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Todtnauberg

The Improbable Encounter of Paul
Celan and Martin Heidegger

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Sample Translation by Anette Pollner

9. The Cabin and the Star on the Well

In the Black Forest, on the steep slope of a wide mountain valley, at a height of 1,130 metres above sea level, there is a small ski cabin. Its floor plan measures about six or seven metres. The low roof covers three rooms, the eat-in kitchen, the bedroom and a small study cell.

Heidegger's cabin at the upper end of Todtnauberg, a village in the Black Forest, is a myth in itself and part of the unique brand created by Heidegger. And he didn't just use it as a retreat now and then, or for quiet meditation. At least since his radio talk of 1 March 1934 when Heidegger declined a professorial post in Berlin, which would probably have made regular visits to the cabin impossible, it was well known to everyone how important the cabin lifestyle was to him. At the time, the radio was the most modern medium of communication, and his talk was printed in Guido Schneeberger's documentation. Therefore it can be assumed that Celan, an meticulous reader, would have been aware of it. In his talk, Heidegger dramatically declared his decision to stay "in the provinces".

Recently, and for the second time, I was offered a professorial post at the University of Berlin. On such occasions, I retreat from the city to my cabin. I listen to what the mountains, the forests and the farmsteads tell me. I meet up with my old friend, a 75 year old farmer. He's read about the offer of the professorial post in the papers. What is he going to say? He slowly and steadily meets my glance with his own, clear eyes, keeps his mouth closed tight, lays his faithful, careful hand on my shoulder and almost imperceptibly shakes his head. That means: unequivocally not!

...]

Today, anyone arriving by car will stop at the Ratschert view point where you are already roughly at the same height as the cabin. But when Neuman writes how they "climbed" up the steep path to the cabin then, and when Vietta says that the ascent took them "half an hour" on foot, it must mean that, on 25 July 1967, the well-known pair and their attendants must have parked their two VW beetles further down.

Colourful cars are parked next to each other. People are stretching their legs. The proximity is gone and with it the intimacy that wasn't real. It transformed Celan and Heidegger into apathetic performers. Just a few breaths of outdoor air and everyone feels a sense of relief. Even if the air is thicker here than elsewhere, as Heidegger growls, and even if it's going to rain soon, and strong winds, blowing hot and cold in turn, will disturb the group of four. Cars don't suit these gentlemen, they prefer to walk. Neumann and Vietta follow, watching Celan and Heidegger with curiosity. The anticipation of the meeting at the legendary cabin, where something is supposed to happen, intensifies. The stuffy drive up here has suddenly just become the prelude.

Silvio Vietta, for whom, since he was alone in the second VW beetle, nothing has happened so far, remembers hoping for a conversation during the walk, but that "wasn't possible". As he tells it, Celan was repeatedly wandering off the track, seeing flowers everywhere, calling out their names, arnica and eyebright! He was

leaping around in the meadows, gathering some of these flowers, taking them to Heidegger and telling him something about them, then disappearing again.

If their confinement inside the metal walls of the VW beetle prevented conversation before, the obstacle now is the vibrant openness of the July landscape. Everywhere, there's something going on. Butterflies are fluttering around, beetles are crawling across the path, the wind is stirring up the leaves. A proper storm might be approaching. Celan, Neumann observes, is more alert than at any time since his arrival. He names the flowers in two, three languages, Latin, German and Yiddish. 50 years later, Vietta tells us that Heidegger seemed to be looking at Celan in amusement, out of the corner of his eyes; he waited every time until he joined him again, and only then walked on, together with Celan, still silent, observing.

Were those little detours into the meadows displacement actions by a suddenly and unexpectedly almost youthfully mercurial Celan, or just an expression of pure happiness to be where he had wished, from inside the secure psychiatric ward where he had spent the last weeks, that he could be, in nature? It is still only a few days since Celan was released from St Anne's to go on this holiday.

Heidegger is irritated by Celan's sudden liveliness, but also a little relieved, since he has reason to fear that Celan might ask him about the "youth hostel". Or could it be that Celan hasn't heard of the "camp" that Schneeberger doesn't mention? Heidegger himself wrote about it as early as 1945, in his report "*The rectorate of 1933/34, facts and reflections*", but what the philosopher has reported so far has fallen considerably short of the interesting details of the first "Science Camp" in Todtnauberg from 4 to 10 October 1933. Heidegger himself organised it, in the youth hostel up here.

"The destination will be reached on foot." Heidegger must have experienced later drives from Freiburg to Todtnauberg as motorised repetitions of that thirty kilometre foot march up to the camp. The requested dress code for the march was "SA or SS uniform, possibly steel helmet uniforms with armbands". One of the objectives of the camp was "to actively enhance our understanding of the goals of the radical national socialist transformation of higher education."

Fortunately, Rector Heidegger didn't lead his fellow students and lecturers, whom he brought up here during his most megalomaniac period, all the way up to the cabin. He really did believe that German universities were in need of renewal. Unfortunately, during the camp, differences between groups from Kiel, Heidelberg and Freiburg broke out. The Heidelberg group is said to even have instigated a revolt against Heidegger, a notorious subversive himself. Not all versions of national socialism were the same at this point. There was infighting here too. Minister Wacker had already grumbled after the rector's speech during lunch at the restaurant Kopf that Heidegger was obviously pursuing his own "private national socialism." And he wasn't entirely wrong. But Heidegger considered *his own* national socialist education reform as the most significant.

When Heidegger and Celan have ascended the final part of the way up to the cabin – several paths lead up through the meadows, the one along the little stream being the steepest – they look South, like everyone here, down the hill. They stand there, in spite of a few raindrops and a little bit of wind, between the cabin and the acorn tree with its shrubs that provide the small property with its protected view point. When visibility is very good, you can actually see Mont Blanc from here. France, the promised land! For Heidegger, it has become a second, philosophical home during the last few decades. That country, of all countries! The country of Descartes, a place full of eulogists of rationality! But it has been changing already. Educated

Russians from Moscow, Taganrog and Kaunas, Koshewnikov, Kojra and Levinas, now suddenly called Kojève, Koyré und Lévinas, have entered through the servants' entrance of emigration and prepared the ground for Heidegger. The newly fashionable Sartre also helped. And they all knew Kierkegaard. It's nice over there. A place where the animosities resulting from a problematic past are limited.

But on 25 July 1967, clouds are hanging low in that direction. Even the expanse of the gentle, long mountain valley, with just that one deep indentation in the middle, in which the village of Todtnauberg lies, can barely be discerned. Celan remembers long walks in Carpathia during the happy summer of 1947, with his best friend from Bucharest, Petre Salomon, Salomon's future wife and Celan's own love at the time, Lia Fingerhut, who later drowned while swimming in the sea in November 1961. When Celan hears about it, he is shocked but even then he cannot quite believe it. She probably killed herself. Beautiful, sad Lia Fingerhut, daughter of a well-known Bucharest doctor, was an excellent swimmer.

Even today, standing in front of the cabin, you can sense what made Heidegger stylise his existence there. Although, at around a thousand metres above sea level, it can't really be called very high up, there is a sense here of being above it all. The cabin sits on one of the highest points in the entire valley. The mountain tops visible in the vicinity are far enough away. Even Mont Blanc, the exalted vanishing point, almost four times as high, looks somehow gentle from so far away. Reinhard Mehring believes that Heidegger brought down Nietzsche's Zarathustra from the heights of the Engadin to the mediocre level of his Black Forest. In terms of the theatrical gesture, that is true. But topographically, it is only half the truth. Sils Maria is located over 600 metres higher, it's colder and there's more snow, and that snow comes earlier. But the village itself is at the bottom of the valley, almost protected by the much higher mountains, or maybe closed off by them. In Todtnauberg, Heidegger has found a place where he can simulate a sense of being at the top, and being exposed, but at a mediocre level.

Heidegger knocks on the door. Even at the time, numerous keys are distributed among his family, and indeed, as Silvio Vietta tells us, that day, Heidegger barely knows the people who open the door. They look at the philosopher and his companions in astonishment. They are relatives of Heidegger's son Jörg's second wife who had no way of knowing about the surprise visit. The only connection to the outside world is still the white Grundig radio that technology sceptic Heidegger purchased in 1962 to keep up with the Cuba crisis.

And so the owner and his guests have to wait outside for a while, until the cabin is ready for them. Meanwhile, Celan observes the area, discovers the well, approaches it with curiosity and inspects it closely, as Neumann writes in a letter to Tophoven. He "noticed the cubic fountain head with its carved notches in front of the house, and the water bubbling out of its pipe (...), he paid a lot of attention to the primitive mechanism of the water dispenser, that was obvious."

The unique feature of this well is its waterspout with a wooden cube mounted on it. Rough cut stars are carved into four of its sides. Depending on your point of view, they look either as if folded from paper or like blossoms. And they really do have a striking similarity to the Star of David.

In his memoirs, Neumann says he waited for Celan to drink the water from the well. And exactly because he was waiting for it, he remembers that it didn't happen. Just as the day before, with the failed photography, Celan shows himself as an expert on the importance of symbolic actions and omissions.

It is interesting that, in his poem “Todtnauberg”, written a few days later in Frankfurt, he will mention “drinking from the well” as if it had happened. Then, Vietta reports, “we entered the inner room of the cabin with the big wooden table and the benches underneath the lattice windows, the big oven and the tiled stove. When Celan, Heidegger, Mr Neumann and I were sitting around the table, Celan looked out through the lattice window to the wooden water trough in front of the cabin.” The carpenter Pius Schweizer had intentionally placed the well, as Vietta reports, “so that you can not only hear the burbling of the water but also see it from the dining table.” According to Vietta, as Celan gives the star on the well a second long look, he abruptly says: “Mr Heidegger, I’m not leaving that star to you.”

Heidegger tells the story of the well – he will later say that he had nothing to do with the design –, then he lays out his presents on the big wooden table. He gifts Celan his collection of aphorisms *From the Experience of Thought*, a short publication that contains, as Celan will discover, the famous phrase: “Walk towards one star, nothing else.”

“We didn’t eat or drink anything in the cabin”, so Neumann. They were going to have coffee in St Blasien at eleven, a pit stop on the way to Horbach Moor. And the already very limited amount of time had been further reduced by the encounter with the previous visitors. They only spent “half an hour at most” in the cabin, Vietta says. There was no time for a proper conversation.

After a brief tour of “Heidegger’s incredibly primitive and, as it seemed to me, ancient little house”, whose toilet can still only be reached by wandering around the entire building, Neumann summarises in his letter to Elmar Tophoven, a little vaguely:

Maybe it is easier to understand a few things, both the good and perhaps also the bad, if you’ve seen him there. It’s a lifestyle that can be misunderstood since the Nazi times, but one that has existed for a long time before the Nazis, and I’m afraid it only became suspicious because of the Nazis.”

Heidegger’s “study cell” isn’t really very monastic, but a well-ordered and cosy domestic study room at the back of the cabin only accessible through the bedroom with its four simple berths lined up next to each other. In a prominent position, directly above the dining table, Celan notices a large framed print of Adolf Glattacker’s best known oil painting of Johann Peter Hebel, the famous author of the *Treasure Chest of a Family Friend from the Rhine*, painted by Glattacker in 1926, on the hundredth anniversary of Hebel’s death.

Hebel is not an unknown factor in the relationship between Heidegger and Celan. As early as 1956, Heidegger sent Celan his *A Conversation with Hebel*, with a personal dedication that reads “For Paul Celan, with heartfelt thanks and greetings”. Celan himself is familiar with this sympathetic Alemannic figure whose *Treasure Chest* was well known throughout all German speaking parts of Europe. He owns an old edition from 1884, complete with various annotations, and values the popular poet. Gerhart Baumann was impressed, in his talks with Celan, by the fact that Johann Peter Hebel was a family friend in Czernowitz as well as in Karlsruhe.

Celan also knows that Heidegger reveres Hebel. He praises him as a poet writing the “noblest” German language, distinguished by its almost mythical “elevated simplicity”. And this, he says, was only possible because Hebel’s language never forgot its origin in dialect. Heidegger reveres Hebel, in an age of technology that neglects the essence of being where many “no longer know where they are going”, in an existential

sense, as a facilitator of a new-old primal connection between the world of the senses and the world of the spirit. “Language is the pathway between the depths of the utterly sensual and the heights of the boldest spirit.” And, so Heidegger, Hebel’s “written German” is “the simplest, the brightest and at the same time the most enchanting and most thoughtful language ever written.”

But things are “not so simple” when it comes to Hebel either. Hebel collected, edited and wrote perfectly formed stories with touching characters. Celan knows that *everyone* likes Hebel. Starting with Goethe who found a wonderfully concise word for it. Hebel, he said, “countrified the universe (...) in the most naïve, graceful way”. Theodor W. Adorno and Robert Minder defended Hebel from their side against his appropriation by Heidegger, the previously enthusiastic follower of national socialism. In 1964, Adorno mocks Heidegger in his *Jargon of Authenticity*, saying that he

wants to hang [Hebel] up in the smokestack of his own point of view, but he never invoked this kind of rootedness in the native soil. Instead he sends a message of greeting to the hawkers Scheitele and Nausel by writing one of the most beautiful stories in the defence of Jews ever written in the German language.

Robert Minder, whom Celan knows from Paris, who supported him in the Goll affair and whose book *Poets in Society* he owns, including a personal dedication, also accuses Heidegger in that very same book of portraying Hebel as provincial. Hebel, so Minder, is more a “Citoyen”, as Ernst Bloch already stated, a true citizen of the state, “a staunch supporter of the liberation of peasants within the context of the enlightenment, the French Revolution and the laws of the Napoleonic Code.”

But it just isn’t that simple. Anyone who opens the *Treasure Chest* again can’t help wondering, sometimes, if Hebel’s many friends aren’t perhaps protesting a little too much on behalf of the master story teller. While it is true that Hebel “sends a greeting”, as Adorno says, “to Scheitele in Lörrach and to Nausel” at the end of Hebel’s “message” entitled *The Jews*, neither Minder nor Adorno seem to notice the numerous anti-Semitic tinted passages and stories, not just in *The Jews* but also in the *Treasure Chest*. Hebel is not a polemicist, but he puts his Jewish characters into situations where they act the way Jews are presumed to act. Such as Nausel, saluted by Adorno, in *The Glass Jew*, who cheats a hussar out of four dollars. His brother-in-law, who calls himself “an honest Jew”, hides Nausel from the angry hussar in a grain sack. When the hussar draws his sabre and asks what’s inside the grain sack, the brother-in-law says: “glass”, presumably in the hope that the hussar would handle it with care. The soldier, furious as well as incredulous, strikes “the sack with all his might, first with the flat side of the sabre, and then with the blunt end of the sabre”. Nausel, inside the sack, has the bright idea to make a “ding, ding” sound. The harder the hussar strikes the sack, the more “ding, ding, ding” he hears. “But when the hussar was gone, and the Jew slipped out of the sack, thirsting for blood, and looked at himself, ‘God’s wonder”, he said, ‘I never want to turn into glass again for the price of four dollars, as long as I live.’” The moral of the story that ends here, would therefore be: Jews, don’t cheat. Or at least don’t cheat for so little money.

In the story „How a Beautiful Horse was Once to be Had for the Price of Five Cane Strokes”, a Jew sees a cavalry captain riding a beautiful chestnut horse and says, admiringly: “I would endure a hundred strokes of the cane if this horse were mine.” In the end, they agree to a contract stating a price of five strokes. The officer hits him four times with his “Hispanic cane”, but “all his pleading and begging for the fifth stroke was for nothing.” The Jew goes to the notary but he can’t help him either. The baron didn’t commit to it, “if the baron doesn’t do it voluntarily, then there’s nothing in the agreement that says he must”. The chestnut horse

stays with the baron. The “family friend”, Hebel’s alter ego,

wouldn’t like to praise this wilfulness if the Hebrew hadn’t offered it himself. Note: if you volunteer to receive five strokes for the sake of profit, you deserve to receive four without profit. You should never volunteer to let yourself be mistreated for the sake of profit.

These stories are typical in many ways. For Hebel, no one, neither Jew nor anyone else, should act in such a way that they are being exploited or exploiting others. The moral always applies to everyone.

But what remains unquestioned is that a Jew is a Jew and basically only interested in money. Hebel likes to rely on clearly delineated stereotypes that immediately grasp the reader’s attention. And the Jew, just like the soldier who is clearly too stupid to recognize the sound of glass, is an easy figure of ridicule.

Most of the time, however, Hebel tells stories from the lives of poor Jews who are more or less struggling to survive. This also endears him to Ernst Bloch who wrote the most profound short essay about Hebel in his afterword to the 1965 Insel Edition of *Calendar Stories*:

How freely Hebel stands with the Jews who had barely come out of the Ghetto then. He does know about the grovelling crooks among them and deplors that they are this way, but full of shame about it. They were forced and coerced into it, by brutes and heretics who call themselves Christians. Nothing at all about the so-called blame for the cross, nothing about God’s revenge on them.

The origins of Jewish poverty are not told in every story, Hebel’s “freedom” concerning the Jews is the better argument for Hebel. It includes criticism as well as intimacy.

For it is also part of the “message”, in almost humanistic form: “Regarding Isaiah, let me just claim this much, that anyone who can read him from chapter 40 onwards, and never feel the impulsive wish to be a Jew, even including the invasive occupation by all the European pests, even an impoverished Jew, doesn’t understand him.” And this closest possible intimacy, it becomes clear when reading Hebel, is not surprising: “The Orient”, he writes, “the home of our faith, our fruit trees and our blood.” Bloch concludes, with a message to Heidegger: “The Nazis wouldn’t have enjoyed Hebel. A good Germany had awoken then, and in its path the infamy of blood and soil can never thrive, it will drink what it cooked up.”

But the Nazis did in fact enjoy Hebel and even created a Hebel literary prize, awarded to their own deserving poets. That prize was actually continued after the Second World War – in 1960, it was awarded to Heidegger – and it still exists today. And that had something to do with the fact that they could indeed find antisemitic content in Hebel’s writing, depending on which stories were selected. Heidegger, however, didn’t care. His approach only emphasises the “simple” but world-encompassing language. A point where he and Celan could definitely connect. But if you only read Heidegger on Hebel, you are likely to overlook Hebel’s advocacy for the enlightenment, his support of the French revolution, his cosmopolitan spirit.

When Neumann urges them to move on, because he can’t make Baumann wait, who is his boss, Heidegger points to the cabin’s house book. Would Celan like to write something in it? We don’t know if Celan was surprised, but of course he is familiar with the custom, and less concerned about written demonstrations of intimacy than photographic ones. He feels secure with language where he holds every detail in his own hand.



He writes:

To the house book, looking at the star on the well, with hope in my heart for a word that will emerge.

25 July 1967 Paul Celan

Celan doesn't speak directly to Heidegger but references the place in his writing, as is customary in house books and similar documents. The "hope for a word that will emerge" is open and friendly. There is no time pressure, and Celan doesn't define the form that this word would take. The addition of "in my heart", grammatically not necessary, hints at a great intimacy that Celan seems to feel in this moment.