

Book Review

Time of the Magicians:

*Wittgenstein, Benjamin, Cassirer, Heidegger, and the
Decade That Reinvented Philosophy*

by **Wolfram Eilenberger**

Trans. Shaun Whiteside. (New York: Penguin Press,
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Every good book is travel writing, whether it knows it or not. Narrational, episodic, or lyrical, a good story takes the reader somewhere and back again, having perhaps changed them as a result of the journey. Sometimes we are transported to new landscapes and sometimes to new selves, but even the most mundane literature takes us somewhere we had not been before because it demands of us that we imagine.

Wolfram Eilenberger's *Time of the Magicians*, deftly translated by Shaun Whiteside, does just that with such ease and facility that one hardly notices they are in motion. It is an absorbing story to say the least, and one written with a hermeneutic sensitivity to both a historical moment and its wide sweeping consequences. *Time of the Magicians* is similar in style and intention to other intellectual histories of philosophy like Sarah Bakewell's *At the Existentialist Cafe*, John Kaag's *American Philosophy: A Love Story*, and Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club*. Tracing the paths and textures of four remarkable, deeply flawed, and undeniably influential figures on the course of philosophy—Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, and Ernst Cassirer—Eilenberger homes in on a decade (1919–1929) that would undoubtedly reimagine, or reinvent to use his words, the project of philosophy. From the abyss to

dizzying heights, across rivers, and with bridges and neighbors aplenty, Eilenberger takes the reader on a journey through the reconfiguration of philosophy itself through the lens of the unyielding crisis of interwar Europe, in particular the Weimar Republic. Indeed, we might say crisis is the orienting principle of the book. The crisis is on every front: political, cultural, intellectual. In a word, it is a hermeneutic crisis of the highest order.

Late in the book, Eilenberger discusses Wittgenstein's comparison of language to a labyrinthine cityscape, and it is here where I believe we find the text as microcosm. He writes:

The task of philosophers, then, is to draw a map of that city so that it is clear to the lost people (the philosophers themselves) where they actually are, and hence which paths are available to them at this point, so that they can continue walking with the greatest possible self-determination and clarity of direction. [...] In order to render an accurate picture of the city, we must thoroughly explore it for ourselves—starting from the spot where we find ourselves question. No one has their map in their head a priori, and in any case it would be of no use. In the end this city (of words) is understood through the comings and goings of those who live in and with it, who are themselves constantly in a state of motion and change. New passages, one-way streets, and cul-de-sacs constantly appear, including some features that are recognized as such only very late, indeed too late. (358–359)

This is the guiding insight of Eilenberger's book, and a significant one. Eilenberger offers his readers not just an intellectual history (though that alone would be sufficient), but also a guided tour of the alleyways and backroads known only among the city's natives. We witness not only keen distillations of Wittgenstein's, Cassirer's, Heidegger's, and Benjamin's philosophies, but with equal weight the circumstances, within which those philosophies are deeply embedded. We have the privileged position of seeing both the traveler's perspective and the map.

The book revolves around the infamous Davos conference where Cassirer and Heidegger go head-to-head on the task of post-Kantian philosophy, the theme of which was "What is a human being?", in an atmosphere that was becoming increasingly politically charged. Indeed, simply raising this question as the conference theme already points to a deep sense of both instability and uncertainty. As Eilenberger notes, if this event had not occurred, historians would have to invent it, as it captured the most pressing ideas of the decade and set the course for the philosophy that followed. What we find at the event is somehow both revolutionary in its insight and

banal in its practice. While Heidegger asserts Dasein's finitude, Cassirer points to the infinitude of the symbolic forms and systems human beings create as they live out their mortal condition. While Heidegger demands the casting off of all bourgeois culture towards the radical responsibility born of nothingness and anxiety, Cassirer calls for a liberation of the self from "original constraints and limitations (333)". What we witness here, is the height of the ontic and ontological divide in human form. Cassirer represents ontic philosophy in its most sophisticated form—meticulous, thorough, and infinitely rich. But for Heidegger, and much of the philosophical tradition that follows, this is not enough. Though the Davos meeting represents the event, around which the stories orbit, we must not forget that neither Wittgenstein nor Benjamin was invited. Neither could find a secure academic post or the veil of respectability such invitations require. Nevertheless, their philosophy speaks just as much to the question of the conference once we grant them entry.

Eilenberger's contributions here are many, but the foremost is his dexterity with elevating the everyday to a representative of the philosophical. Organized into sections thematically, the book consists entirely of vignettes and glimpses of the lives of these men. If philosophy is to be a way of life, we witness the ways, in which Wittgenstein, Benjamin, Heidegger, and Cassirer live out their philosophical position (or risk bad faith). Of particular note is the following passage:

No human being is born with the ability to fly. Not even Leonardo da Vinci. But once the laws of gravity, inertia, and air resistance have been revealed, with certain calculation and techniques, spaces open up for us to modify and circumvent our supposedly inalterably flightless fate. As creative shapers of our own access to the world, we play our own constellation (a law) off against another constellation (another law). And end up flying. (248)

One must ask of books of this kind, whether one risks idolizing the figures central to the text or whether they are raised as paradigmatic of the social conditions. Eilenberger is careful here in that above all these figures are shown to be more vulnerable, more precarious, than the history of philosophy otherwise alludes. Yes, both Heidegger and Wittgenstein were prone to self-aggrandizement, but here we see everything laid bare. These men, for all their intellectual greatness, are among the most broken specimens. Only Cassirer stands out in this regard as the most stable (and notably bourgeois) of the bunch. Indeed, it is against bourgeois culture, and the stability it provides, that Benjamin, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein most fitfully revolt in their professional lives, politics, and personal relationships.

The German original title *Zeit der Zauberer* is rendered *Time of the Magicians* in translation. Perhaps this is an allusion to Heidegger's moniker as the "Magician of Messkirch." I have wondered whether sorcerer or magi would have been more accurate as all four no doubt have enchanted us and held us in their sway. Magician implies illusion, a slight of hand. Perhaps the illusion lies not in the hands of these magicians, but in our own unwillingness to anchor these thinkers consistently and firmly in their historical moment despite—nay, because of—their attempts to write timelessly.

Eilenberger's *Time of the Magicians* is well worth our time and promises a multitude of passages, maps, and detours to understand this hermeneutically rich philosophical project, one that has undeniably shaped the course of philosophy and the practice of philosophy as a way of life.