in a position that quickly concedes defeat. To try to insert

---

<sup>5</sup>Or, in the words of Christian Gailly, "The ten fingers of the pianist compose the two hands of the strangler."

something to fill an absence is to offer it up to the void, to constitute its destruction as a thing. While Heidegger suggests that "What matters to preparatory thinking is to light up that space within which Being itself might again be able to take man, with respect to his essence, into a primal relationship" (1971, 55), Bernhard might argue that no such space exists, ready-made to be lit, and no such essence exists to light it. All thinking, to some degree, is a clearing away—lighting is only secondary to this clearing. What is cleared and thus revealed is Nothing, an "absence of a suprasensory, obligatory world" (Heidegger 1970, 61-62).

One wields one's axe to move to the center of the forest, there to chop up the inscrutable thicket of Being. One clears the clearing and moves beyond it to a place beyond Being, if one has the courage to move beyond (1970, 100). Roithamer is unable to move beyond. By attempting in a post-transcendent world to set up as transcendent those things that can no longer be considered transcendent (even if they once were), one in essence denies their thingness, their historical and/or tangible reality. Roithamer's sister, separated off as she is by her brother in a building of perfect geometrical proportions, must die. No longer a thing, she becomes an idea now devoid of meaning for having been elevated to transcendent status. If placed in the Cone, she becomes first only a speck in the void and then nothing at all.

But it is precisely in this evanescence that nihilism begins to understand itself as nihilism. What has been in the past the very center of Being, upon which all else has depended, has now become not merely a corpse, but an absence, a source of absencing. We cannot say that it *is* nothing so much as that it *makes* Nothing. To bring something into the circle is to destroy that thing. It is a vortex, a black hole, an abyss.

Nihilism's clearing of a space is altogether different from the Heideggerian clearing (lighting: *Lichtung*). Nihilism clears the space so as to make nothing—it cuts down the trees of being so as to open a void. If it does build in the space cleared it builds that absurd notion of being that is most amenable to nothingness. Heidegger's clearing is another process entirely. It is not something which one clears for oneself, but something one stumbles upon: "In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs" (1971, 53). Says Heidegger, "We never come to thoughts. They come to us" (6). We do not find them when actively searching, but stumble upon them while errant. They are the site at which Being is revealed to a greater or lesser degree. "That which is can only be, as a being, if it stands within and stands out within what is lighted in this clearing" (53).

In *Correction*, on the contrary, the clearing becomes a place constructed for the encounter with death. Roithamer enters into the

clearing to commit suicide. The clearing of Being is where one hangs oneself, thus negating the possibilities of the being.

Roithamer is that thinker who carries a shoulder-slung axe, carving his path to the center of being. There, he clears a space and then cuts himself to pieces. Having no ability to see the future, he turns upon himself, unto his own destruction. Nietzschean nihilism, however, does not allow itself to fizzle out in the clearing of Being. Rather than becoming caught in the clearing, Nietzsche moves through it—not because he can see the future, but because he no longer thinks in terms of either future or past. He is not moving from one point to another; he is just moving. He keeps cutting, strike paths with the axe, which twist free of the forest, paths which destroy the forest itself. Indeed, the Nietzschean figure at its extreme becomes more a trajectory than a human being, pure movement.

It is perhaps time to add another piece to the collage, time to return to theory, to see where Roithamer's cone might lead us, though I shall do so only briefly. One direction might be Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the line of flight that cuts a path through striated space, through organized space, the alternative to lines that segment us, dividing our lives into neat and careful packages and repeated events. For Deleuze and Guattari, an individual is a conjunction of molar and molecular lines that shape us and that stratify our organism. School is a segmenting line, as is habit, as is work; culture becomes a line as well, a channel that directs our actions. Serving as a rupture to this segmentation is the line of flight, something that cuts through habit and segmentation and, at least momentarily, delivers the self to an intense freedom. Such a line of flight "carries deterritorialization to the absolute, intensity to the highest degree . . ." (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 132). Subjectification, however, "attempts to impose on the line of flight a segmentarity that is forever repudiating that line" (134), a struggle which is literalized in the narrator Rudolph's struggles in another Bernhard book, *Concrete* (1982).

Though I began by declaring that there is no unmediated relation to the text, Deleuze and Guattari suggest as an alternative an active and conscious slicing through a mediation that is constantly trying to fold us back into it: we cut a path through our segmented and mediated lives and in so doing open ourselves to the possibility of destruction and, thus, to an experience that can impact us beyond (or outside, to move toward Maurice Blanchot's thought) mediation. From here, we are on the verge of a theory of writing as velocity and trajectory, a theory of art based on velocity, where the despair of nihilism has been replaced by a sort of relentless rush, where harm is neither directed at oneself or outward but has become simply pure intensity, where Being is no longer an issue. We enter into the work, both as writer and reader,

breathlessly, giving our beings up in favor of speed, of a nullity that moves beyond Being—a speed that, for the duration of the work, substitutes itself for our being. What that means in terms of actual writing strategies, contemporary writers are just beginning to explore.

There has been something at once arbitrary and highly personal in my choices of writers and philosophers, and in the choice of what I've chosen to borrow from each. There are other approaches I could have made, other concepts or clusters of concepts that I could have chosen from Heidegger that would seem as contemporarily relevant—perhaps even more so—as Deleuze and Guattari. Or with Bernhard I could equally have chosen to talk about Wittgenstein, who I believe is as much at the heart of the critique in *Correction* as Heidegger. And Bernhard himself, with his patterns of intense repetition and non-paragraphing, is interesting to consider in view of narrative theory. Indeed, stylistically he poses problems that narrative theory doesn't quite know how to resolve. But the point is that all these possible approaches to fiction, as well as the aesthetic positions that I've hinted at, are unavailable to me if I remain, as many workshop programs encourage students to do, exclusively grounded in new criticism and Aristotelian notions.

Good fiction, I would argue, always poses problems—ethical, linguistic, epistemological, ontological—and writers and readers, I believe, should be willing to draw on everything around them to pose tentative answers to these problems and, by way of them, pose problems of their own. For innovative writers, I believe, philosophy is always best an errant affair, a personal and intense wandering, a series of tools that one can employ, move beyond, come back to; it is our ability as writers to stay curious, to borrow, to bricoler, to adapt and move on, that keeps us from becoming stale.

I would also argue that the future of fiction lies in writers' ability to complicate notions such as Deleuze and Guattari's in ways that I cannot yet foresee, ways that might lead back, among other places, to other Heideggerian notions. I begin to get a hint of such a direction in the work of Antoine Volodine, whose ability in *Minor Angels* to assemble a novel-length text out of dozens of discrete "narracts" that both do and don't hold together seems to be pointing toward structures that are at once errant in a Heideggerian sense and have short bursts of Deleuzian velocity. Or in Eric Chevillard's *Palafox* (1990), in which the character's physical form seems to be constantly shifting so that it is never graspable, never stable: post-human in a disturbing sense which reintroduces the notion of the sublime in a way that responds to both Kant's original notion and Lyotard's 20<sup>th</sup> century response to it. As a writer, my fascination with such writers is likely to lead me into new spaces—and indeed, my fascination with Volodine is based in part on

my willingness to see in him impulses sympathetic (but also disruptive) to philosopher Giorgio Agamben's notion of "whatever being." And this too will, I feel, eventually be responded to both by literature and philosophy, the conversation between the two fields enriching each other, and enriching writers of both, in ways that none of us can afford to do without.

BROWN UNIVERSITY

## References

- Bernhard, Thomas. *Concrete*. Trans. David McLintock. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Correction*. Trans. Sophie Wilkins. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Woodcutters*. Trans. David McLintock. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989.
- Chevillard, Eric. *Palafox*. 1990. Trans. Wyatt Mason. New York: Archipelago Books, 2004.
- Deleuze, Giles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Basic Writings*. Ed. David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper and Row, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Holzwege*. Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, 1950.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Nietzsche. Volume Four: Nihilism*. New York: Harper Collins, 1982.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Word of Nietzsche." *The Question of Technology and Other Essays*. Ed. William Lovitt. New York: Harper and Row, 1970. 15-88.
- Volodine, Antoine. *Minor Angels*. 1999. Trans. Jordan Stump. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2004.