Martin Heidegger and Werner Jaeger are not usually mentioned together in the same breath either as scholarly allies or antagonists—least of all as political bedfellows. Scant attention, if any, has been paid to the possibility of an intellectual and even political rapprochement between these two men on the eve of 1933. The general impression to date seems to be that they maintained a collegial relationship in the latter twenties and early thirties which remained within the professional bounds of exchanging publications and opinions. However, a letter written by Heidegger to Jaeger (text and translation below) dated 12 December 1932 may well change that.

In 1932, both Jaeger and Heidegger were at the top of their respective fields: Jaeger in 1921 had filled the prestigious chair of classical studies at the University of Berlin vacated by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff.¹ By 1932, Jaeger certainly was considered Germany’s leading classical scholar. Heidegger after publishing the bombshell of Being and Time (1927) during his stay at Marburg returned to the University of Freiburg in 1928 to accept the chair in philosophy vacated by Edmund Husserl.

Both of these men with international reputations took the plunge in their respective ways in 1933 into the politics of National Socialism.
Heidegger was elected Rector of Freiburg University on April 21, 1933, and became a party member shortly thereafter. After a year’s active involvement in and support of Nazi politics, Heidegger stepped down from his position as rector.

Werner Jaeger’s involvement does not appear to be as extensive as Heidegger’s; however, less is known of Jaeger’s activities in 1933–34 than of Heidegger’s. When the question of Jaeger’s ‘accommodation’ to Nazi politics arises, three points are usually brought up: (1) Jaeger’s publication of an article in Ernst Krieck’s political journal Volk im Werden in early 1933 (WJ, 220–21), (2) his participation with Kroymann, chairman of the Association of German Classicists, in preparing a program for what the new regime, specifically, Bernhard Rust, expected of classics teachers, and (3) the first volume of Jaeger’s Paideia published in 1934 contains language with racist coloring (Gisela Müller) and exhibits a tendency to make itself “the servant of any kind of politics” (Bruno Snell).

Jaeger and Heidegger both read the approaching ‘revolution’ as a much wider phenomenon than the grabbing of power by a political party. They both saw the ‘revolution’ as a turning point which could provide the seedbed for a different future: Heidegger saw it as a turning toward the possibility of a new relationship to being; Jaeger saw it as the possibility for establishing a “Third Humanism.”

What this new letter shows is that a very real possibility existed for some kind of rapprochement between Heidegger and Jaeger especially on the key point of the importance of the ancient Greeks for the German revolution. I believe Beat Näf is quite right when he says that “the political interpretation of antiquity was perhaps even more crucial for the National Socialist view of antiquity than the unreliable racial-theoretical meaning which in the final analysis was abstruse.” More on this later. First the German transcription of Heidegger’s handwritten letter followed by an English translation. I wish to thank the Houghton Library of Harvard University and Dr. Hermann Heidegger for permission to publish this letter.

Sehr verehrter Herr Jaeger!