

You know how we all love to return to guilty pleasures – the rich chocolate sauce and the pudding wine. I like both those delights, but I confess also to recidivism when it comes to the symphonies of Gustav Mahler. Despite what I pretend to myself are my best instincts, from time to time, I take out a CD of one of these *longueurs* and luxuriate in it, as in a perfumed casket, for an hour and a half or so. While I'm in confessional mode, I must admit an even guiltier indulgence and it is the philosophy of Martin Heidegger who is chiefly renowned these days for his mention in Monty Python's *Philosophers' Song* and the immortal couplet:

Heidegger, Heidegger was a boozy beggar: He could think you under the table

I first came across Heidegger at theological college when we were all into Existentialism, Juliette Greco and the Left Bank of the Seine: loafing around smoking *Gauloises* and maundering on about *Sein und Zeit, Being and Time*, – the title of Heidegger's great book. By accident, I found myself looking into this work last week, for the first time in thirty years.

The whiff of the *Gauloises* and the aroma of strong black coffee seemed to waft out of the very pages and I ended up reading the old sorcerer for a couple of hours. What impressed me – came as a shock, actually – was what a religious book *Being and Time* is. Why hadn't I noticed this when I was a young man? But to call his book *religious* is an odd thing to say, because he hardly ever mentions God or the familiar things of the Christian faith. And yet the whole darn book breathes and radiates religious sensitivity.

Heidegger's approach to our contemplation of the world is unusual for a modern philosopher or a contemporary scientist. He says that philosophers and scientists don't go deep enough when they try to understand or analyse the world: what we must do is realise that we *belong* to the world. As he says, *Life is not a problem to be solved but something to be lived*. We must go deeper than measuring, analysing and quantifying and instead enter the realm of reflecting and considering. As I read this, I felt a *frisson* of creepiness. For the words which forced themselves to the front of my mind were not Heidegger's but Christ's: *Consider the lilies of the field: they toil not, neither do they spin*.

Our Lord spoke those words to help his disciples overcome their anxiety. Heidegger's constant theme in anxiety, *Angst*. He says that the anxiety or unease, the worry of life comes through our not accepting our life as given to us; through not relating, as he puts it, to *Being*. We are too busy *doing* to give our time to the more basic business of *being*. As I read, suddenly the words of other great Christian teachers came to mind. Pascal's saying about all our problems being caused by our inability to *sit quietly in our own room for half an hour*. And Eliot's saying in *Ash Wednesday: Teach us to care and not to care: teach us to sit still*

Being in time and how to do it! Of course, that's the title of Heidegger's book: *Being and Time*. He accuses us of not being sufficiently aware of the glory of the present. And I thought of St Paul telling us that *Now is the acceptable time: now is the day of salvation*. And of J.P de Caussade telling us about *the sacrament of the present moment*. For the past is gone and the future is not yet. If we are to be saved it must be *now*. And it is always now: *the eternal now*.

What a fool and slow of heart I had been not seeing that Heidegger was putting into new poetry some of the profoundest biblical reflections on the mystery of life. Heidegger's sense of the immediate and deeply disturbing reality of being took me right back into the Old Testament and to Jacob, haunted in the desert, and crying out, *How dreadful is this place!*

Instead of entering into the being of our life, we spend our time, under the unconscious influence of modern science and philosophy, observing our life, measuring and quantifying. We watch our life running along like a TV programme: one damn thing after another. This has led to what Heidegger calls *a forgetfulness of being*. This is very close to what the Bible means when it speaks of our forgetfulness of God. For God is the author of being. Or, as the 14th century mystics and Paul Tillich said, *God is Being itself*.

The mystery of being is its felt presence. This is something uncanny, always just slightly beyond our grasp. When we say we love the landscape, it is not exactly the physical landscape we are loving, but something which half-hides and half-reveals itself in the landscape. Something haunting, mysterious and intangible. That felt presence, which is half an absence, and so provokes an intense longing. And which can also be fearful: *Come in under the shadow of this red rock*.

And, because the Being of God is personal, we are not condemned to relate only to generalities. Because of the incarnation – or, as Heidegger would say – *being in the world*, we relate to particulars. As he says,

What we hear is never mere noises and sound-complexes but the creaking wagon, the motorcycle, the column on the march, the north wind, the tapping woodpecker and the crackling fire...

Poetry is the establishment of Being by means of the Word. In the beginning was the Word.

We are devoured by clock time. We feel our lives are running away with us. We are running out of time. The antidote to this is attention to the fullness of being in the present moment. Or as the Gospel puts it: *Seek ye first the Kingdom of God*. Jesus called us back to this central mystery of being when he promised that the Holy Ghost will *bring all things to your remembrance*. The things he brings to our remembrance are those things which are just beyond the veil. In giving

himself for us, remember how Christ rends the veil, so giving us access to eternal holiness: *And the veil of the temple was rent in twain, from the top to the bottom.*

We do not actually have to go anywhere to escape the tyranny of clock time, that relentless succession of scenes, one damn thing after another; the anxious representation of our life as a set of moving pictures which we can't control. God gives us something beyond jittery clock time. He gives us true representations of himself and of eternity in landscape, poetry and music – things which exist in their own time beyond the anxious flux of events.

Landscape, poetry and music are the calling cards of God. They recollect and anticipate for us eternal life – as Heidegger would say, of Being itself. In Christian terms, that is, of God.

I am not telling you all this as if to say that Heidegger improves on the Gospel or replaces it. But the gift is that we find in his work an echo of the timeless truth put in fresh words – rather in the way that Van Gogh makes you see a sunflower or the starry sky as you'd not seen them before.

Heidegger is saying, in effect, *It's not what you do: it's the way that you do it.* And in this he is at one with George Herbert: *Who sweeps a room as for thy laws makes that and the action fine.*

And finally we find Heidegger speaking of that other sensation with which we are sometimes afflicted: the sense of alienation, of not being at home: *Unheimlich* as he would say, wouldn't he? And even in this there is the understanding that here we have no abiding city. And the inescapable echo of the words of Our Lord: *My Kingdom is not of this world and Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you.*