

Interpretation

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**Walking across the Abyss:
Karl Löwith in His Correspondence with Heidegger
and His Early Autobiographical Draft *Fiala*:
*Die Geschichte einer Versuchung***

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Karl Löwith and Martin Heidegger were connected by a special relationship, and the body of their respective works is closely intertwined as well. Having met Heidegger as Husserl's assistant in Freiburg, Löwith became one of Heidegger's first students, and, indeed, a friend. From the early days, both succeeded in becoming distinguished philosophers of international importance. However, their reception varied greatly in later years. While Heidegger managed to build a school of his own, Löwith acquired the status of a minor classic (mostly owing to his works *Meaning in History*, *Max Weber and Karl Marx*, and *From Hegel to Nietzsche*). However, the later Heidegger was convinced that Löwith "has no idea of thinking, possibly, hates it";¹ other contemporaries, such as Heinrich Blücher, believed that Löwith "has nothing positive to say."² After Löwith's death in 1973, it seemed he would sink into

¹ Martin Heidegger and Elisabeth Blochmann, *Briefwechsel 1918–1969* (Marbach: Deutsche Schilergesellschaft, 1990), 103.

² Lotte Kohler, ed., *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich*

oblivion, and while he is slowly being rediscovered, an intellectual biography or a comprehensive monograph on Löwith's philosophy has yet to be written.

Partly responsible for this development is the considerable difference in source material. While Heidegger's estate abounds, and the edition of the Gesamtausgabe is still underway (the important Black Notebooks having been published only recently), the situation is rather different with Löwith: the edition of his philosophical works was completed in 1988, and his estate at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach is quite small. However, it does provide some autobiographical material that has been partially published.

This state of affairs mirrors the unequal biographies of Löwith and Heidegger. Heidegger stayed in Freiburg and its surroundings most of his life. He was able to build an undisturbed body of work and devoted much energy to his legacy. In contrast, Löwith was forced into exile more than once: his "world trip" went from Germany to the United States via Italy and Japan, before he finally returned to Germany in 1952. He had to leave much behind every time he moved and sold most of his library before leaving Japan. Also, neither he nor his wife appears to have valued his papers much: the Marbach archives acquired only recently two diaries that Ada Löwith had given to friends after her husband's death, whereas the important manuscript of *My Life in Germany before and after 1933* had been entirely "forgotten."³ Löwith's estate remains scattered to this day, publications of his correspondences face great difficulties, and they have been greatly delayed. This includes important exchanges with Rudolf Bultmann and Gerhard Krüger; the correspondence with Hans Jonas seems to be lost; the correspondence with Heidegger was in the works for many years, its planned publication having been announced for early 2014.

In the face of these difficulties, its appearance in 2017 was nothing less than a milestone. Alfred Denker, the editor, is one of the preeminent experts on Heidegger. His edition of the Heidegger-Löwith correspondence presents well over one hundred preserved letters and postcards. These span nearly the entire careers of both thinkers—from 1919 until Löwith's death in 1973. The correspondence concentrates on the years following World War I and fades quickly after Heidegger embraced National Socialism in 1933. While

Blücher, 1936–1968 (New York: Harcourt, 1996), 186.

³ See Ada Löwith's postscript to Karl Löwith, *My Life in Germany before and after 1933* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 169–70. See also Liliane Weissberg's essay "Karl Löwith's Weltreise," in *"Ich staune, dass Sie in dieser Luft atmen können": Jüdische Intellektuelle in Deutschland nach 1945*, ed. Monika Boll and Raphael Gross (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2013), 126–70, 134.

the changing intensity of the correspondence documents estrangement and rapprochement, it proves that the two thinkers resumed contact shortly after 1945 and continued to meet. The philosophical importance of the later letters is rather limited, but the early letters offer many, and very diverse, insights that make the edition extremely valuable.

Heidegger and Löwith very quickly engaged in an open personal exchange. This offers the unique opportunity to place both thinkers within a framework and to reconstruct their respective influences. They discuss their contemporaries at length and take sides in the philosophical debates of the time. Their points of reference are surprising at times from today's perspective: we find no mention of Leo Strauss, Hans Jonas, or Hannah Arendt, who are commonly connected with the Marburg Circle today, while others, such as Wilhelm von Rohden, Charlotte Grosser, Oskar Becker, and Günther Stern, play a certain role; Hermann Keyserling, Hans Vaihinger, and Ludwig Klages are also discussed. Often, the judgments are very pronounced, not to say harsh—already in March 1920, and despite their friendship, Heidegger says about Jaspers's *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*: “Jaspers's book fades on a closer look. The order is positive and new, the ‘catalogue’ less so. In essence, it is unphilosophical” (17). A couple of months later, Heidegger writes that Erich von Kahler, with whom Löwith was engaged in a discussion on Max Weber's *Science as a Vocation* that shaped Löwith's self-understanding as a philosopher and scientist, “is painful to read”: “His style is overdone and flamboyant while coming from a very thin air. He seems to be the academic type who thinks about issues he never truly experienced” (21).

Löwith, in turn, is no less outspoken and critical when attempting to position himself: “Husserl was never an option for me, his high demands notwithstanding. You will remember that already in my second semester, I frequently expressed my strong aversion against his philosophical disposition. Today I understand that Husserl, in essence, is no great philosopher, it is a massive sham to see him on a par with Kant. All of his attitude is infinitely unrealistic, soulless, and academic” (36). These lines from February 1921 seemingly are in contrast with Löwith's favorable estimation of Husserl in *My Life in Germany before and after 1933*, where he described Husserl as “the philosophical centre of attraction not only at Freiburg University but of German philosophy in general.... Through the mastery of phenomenological analysis, the sober clarity of the lecture and the humane rigor of academic schooling, he educated us intellectually, referring us beyond the transient realities to the timeless ‘essence’ of phenomena, which he understood according

to patterns of mathematical and logical beings. In seminar exercises he forced us to avoid long words, to test each concept by intuiting phenomena, and to give him ‘small coins,’ rather than big ‘paper money,’ in response to his questions. He was among those who are ‘conscientious in spirit,’ as Nietzsche called the type in *Zarathustra*.⁴

In both instances, Husserl is presented as Heidegger’s antagonist. Whereas in 1921 Husserl is seen with great antipathy, which justifies Löwith’s turn to Heidegger, in 1940 he constitutes the model of a true philosopher, and, more importantly, a measure of humanity, where Heidegger ultimately fails. The interpretation suggests itself that Löwith, while being very opinionated, might have judged persons and issues differently depending on occasion and dialogue partner. However, it also attests to a development in Löwith’s thought and the mark a changed intellectual and public climate left on him, while his original criticism remains. Indeed, Löwith’s cross reference to Nietzsche provides the context for a correct interpretation here. In *Zarathustra*, the “conscientious in spirit” (*Gewissenhafter des Geistes*) represents Nietzsche’s idea of a true philosopher, who has freed himself of dogmatism and prejudice, but has been unable to create something truly original. However—and here Löwith’s judgment departs from his early position—in 1940 he finds a kindred spirit in Husserl: “As both of them then start up and snap at each other, like deadly enemies, those two beings mortally frightened—so did it happen unto us. And yet! And yet—how little was lacking for them to caress each other, that dog and that lonesome one! Are they not both—lonesome ones!”⁵

However, Löwith extends his criticism to Heidegger (and Jaspers) as well: “Frankly speaking, sometimes you ‘drill’ too much and too tenaciously on the same spot. Towards Jaspers, I defended you vigorously, because Jaspers has a very superficial idea of fundamental philosophical and methodical questioning. It seems to me, however, that a remainder of Husserlian shrewdness drives you to continue drilling where you have hit land long ago and eventually, your drilling may turn into an obsession” (39). This paragraph captures the essence of Löwith’s lifelong critical relationship to Heidegger: he is deeply involved with Heidegger’s thinking, understands his eminence, and is filled with deep respect. On the other hand, he is able to preserve his independence and manages to pinpoint Heidegger’s philosophical deficiencies. Already in 1936, Löwith analyzed Heidegger’s philosophical affinity

⁴ Löwith, *My Life in Germany*, 27.

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (New York: Dover, 1999), 175.

to National Socialism. After the war, he instigated the first Heidegger controversy in Sartre's *Les Temps modernes* and in 1953, Löwith published his major monograph *Heidegger: Thinker in a Destitute Time*, which left Heidegger "horribly hurt," as Hannah Arendt observed.⁶ Löwith, "between the two extremes of fascination and repulsion," attempted "to pursue a critical middle path,"⁷ and became the most important of Heidegger's early critics.

Löwith's critical approach does not stop with his teachers or colleagues. Indeed, large parts of the correspondence are devoted to the "vain and childish question," "Do I indeed have what it takes to be a philosopher? I.e., what kind of philosopher could I be?" (33). What we witness here is the formative crisis of a young, aspiring man who tries to find his place—not only in an academic environment, but in the world. Both men embark on this journey together and try to influence each other. Together, they ask for the conscientious essence of mind, ask about the meaning of death, discuss friendship, and inquire about the notion of existence and the *unum necessarium*. The correspondence helps both to define themselves and to grasp their philosophical projects. While it centers on personal and academic matters, Löwith especially tries to discuss broader contemporary issues and the rise of fascism. In December 1922 he notes: "The rise of the most bigoted nationalism and antisemitism—reinforced with Bavarian beer—is outright frightening.... On a near daily basis, there is some kind of evening presentation, speech, blabber of some academic club—and nearly always all discarded royals and excellencies appear on invitation of the senate. Especially Ludendorff, who at striking distance has a fatal look: a root-and-branch poseur, brutal, flatulently vain and completely insipid" (76–77). Two years later, Löwith briefly alludes to this atmosphere when writing from Rome: "Down on the streets a horde of Fascists is blaring right now, celebrating some kind of anniversary because there is no murder to celebrate. I have to think of Munich" (116). But Löwith does not only see what was in the open, if commonly ignored by many. Already in May 1923 he attempts to give a more profound analysis of the situation:

In Bischofstein, at Marseille's school, the boys learn nothing of Germany, politics, the occupation of the Ruhr and so on.... But what will happen once they are released at 17/18 into the very different bluster of life, have to give up their former ways, unsuspecting and ignorant like anyone of the elder generation, when they will read the paternal newspaper, their narrow social circle. In Bischofstein, teachers don't

⁶ Kohler, *Within Four Walls*, 188.

⁷ Karl Löwith, *Heidegger—Denker in dürftiger Zeit*, in *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 8 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1984), 127.

care about the symptomatic imagery the boys plaster their rooms with: German emperors, Hindenburg, Daddy in resplendent uniform, battle cruisers and so on. Nobody cares, it doesn't take effect—but it isn't rebuked as well, and there is no discussion with different-minded people. So, they are unpolitical on the outside only and once their time comes, they will enter another war with the same lack of memory, the same phrase-mongering, and with the same and complete lack of understanding when it comes to the dirty methods of a tenacious press and of public propaganda. (92–93)

The volume is an exceptionally rich source for both Löwith's and Heidegger's early years and ideas that otherwise could be traced only very indirectly within the deeper layers of their work. While this is not a critical edition and remains accessible to a casual reader, every letter is accompanied by a short commentary in which mentioned texts and persons are identified and properly referenced. This gives an additional value for scholarly work, which is further enhanced by a number of additions, most notably Heidegger's expertise on Löwith's first monograph, his habilitation thesis *Das Individuum in der Rolle des Mitmenschen*. In addition, a short excerpt from Löwith's Italian diary dealing with Heidegger's visit to Rome in 1936 and Ada Löwith's letter of condolence to Heidegger's wife are provided. The letter ends with the words: "There are only very few left of this generation, and already now I feel that a true understanding can hardly be achieved where one has not met each other in person" (203).

This summary captures the difficulties we all have to deal with in understanding Löwith. The existing autobiographical material seems to ease some challenges, but that might well be misleading, if the material is not interpreted carefully enough. Already Löwith's other autobiographical manuscript, *My Life in Germany*, might serve as an example. It was written at a time when the situation in Japan became untenable and the urgent need for alternatives arose. For Löwith, it was the first contact with an American audience in a very tense and precarious situation. It seems to be evident that these circumstances influenced Löwith's pen and writing.

As a matter of principle, these reservations apply to another autobiographical text that has been preserved among Löwith's papers, but that had been only partially published until very recently as well. In 2019, the psychotherapist Klaus Hölzer finally provided a complete edition entitled *Fiala: Die Geschichte einer Versuchung*. Hölzer considers the text to be a "very inspiring and enigmatic," but valuable, supplement to Löwith's better known autobiographies. However, he also understands the basic problem: "What is fact, what

is fiction in *Fiala* remains to be clarified” (120). And here the trouble begins. The manuscript lacks context and is quite isolated. Despite the fact that Löwith used the name “Fiala” as a pseudonym occasionally, already the speculations on the origin of this name abound in the literature: Is it an acronym of Finalmaria, where Löwith spent his time as POW in World War I? Does it come from Löwith’s own family?⁸ Even less do we know about the draft itself. What did Löwith himself think of it? What was the original concept? How far does its intellectual background extend beyond authors mentioned in it, such as Dostoevsky, Strindberg, Kierkegaard, and Filippo Neri?

Fiala seems to be one of many coming-of-age novels that were clearly autobiographical, as well as fashionable and influential around that time. To name just a few: Musil’s *Confusions of Young Törless*, Hesse’s *Demian* and *Beneath the Wheel*, Torberg’s *Der Schüler Gerber*. They all share a common feature: the main character, a highly intelligent, extremely sensitive young man, has to struggle with his own psychological disposition and finds himself in a hostile yet decaying world. The resulting conflicts are existential and culminate in suicidal thoughts and situations. For Löwith, all this was only too familiar, and in *My Life in Germany*, he reflected on this era (and on Heidegger) with regard to another author: “Rilke was the poet of this destructive period. A few sentences from his letters could easily serve as a guiding principle for an understanding of Heidegger’s work. Through its belief in progress and humanity, the bourgeois world has forgotten the ‘ultimate instances’ of human life—namely, that it has been once and for all surpassed by death and by God.”⁹

This is *Fiala*’s background, and indeed, the great temptation of the book is the temptation posed by death and the acceptance of life. Not of any life however, but the life of a “free spirit,” as Nietzsche calls it in the *Gay Science*, or the “tempter” in *Beyond Good and Evil*. While he sees the connection with Nietzsche, Hölzer nevertheless defines the central theme of the text as “history of a temptation.” For him, the title refers to “the history of his [Löwith’s] suicidal attempts and a general history of suicide” (which is not provided in the manuscript) (121). While Hölzer rightly asserts that autobiographical texts should always be read with a great deal of caution, he himself reads the text as a thinly veiled, literal autobiography. There might be some merit in this when *Fiala* is read together with and against other texts, diaries, or correspondences, but it lacks any basis when Hölzer tries to use it in order to decipher

⁸ For different interpretations, see, for example, Hölzer at *Fiala*, 121, and Weissberg, “Karl Löwiths Weltreise,” 129–30.

⁹ Löwith, *My Life in Germany*, 28.

(and date) Löwith's "three attempts at suicide," or when he speculates on the character of Agnes Schlegel—whom he identifies with Löwith's fellow student Charlotte Grosser—and her secret love: "who might have been this desired man? Was it Löwith? Or was it the man of the church Karl Barth?" (135). These diversions take up a lot of space in Hölzer's explanatory afterword and render his attempts to interpret the text rather futile and incoherent.

Take his explanation of Löwith's (Fiala's) relationships with Husserl (Prof. Endlich) and with Heidegger (Dr. Ansorge), respectively. Endlich is characterized as a man "who lived in his own ideas in such a solipsistic manner it could appear that these ideas really might constitute a reality" (25). "For Fiala, the only difference between his professor and a mentally ill person seemed to be that the former was roaming freely, confusing sane minds with his delusional ideas, while the latter was in a madhouse" (26). Ansorge—"his outer world encompassed the room between his chair and his desk, and from there, to the auditorium, while his inner world was confined by his very own Dasein that he called 'existence'"—"constructed in ten years full of hard labor a philosophical system that could compete with German Idealism in consequence, complexity, incomprehensibility, perspicacity, and its absolute state of dilapidation, but not in richness.... It was impossible to say how his face looked from close proximity: the thinker was not able to look at anyone's face properly, and for a longer period.... His appearance was downright unfree, frankness was alien to him in every respect; his natural expression was a cautious—and at times sneaky—distrust" (28–29).

Hölzer speculates that Löwith did not think so poorly of Husserl, "and with his sarcasm, he possibly was anxious to please Heidegger, ... who was no friend of Husserl" (26n19). But if he wanted to please Heidegger with his account, shouldn't Löwith have presented it to him? But then, why did Löwith write such a highly derogatory characterization of Heidegger only a few pages later? Hölzer gives no answer, but remains inconclusive on the nature of Löwith's relationship to Heidegger. However, he takes the critical remarks in *My Life in Germany* and the quoted characterization of Dr. Ansorge in *Fiala* literally enough to suspect its deeply flawed character. For him, it amounts to a great deal of opportunism and dependency from Löwith's side (see 138–41). Obviously, the idea that Löwith, whom Liliane Weissberg called "a master of vignettes,"¹⁰ might have constructed a literary figure to illustrate criticism, appearances, and inner composition in both cases is beyond Hölzer's grasp.

¹⁰ Weissberg, "Karl Löwith's Weltreise," 135.

However, it is true that young Löwith indeed had a very flawed relationship, but with academic philosophy. Didn't Löwith write to Heidegger that he wished to "philosophize in a romanticist, aphoristically concentrated manner...closely bordering on an artistic existence"?¹¹

While Hölzer's interpretation of Löwith's *Fiala* remains deeply problematic, Löwith's text itself is important. I cannot give a comprehensive interpretation here, so a few remarks must suffice. Without doubt, the autobiographical fundament is very pronounced. It remains possible that the documents quoted in the text—a graphological expertise, diary entries, and letters (they alone comprise a significant portion of the text)—are genuine. There is no certainty, however. And while the autobiographical undercurrents are strong, the systematic construction of the text is very pronounced as well. It starts with an exposition in which the reader learns that Fiala "was no hero at all, but a born fugitive" (9). The time frame of the account is approximately ten years that have been especially formative for adolescent Fiala. Already the second chapter of the text, "First Temptations," brings up Fiala's struggle with himself and its proximity to its ultimate solution in suicide—or in a self-abandonment in friendship.

Friendship and philosophy are two major issues for young Fiala, and they are essential problems for Löwith as well: "The relationship to others—more explicitly: 'friendship'—always has been one thorn in my flesh—philosophy being the other one."¹² And indeed, *Fiala's* main chapter on friendship is entitled "The Thorn in the Flesh." It marks the longest part of the text, about a third of the entire manuscript, almost exclusively consisting of letters between Fiala and Agnes Schlegel. Like Agnes Schlegel herself, the chapter stands "on the crossway" (56) of life and death, and the question of meaning and freedom, the search for a god, are its recurrent themes. It might well have been Löwith's personal judgment that Agnes Schlegel, in her decision for Christianity, decides against life—and vanishes in her illness. For Fiala, however, the breakthrough comes with a final temptation to commit suicide; this attempt ultimately disappears in the face of friendship. This time, however, it is a form of friendship that leads not to self-abandonment but to a deeper understanding and affirmation of life.

While the first chapters of the manuscript deal with spiritual maturity, the last third consists of two parts: the first part celebrates the newly discovered

¹¹ *Briefwechsel 1919–1973*, 27.

¹² *Briefwechsel 1919–1973*, 61.

potentialities of life in a *vita nuova*; the latter pages are a summary of the text as such, starting off with a theoretical essay on suicide, leading into the “practical” analysis of life and the power of nature in Italy. The manuscript ends with a poem on Tasso and Filippo Nero:

All' ombra die questa quercia
 Torquato Tasso
 Vicino ai sospirati allori e alla morte
 ripensava silenzioso
 Le miserie sue tutte
 e Filippo Neri
 Tra liete grida si faceva
 co'fanciulli fanciullo
 sapientemente.¹³

In general, the setting of *Fiala* is more deconstructing and self-critical than Löwith's well-known autobiography *My Life in Germany*. Some details are presented rather differently, most notably the motivation for joining the armed forces which, in *Fiala*, is based on the simple wish to die an easy and decorous death. Much of this can be attributed to literary forms; however, they are deeply rooted within Löwith's philosophical mindset. Not only did Löwith write several essays on the problem of suicide during his career, he also alluded to the experience of death—and rebirth—in one of the last lectures he held at Marburg before going into exile: “If anything, it was the experience of the front, with its indifferent validity of Being and Nothing in the face of death, that taught us the meaning of life. We shot the entire 19th century—and our own origins—into pieces. It will not depend on programs and speeches but on you, on your daily works and omissions, whether this magnificent wasteland will give birth to a new, if perhaps very modest world of human life.”¹⁴ Here, while talking of his own experience, he defines the philosophical task he had set for his generation, and, especially, for himself. It is the question how to build a new life after experiencing utter destruction, both in the physical and the metaphysical worlds.

Both publications show how Löwith struggled with this task. But they provide more than an account of Löwith's struggle. The closing poem of *Fiala* anticipates Löwith's final truth in this matter as well: the eventual turn to

¹³ *Fiala*, 116. In translation: “In the shadow of this oak / Torquato Tasso / near both the desired laurels and death / quietly contemplating / all his misery / and Filippo Neri / played rejoicing / a child among children / wise.”

¹⁴ See Ulrich von Bülow, *Papierarbeiter: Autoren und ihre Archive* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018), 152.

nature and the “three metamorphoses of the spirit...I designated to you: how the spirit became a camel, the camel a lion, and the lion at last a child.”¹⁵ However, for Löwith, this eventual turn to nature does not mark a possible solution for the modern situation. For Löwith, Nietzsche’s attempt to transform forcefully into “a child” was doomed from the beginning. Nietzsche did succeed in the end, but only after he was “not a man anymore, and much less a super-man, but a vegetating, pitiful lunatic.”¹⁶ So, the task marks a problem that cannot be “solved,” but has to be endured.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 14.

¹⁶ Karl Löwith, “Nietzsche nach sechzig Jahren,” in *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 6 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1987), 462.

