

Babette Babich, *Words In Blood, Like Flowers; Philosophy and Poetry, Music and Eros in Hölderlin, Nietzsche, and Heidegger*. Albany: State U of NY P, 2006. \$85 hb. Xix + 394 pp. ISBN 0-7914-6835-6

reviewed by Nicholas Birns

The New School

Babette Babich's superb new book profoundly humanizes our view of twentieth century philosophy. This is not humanizing in the sense of what the later Heidegger might rebuke as 'philosophical anthropology', but humanizing in the sense of reading Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gadamer in the light of a plethora of cultural practices: the almost 'expected' poetry and art, as well as the less expected music and architecture, and even such unusual areas as historic preservation, environmental science, and medical training. Babich is able to counter a deadening hegemony of technique with a set of living practices precisely because she sees them as practices, not as sentimental slogans. Babich epitomizes Heidegger's stance towards modernity at its sharpest: countering its deep rather than surface manifestations, and contrasting to it not a self-pitying pathos but a scrupulous severity.

Babich does not just mount a three-cornered dialogue between Nietzsche, Heidegger and herself, but brings in many other thinkers and commentators. On the vexatious question of who owned the shoes in the van Gogh painting—an anonymous peasant or the artist himself—Babich not only cites Meyer Schapiro's famous response to Heidegger's contention, but lets us know about Schapiro's reiteration of his views toward the end of his life, as well as comments on the Schapiro-Heidegger controversy made in

the 1980s by the great Jacob Taubès, then at the very end of his distinguished philosophical career. Babich lifts the debate from being over the ownership of the shoes, and the corresponding conclusion as to whether their point is ‘aesthetic’ or ‘phenomenological’, to being a consideration as to whether the “dramatically conclusive success” (210) of Schapiro’s critique in fact proceeds through “demonstration” or merely relies on “subjective preference”. Babich points out that Schapiro actually fudges the difference by speaking of Van Gogh wearing the shoes and giving them a lived-in feeling similar to that imagined by Heidegger in the case of the peasant, when Van Gogh well might have bought the shoes solely for the purpose of painting them. Babich portrays Heidegger’s imagined scenario about the shoes as not so much an attempt to invoke agrarian authenticity but a challenge to the “expert tradition” (218) of connoisseurship with its reliance on “factitious detail”. Much like the Nietzsche depicted in Philip Pothen’s recent book, Babich shows a Heidegger whom one might not envision in the role of suave curator of paintings at a local trendy museum, but who gives a distinctly philosophical perspective on what it means to be *a work of art*. And being a work of art, the actuality of an art work fully disclosing its manifestation, has, for Babich, to do with a sense of *loss*: “to note the passing of a world will be also to admit the eclipse of the working power of art otherwise than as a trace” (220). This loss, and its simultaneous opening-up as a real presence, is what Heidegger is after when he talks about the shoes in the painting.

So much has been written about the Heidegger-Nietzsche relationship, but Babich’s juxtaposition of the two thinkers gives, in great detail, a new overview. The

puzzle here has always been that the nature of the critiques of Heidegger and Nietzsche are similar, their potential vulgarization by 'the wrong sort of supporters is similar: they are both concerned to debunk certain metaphysical institutions and intellectual certainties, and the same set of people tend to admire or revile them. Yet the emotional tone of Heidegger is so different from that of Nietzsche. The tag usually applied to Heidegger's view of his philosophical forebear, that Nietzsche epitomized the last stand of Western metaphysics in his attempt to overcome it, is usually read if it was the equivalent of Derrida's view of Heidegger—so close, and yet so far, from 'deconstruction'. But what is at stake here is that Nietzsche's delighting the all-too-human, his love of joy and sheer, inchoate life, is very different in affect, if not necessarily in philosophical profile, from Heidegger's grave, contemplative, thoughtful ruminations of being. Babich refers to Gadamer's concept of the 'festive silence' (*feierliches Schweigen*) of antique art objects revealing themselves. Though Heidegger would have welcomed the truth-disclosing manifestation of Gadamer's concept, one cannot quite see him being festive about it, which one can certainly see Nietzsche doing. (This citation of Gadamer, incidentally, makes the late hermeneutician seem far less Burkean-Schleiermachiian, less organicist and historicist, than he is usually made out to be. Babich gives us a more Nietzschean Gadamer—perhaps one with which Derrida could have found common ground).

Getting back to the question of the Heidegger-Nietzsche relations, Babich implies that we should perhaps reframe Nietzsche's comment about Heidegger and metaphysics as less a qualitative comment about either Nietzsche or metaphysics, but

rather one which lets us know both how to situate Nietzsche and how to evaluate Heidegger's dialogic relation to him. Certainly both are anti-Platonist, anti-rationalist, but where Nietzsche sounds the wail of Pan across nineteenth-century complacency, sounding the wail of Pan against bourgeois self-satisfaction as a thought out of seasons, Heidegger is situated in a more sober, stern, and ambiguous twentieth century, evoking, as Wallace Stevens would put it, "ambiguous undulations" on "extended wings." (Ironically, though, Stevens was inspired by Nietzsche in writing the poem, "Sunday Morning," from which these lines come). Without merely ventriloquizing the two thinkers or capitulating to their ideologies, Babich sympathetically unfolds their thought even as she makes clear her dissent and even antagonism at some points.

Babich deepens our acquaintance with a Nietzsche already made known to us by such figures as Duncan Large, David Farrell Krell, Gary Shapiro, and Thomas Brobjer, she reintroduces us to Heidegger, shows us a different side of him than that which we usually see. In many ways, Babich's Heidegger is the Heidegger of the Zollikon Seminars—a Heidegger contemplating being as such, but also aware that practical application might well be made of his speculations. The Zollikon Seminars were arranged by Medard Boss, a Swiss psychiatrist who assayed the remarkable feat of adapting Heideggerian *Gelassenheit* to the Idea of an individual patient "letting go" in their own personal predicaments. To read Heidegger and then actually see patients certainly takes dedication, and a deep pledge to the understanding of experience. Though Babich is not concerned with psychology as such, she addresses those mediate areas of

experience—art, creativity, perception—towards which psychology has also directed its attention, and addresses them with a similar affective solicitude.

Babich, though, is not a straightforward disciple of Heidegger. Unlike Nietzsche, whose politics were vulgarized after his death and adapted to a century which he fundamentally never knew, Heidegger is forever stained by his enthusiastic espousal of the Nazis, however much in later years he tried to atone for it. Babich is tart when addressing aspects of Heidegger's thought that, whatever his true aversion to biologicistic, racist nationalism, do seem to have a chauvinistic aspect to them. Viz. his statement that only Germans have a "special linguistic and spiritual affinity" (238) with the Greek language. Babich's riposte is splendid: "Are we to say, following Heidegger, in specific reference to the French (may we count the Belgians too?) that a Georges Dumézil, or indeed a Pierre Vernant or a Marcel Detienne or even (now via Hungary) a Gregory Nagy or a Gabor Betegh possibly lack some "special affinity" for the language of their specific field of scholarship?" (238). Reading this, we chortle. Babich's amusing query as to whether these standout classicists and students of ancient culture were handicapped by their cradle tongues from understanding their scholarly domain. But she also notes the irony that, in stressing the 'special' qualities of Heidegger's German, Heidegger scholars have to rely on the same sense of privileged linguistic access that Heidegger seeks *vis a vis* the Greek. One could try to read Heidegger's language as a kind of Aesopian disguise, availing himself of maneuvering room by exalting his own thought at the expense of the thought actually espoused and propagated by Nazis, but it is wisest not to read this way, and Babich adheres to this path of wisdom in reading his Nazi enthusiasm more or less as

(in the words of his old flame Hannah Arendt) banal and evil. Indeed, a sympathetic but no-nonsense commentator like Babich is much more instructive to read on Heideggerean politics than a wholesale, and indiscriminate, detractor such as the Chilean writer Victor Farias.

In unfolding the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger, Babich excitingly redefines, *en passant*, some concepts needing to be philosophically revitalized. Those who are familiar with the term *concinny* learned it with respect to Latin rhetoric and have seen it as meaning symmetrical, polished formulation of speech. While respecting the definition of “rhetorically attuned discourse” (106), Babich reframes ‘concinny’ by literalizing the metaphor and seeing the attunement as *musical* and *architectural*. By evoking concinny’s trait of making harmony out of divergent parts, Babich stresses its self-conscious as well as datum-burnishing aspects; concinny opens what it harmonizes it as much as it polishes it, thus providing “a resonant hermeneutic of the aphorisms” (106) which operates by “a reader-ironizing counterpoint” (106). Nietzsche’s style, in its own way, embodies concinny as much as Cicero’s did.

Musicality is not just a metaphor for Babich, and this book excels in bringing serious musical thought into the mainstream of postmodern philosophical discourse. The recent work of Benjamin Moritz has reminded us what a stake Nietzsche had in music not only as (disavowing) aficionado of Wagner but as a composer in his own right, Babich goes further and points out that Nietzsche also *played* music (9). Babich goes beyond the manifest role music plays in *The Birth of Tragedy* with its discussion not only of ancient Greek music but the attempt to revive the musicality of ancient Greek drama in opera) by

stressing musical aspects of two past eras with which Nietzsche was fascinated: ancient Greece and medieval Provence. It is bracing to be reminded by Babich that late nineteenth century classical philology did not realize that Greek musical and poetic meter was quantitative, rather than accentual (as modern European languages are); Nietzsche's thoughts about music occurred just as the quantitative rhythm of Greek music was being discovered which not only led to a more 'authentic' discernment of this forever mysterious body of work, but also heightened our awareness of its alterity.

We are more familiar with the role music played in the Provençal *gai saber*. What Babich does here is, paradoxically, foreground the musicality of this way of thought by emphasizing the *gai saber* as *gay science*. By looking at music as the expression *par excellence* of the Muses, Babich restresses the role of *gai saber* is not so much an acknowledgment of the oft-sighted scientific and mathematical properties of music but of science reconstituted as a branch of the humanities, as one of the muses, without losing the integrity of its own method and becoming an adjunct to society or the literary imagination.

In line with the idea of architecture as 'frozen music', Babich's thoughts about the Muses and music lead her to considerations of architecture. Babich briefly cites controversies over the Libeskind-Childs Freedom Tower at the World Trade Center site, and also comments on Christo's Gates installation in Central Park. Although philosophical consideration of architecture and public art are often seen today in journals such as *Grey Room*, as well as more frequently in public discourse as a result of the

World Trade Center rebuilding, Babich performs the salutary service of encasing these debates within the context of the major twentieth-century philosophers.

If architecture is frozen music, historic preservation seeks to at once retrieve the past and freeze it in time. Perceptively, Babich sees Heidegger's attempt to have Greece reveal itself in a truth-disclosing way to the present as a very special case of historic preservation. Herself traveling to the "actual" Arcadia in present-day Greece. Alluding to Nicolas Poussin's painting *Et In Arcadia Ego*, Babich says 'And once in Arcadia, I, too, would also travel great lengths in a mountain landscape, spare and ethereal in contrast with the vision of the pastoral created in its name, a word that captures no aspect of the place. Perhaps this was once otherwise, but perhaps, so I am inclined to think, given the mountains themselves, it was never otherwise. Vico would remind us that we cannot know, if only as what inevitably remains alien to us today: perhaps the Arcadian ideal was always the sheer starkness of the landscape. Like Nietzsche's chaos taken to eternity, at its height, the harsh turns sublime" (226). This paragraph is Babich's meditative philosophical writing at its finest. Poussin immediately arises in a metonymic sense when the idea of Arcadia is mooted, but to gravitate to Vico is a stroke of pure intuitive percipience on Babich's part. Vico stands with Nietzsche in plumbing both the earliest traces of European culture and his own belated, elegiac position within the matrix he has himself posited.

Even without invoking the grim irony of the occupation of Greece by the Nazi regime Heidegger sanctioned, Babich's Greek-German apposition posits 'historic preservation' as a way of *mastering* the past. Similarly, philology, in the Wilamowitzian

sense from which Nietzsche dissented, tried to manage the past, perfect it in finished detail for a reader “who needs to be protected from the sully (questionable, misleading, erroneous) aspects” (51) of the source material which philology ties up. In both philology and historic preservation, we are presented with an eidolon of pastness that, according to Babich, blocks historicity even as it seems to be preserving and even revealing it.

Medicine in many ways seeks to tend to the body the way historic preservation seeks to tend to the past. Babich gives perhaps the most compelling critique of vivisection since John Cowper Powys’s, in his novel *Morwyn*, over seventy years ago. She argues that vivisection inures scientific researchers to the pain of animals in much the same way that truisms about globalization inure those in the ‘advanced’ West to the suffering in developing countries. In each case, those who presume mastery discard “the experimental ‘object’” (142) in order to attain “utter inattention to the animal under the knife”. The most dire consequence of this, for Babich, is that this clinical indifference is repeated again and again as a technical practice, and thus becomes a mentality one can slip in and out of, as in her example of a medical student who practices on cadavers of animals to attain the student’s degree and at the same time compassionately takes in a stray dog or cat from an animal shelter.

Babich’s discussion of the simultaneous “healing” (143) and “duplicity” of conventional (perhaps now a bit old-fashioned?) ideas of medical training, and her tacit comparison between apprentice doctors practicing on cadavers and *Gymnasium*-molded philologists practicing on ancient, makes us think of John Keats. Indeed, Babich’s

discussions of Pindar and Hölderlin, poets who juxtapose and, in another sense, epitomize in themselves a contrast between melancholy and athleticism, which also summons Keatsian specters. But Babich's discussion of vivisection brings to mind Keats's medical training. One speculates that both Keats (as a doctor) and Nietzsche (as a philologist) received rigorous training for a discipline they did not end up practicing, and both felt an affinity towards Provence as a sort of territorial embodiment of all that their training did not provide:

'O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth."
(Keats, *Ode to a Nightingale*)

The Provençal is, for both Keats and Nietzsche, a figure for a release not really from discipline—Nietzsche is still highly disciplined after he stops being a conventional philologist, as Babich's discussion of the concinnity of his aphorisms reveal—but from mastery, from a professional need to master and therefore to homogenize all detail, be it detail of word and body. Babich reveals many practices by which we unconsciously participate in a discourse of mastery even when we do not mean to do so. She says that it “is worth pausing a minute to ask ourselves why we persistently call Lou Salomé by her first name, just where we do not refer to Nietzsche as Friedrich (forget Fritz or Freddy) or why Arendt is always emphatically *Hannah* Arendt and Heidegger only Martin in the context of a love story? (8). Note that, for instance Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich were always referred to by their last names, perhaps connoting that

female film stars exercise more power than women philosophers, or women in philosophy). When Babich writes about gender and the body, she does so in a manner reminiscent of Drucilla Cornell, but without the latter's explicit avowal of Derridean tropology. Derrida, indeed, is missing in general in this book, as, even more, is Paul de Man, a Heideggerean Nietzschean if ever there was one.

For rigor and versatility, Babich has no peer among contemporary writers on philosophical issues. She evinces a vision of philosophy as extending to music, art, architecture, and various forms of material embodiment—a philosophy that is not just discursive but active and situated. I hope this book is read not just by those professionally interested in Nietzsche or Heidegger, but by humanists (and even anti-humanists!) in general. This is a book so spectacular in its range and sagacious in its canvassing of that range that any criticism merely reveals the reader's idiosyncrasies, but here goes: I agree with Babich's criticism of the current Iraq War, but dissent from her lumping the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 as the same sort of action. Also, Babich amusingly argues against attempts to turn the Arendt-Heidegger relationship into sensationalized gossip, and defends the two philosophers against a cheap personalization of their relationship. I wish she had commented more explicitly on the very interesting Arendt-Heidegger correspondence, especially its latter portion. Here, we see an increasingly political Arendt and, if anything an increasingly apolitical (or chastened from politics) Heidegger trying to find common ground; writing to Arendt yields evidence of Heidegger's politics even when he is trying to avoid making such, and yields more than the statement Babich quotes from Heidegger about his supposition of Soviet-

American moral equivalency during the Cold War, on which he is not just, as Babich thinks, half-wrong, but wholly wrong, however much the US might have, as Babich notes, partially squandered its Cold War moral victory. And, to register the slightest quibble possible, I wish, for complex historical reasons, that Babich had used “Swabian” and not “Cebuan” when referring to Heidegger.

Babich concludes with a discussion of technology, agreeing with Heidegger that technology is most dangerous when we no longer worry about it, just accept it as one of the appurtenances of life that is at the back of our manifest agendas; it is at this moment when we take it for granted that it has the most power over us. Babich implies that Heidegger might be on to something here, that technology’s hegemony underlies a postmodern era that may more blatantly seem to be dominated by what, in my 2005 essay for the Nietzsche Circle, I termed ‘counter-*ressentiment*’. Babich contends that the environmental and ecological aspects of Heidegger’s work are even more valuable now, in light not just of the unavoidable reality of climate change but of genetic engineering and its standardizing effects, and insulates Heidegger’s critique of technology from being seen merely as a more sophisticated avatar of the time-honored German mode of romantic agrarian nostalgia.

Organization—concinnity!—pervades the book’s heedless to-and-fro between philosophers and subject-matters. An index of concepts parallels the book’s index of names, making it easy to navigate. The endnotes are also a gold mine of information, and often contain informative mini-essays about a subject marginal to the book’s main argument but interesting in itself. We learn, for instance, of the late Dominique Janicaud

(a thinker too little-known) and his delineation of the ‘complexities of critique and partisan defense’ in Franco-German wrangling over Heidegger’s legacy. In a short but compelling excursus on the philosophy of sex, Babich opines that, as “a named woman tunes out...to be the erotic signifier *par excellence* for both male and female observers” (313), “philosophy of sex and love” cannot be said to be truly erotic as it excludes the male body as erotic object aside from homoerotic circumstances. A dense note on pp. 309-310 excavates the process by which conservative philology has sought to recuperate the Dionysiac from Nietzsche’s appropriation of it. These supplementary mini-essays on diverse and disparate subjects are grace notes to humanizing effect of the book’s arguments.

Commentators as different as Pheng Cheah and Daniel Cottom have recently written of the inhuman or unhuman qualities of postmodern discourse, the way a globalized, technocratic world seeks to deny the humanity of its citizens. Babich bids to redress this condition, but in a way heralded by a deconstructive, Nietzschean humanism. Babich’s is not an uninflected, Cartesian, humanity, or a “So-called Great Books” (51) humanity, but a humanity that is most human in trying to overcome itself, and in whom—as Nietzsche put it, in a quite Hölderlinian way—“whose hearts have lasting courage and exuberance, and in them, the spirit, too, remains patient” (Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, II, 8, p. 155 in Oxford World’s Classics Edition, tr. Graham Parkes).