

**Robert Savage. *Hölderlin after the Catastrophe: Heidegger – Adorno – Brecht.*  
Rochester NY: Camden House, 2009.  
ISBN: 9781571133205**

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The Nazi inheritance of the greats of German literature has many disturbing implications. Probably the most troubling is the question of cultural culpability. What exactly does it mean when the Nazis claim to see their ideas embodied in classic works? How far can this be dismissed as wilful misappropriation, or how much credence should we give the suspicion that somehow the author sanctions such an interpretation, that there is something fascist latent within the work to begin with?

Hölderlin did not escape the ignominy of Nazi adulation. However, as Robert Savage notes in his authoritative study *Hölderlin after the Catastrophe: Heidegger – Adorno – Brecht*, there was a whitewash of the poet's wartime record by the mainstream scholarship after the conflict. The nationalist misuse of Hölderlin was considered to be an external imposition, thus freeing him of any responsibility, and allowing for the work of interpretation to continue "as if nothing had happened" (15).

Savage contrasts this state of denial with the Hölderlin reception of Martin Heidegger, Theodor Adorno and Bertolt Brecht. Although greatly divergent in their political and philosophical preoccupations, Savage considers all three thinkers to be engaged in radical philologies that see the need to drastically re-evaluate Hölderlin in the light of the Second World War. This singularly catastrophic event represents for them, whether explicitly voiced or not, a caesura in German history, a cut that brings into question all that has come before. Nevertheless both Heidegger and Adorno still see Hölderlin as necessary if Germany is to be redeemed. Their task splits into two: "that of saving Hölderlin *from* Germany, and that of saving Germany *through* (or with the help of) Hölderlin" (17). Brecht turns out to have other

ideas.

The book comprises three long chapters, each focusing on one of these thinkers and a text they wrote after the war: Heidegger's unfinished dialogue "The Occidental Conversation", 1946-48; Adorno's address to the Hölderlin Society "Parataxis: On Hölderlin's Late Poetry", 1963; and Brecht's adaptation of Hölderlin's *Antigone* translation, 1948. Each employs a different paradigm of reception: Heidegger's *Conversation*, Adorno's *Polemic*, and Brecht's *Citation*. In each chapter Savage unfurls an interpretation of rich insight, and he excels at close readings.

Of the three, Heidegger initially appears ill suited to Savage's thesis. His understanding of Hölderlin, as Savage readily admits, is marked by a longstanding consistency and continuity that stretches over four decades, from the 1930s until the philosopher's death, and seems unaffected by the Second World War. Heidegger was loath to attach much importance to Germany's defeat, reducing it to "a blip in the course of world history" of no ontological consequence (70). Scholarship has by and large taken Heidegger at his word. Savage's contribution is to tease out what Heidegger intentionally leaves unsaid in "The Occidental Conversation", which, Savage argues, makes this dialogue necessarily a *post-war* text and is Heidegger's attempt to discreetly quarantine the recent, traumatic past.

Adorno, on the other hand, stages a violent intervention to ensure that Hölderlin is received as the victim of crude perversion rather than partly authorising it. To achieve this end he devotes one half of his "Parataxis" speech to a blistering polemic against Heidegger's Hölderlin interpretation, which he sees as emblematic of the fascist abuse of the poet. Adorno's aim is not to dispute Heidegger's arguments but to disable them "by creating discursive conditions under which they will no longer be given a hearing" by the assembled Hölderlin scholars (117). So far so good, but Savage's argument turns out to be much more ambitious than this. He claims that the polemic is a guiding thread throughout Adorno's thought, and has been denuded of the attention it deserves. It is present from Adorno's first publication until his last, but is used in two senses: as devastating praxis in the form of controversial argument allowing no right of reply, and as an epistemological model illustrating the impossibility of identity thinking. Savage demonstrates that "Parataxis" offers us a unique insight into these dual meanings, as they exist, uniquely in his oeuvre, side by side in the two halves of his speech, paratactically so to speak. They are mirrored in the Hölderlin Adorno seeks to salvage, and he portrays the poet as both a political radical opposed to the injustice of his time and as a proto-modernist questioning the very possibility of meaning. In short the perfect antidote to noxious Nazi distortion.

However, the most surprising and satisfying chapter of Savage's book is the one on Brecht. The playwright is not convinced that either Germany or Hölderlin can be redeemed. He instead illustrates the ensuing dilemma when past works are called upon to make sense of a present marked by a catastrophe without comparison. For Savage, Brecht does this through a particular understanding of citation. Brecht makes copious alterations to Hölderlin's adaptation of Sophocles' text, including a new prologue set in Berlin circa April 1945, with the actresses who will play Antigone and Ismene facing a situation reminiscent of the heroine's predicament in ancient Thebes. Brecht focuses the minds of the audience on the similarities – but especially the gaping differences – between Antigone's heroic opposition to Kreon and the futility of individual resistance under the Third Reich. Antigone is called on as a precedent, but one which cannot entirely cover the exigency of the present. This is an excellent thesis and allows Brecht's neglected play to be seen as a considered, complex response to the difficulties and lack of either/or choices inherent in making art after the catastrophe, and in reconnecting with the tradition that precedes it.

Savage's is an inspired study. The detail in the argumentation, obvious command of the primary and secondary sources, and above all the consistent quality of the prose, which often transcends the straitjacket style of academia to truly sparkle, arouse admiration. This book is highly recommended not only to specialists intimately familiar with the texts, but to anyone interested in how the German cultural legacy is to be appraised after the Second World War and the crimes done in its name.

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