

Martin Heidegger is eighty years old

Hannah Arendt, 1969

5 Along with his 80th birthday Martin Heidegger celebrates also the fiftieth anniversary of his public workings as a teacher. Plato once said: »For the beginning is also a God, as long as he dwells among people, he saves everything« (*Gesetze* 775).

10 Let me then start with his first appearance in the public sphere - not with his birth, 1889 in Meßkirch - but with the year 1919, which marks the entry of the teacher into German academia at Freiburg University. Heidegger's fame precedes the publication of *Sein und Zeit* in the year 1927, and it is even questionable if the unusual success of this book - not only the excitement that it immediately generated, but mainly the exceptionally enduring effect with which only few publications of the century can compete - would have been possible without the, as one might say, "teaching-success", that came before it. So that, in the opinion of the students at that time, the success of the book was 15 merely a confirmation of his previous success as a teacher.

His was a peculiar early fame, perhaps more peculiar than that of Kafka in the early twenties (or Braques's and Picasso's in the preceding decade), who were also unknown to what one might refer to as, "the public", but who nonetheless had an extraordinary impact. For in Heidegger's case, there was nothing written available to justify any 20 fame, outside of seminar notes taken by students that were handed from person to person, and these on seminars dealing with well-known texts and without any teachings that one could have learned or passed on. There was hardly more than a name, but that name traveled through all of Germany like the rumor of the secret king. This was something completely different to a »circle« with the leadership and central figure of a »master« (like for instance the George circle), which were usually well-known to the public, but which chose to cut themselves off from the public by an 25 aura of secrecy, with allegedly only the members of the circle in the know. Here was neither secrecy nor membership; those to whom the rumor had made it knew each other, because they were all students, there was occasional friendship among them, and later here and there cliques did form, but there was never a circle, and there was no esotericism.

Who then did the rumor reach, and what did it say? Back then, after the First World War, there were no rebels at the 30 German universities, only a widespread uneasiness about academic teaching and learning in all those faculties that did more than just vocational training, and among all students for whom studying meant more than the preparation for a later career. Philosophy was no subject for earning one's bread; instead, it was a place for resolute non-careerists, who, for that reason, were very demanding. Wisdom of world and life had no appeal for them, and he who was interested in the solution to all riddles could choose among a rich selection of worldviews and their respective parties - but to 35 make a choice among them did not require studying philosophy. But then they also did not know what it was that they wanted. The university offered either entire schools - the Neo-Kantians, the Neo-Hegelians, the Neo-Platonists, etc - or the old disciplines dividing philosophy neatly into epistemology, aesthetics, ethics, logic and the like, and therefore did no so much pass these subjects on, but got them done with bottomless boredom. Back then, before Heidegger's entry into academia, there were a small number of rebels against these convenient (and in their own way even quite solid) 40 workings at the universities. First, in chronological order, was Husserl with his call to »the things themselves«, which meant »away from the theories, away from the books«, and away from the establishment of philosophy as a strict science, which would one day favorably compare against other academic disciplines. This was meant in a naive way of course and in no way rebellious, but it was something that first Scheler and some time later Heidegger would take up. And then there was, consciously rebellious and from a non philosophical tradition, Karl Jaspers in Heidelberg, who, 45 as is well known, had a long friendship with Heidegger, just because the rebellious element in Heidegger's endeavor seemed to him something substantially philosophical among the academic chatter *about* philosophy.

What these few had in common, to put it in Heidegger's words, was that they could »differentiate between items of scholarship and the matter of thought« (*Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*, 1947), and that they were pretty indifferent 50 to the scholarly items. The rumor reached those, who more or less explicitly knew about the break of tradition and could feel the »dark times« approaching, and therefore took sophistry, especially in philosophical matters, for an idle game, and who were only willing to submit to academic discipline because they cared about the »matter of thought«, or as Heidegger today would say: »the business of thinking« (*Zur Sache des Denkens*, 1969). The rumor that drew them first to Freiburg, and some time later to Marburg, to this private lecturer had it that there was one who actually 55 delivered what Husserl had proclaimed. Someone who knew that philosophy is not of academic concern, but is the concern for any thinking people - and not since yesterday or today, but since forever. Someone who, by the breaking of traditions, was freed to rediscover the past. It was of critical importance that there was no talk *about* Plato (for example) and no presentation of his teachings about ideas, but that one dialogue was followed (and queried) over the course of a semester, step by step, until the thousand year old doctrine had been dissolved into present problems. This 60 may sound quite common to you today, because there are now many who do the same; but before Heidegger, no one did. The rumor said it in plain words: thinking has been brought back to life, the scholarly treasures of the past (long

presumed dead) are being brought back to life and are made to speak - upon which it turns out that they yield something totally different compared to what one had suspiciously assumed. There is a teacher; perhaps one can learn how to think.

The clandestine king then in the realm of thinking, which is undoubtedly part of our world despite being almost perfectly hidden in it, so that one can never really know if it exists at all, but whose inhabitants in the end turn out to be more numerous than one thinks. For how else could one explain the singular, often subterranean, influence of Heidegger's thinking and his thoughtful reading, that extends so far beyond the circle of pupils and, what one commonly understands to be, philosophy?

It is therefore not Heidegger's philosophy, whose existence one can rightly question (see Jean Beaufret), but Heidegger's thinking that so decisively contributed to the shaping of this centuries' intellectual physiognomy. This thinking has a unique piercing quality, which, wanted one to trace and capture it in language, would lie in the transitive usage of the verb »to think«. Heidegger never thinks »about« something; he thinks something. In this totally non-contemplative exercise, he pierces into the depth, not to find final and sound bedrock in this dimension (which, as one could say, was previously, in this way and with such precision, virtually undiscovered), and much less to unearth it, but instead to remain and lay paths and to erect "landmarks"(which is the title of a collection of texts from the years 1929-1962). This thinking may put itself to tasks, it may deal with »problems«, it always has something specific of course, which it turns its attention to, or more precisely which it is aroused by - but one can not say that it has a goal. It is continually acting, and even the laying of paths serves more as a laying of the land, than the attainment of a preconceived goal. These paths may well be »shamtracks« (after a title of an essay collection from the years 1935-1946), which just because they do not lead to a destination outside of the woods and »suddenly stop in the untrodden«, are much more appropriate to those who love the forest and who feel at home within it, than the carefully curated tracks connecting problems, on which the exercises of the mainstream philosophers and humanists travel to and fro. The metaphor of the »shamtracks«, points to something very substantial, but not as it seems at first, that one is off the track and lost, but that one is like a lumberman, whose work is the woods, and who walks on paths that are laid by himself, where the laying of the paths is no less part of the work than the logging of trees.

In this deep dimension, only uncovered by his piercing thought, Heidegger has constructed a web of such paths of thinking, and the only immediate outcome (naturally noted and a continual precedent) was to completely collapse the building of metaphysics, which was already partially in ruins, and in which nobody had really felt at home for quite some time anyway - so completely as underground gangways and digging collapse that whose fundamentals have no deep footing. That this is a historical affair, perhaps of first order, need not be of concern for us, who stand outside of every school, even the historical. That one could refer to Kant, from a specific perspective, justifiably as the one who »grinds down everything«, has - in opposition to his historical role - little to do with who Kant was. And regarding Heidegger's contribution to the collapse of metaphysics, which was about to happen anyway, we are to thank him, and only him, that the collapse was conducted in a way that dignified its previous developments; that metaphysics was *thought* to its end, and was not simply overrun by what came after it. »The end of philosophy«, as Heidegger puts it in *Zur Sache des Denkens*, but an end that respects philosophy, honors it and was brought about by someone who had the deepest connection to it. All his life, he based his seminars and lectures on the philosophical canon, and only late in his life dared he to step forward, and gave a seminar about a text of his own.

As I said, one followed the rumor to learn how to think, and what one discovered was the following: that thinking as pure action (which means driven neither by a thirst for knowledge nor understanding) can become a passion, which doesn't so much rule over all the other abilities and talents, but orders and thoroughly guides them. We are so used to the old dichotomy of reason and passion, of spirit and life, that the notion of *passionate thinking*, where thinking and being alive become one, is somewhat alien. Heidegger himself expressed this unity - according to a well attested anecdote - in one terse sentence in the introduction of a lecture on Aristotle, where instead of the usual biographical introduction, he said: »Aristotle was born, worked and died.« That this is possible, is, as we can see in hindsight, the very first condition for the possibility of philosophy. But it is more than questionable if, without Heidegger's thinking existence, we would have ever learned of this possibility, especially in this century. This thinking, that arises as passion from the simple fact of being born into the world and »thinks about the meaning, which governs everything that is« (*Gelassenheit*, 1959, S. 15), can have as little an end goal (i.e. discovery or the knowledge) as life itself. The end of life is death, but people do not live for the purpose of death, they live because they are living beings; and think not for the purpose of getting results, but because they are a »thinking, i.e. sense making creature« (Ibid S. 16).

As a consequence of this, thinking has a peculiarly destructive or critical relationship towards its results. Admittedly, philosophers ever since the philosophical schools of antiquity have shown a fatal tendency towards the construction of systems so that today we are often struggling to demolish the system to discover the proper thinking behind them. But this tendency does not arise out of thinking itself, but from completely different and in themselves legitimate wants. If one wants to measure thinking in its immediate passionate vitality by the results, then one would fare as with the Veil of the Penelope - at night, it would adamantly unravel what it has spun during the day, only to begin anew the next

day. Every piece of Heidegger's writing reads, despite the occasional reference to something already published, like he is starting from scratch, only using the language he coined (his terminology) - but the terms are just »landmarks« for a new train of thought's orientation. Heidegger notes this peculiarity of thinking when he stresses »how much the *critical* question, which is the purpose of thinking, is a necessary and continually part of thinking«, and when he says that thinking has »the character of something retreating«. And he practices this retreat when he subjects *Sein und Zeit* to an »immanent critique«, or notes, that a specific interpretation of the platonic notion of truth is »not tenable«, or more generally speaks of the »retrospection« on his own work, »which always becomes a retractatio«, but less a taking things back, and more a thinking anew of things already thought (in *Zur Sache des Denkens*, S. 61, 30, 78).

Every thinker, if he only gets old enough, must aim to dissolve that in his thinking which approximates result, merely by thinking it through again. The thinking self is without age, and it is the curse and blessing of any thinker, so long as they are truly concerned with thinking, that they get old without aging. In this, the passion of thinking is similar to other passions, where what we commonly understand to be the characteristics of a person (whose totality, as ordered by the will, results in something like character), does not withstand the onrush of passion, by which human and person are seized and in a sense captured. The thinking self, which »stands still« in the unleashed storm, as Heidegger puts it, and for which time literally stands still, is not just without age; it is also (and despite being a specific other) without characteristic. The thinking self is totally opposed to the self of consciousness.

Thinking generally, as Hegel once remarked about philosophy, is »something lonely«, and not just because one is alone in the »silent discourse between me and myself« according to Plato (*Sophist* 263 e), but because there is something »inexpressible« in this discourse, that is not - and can not be - fully captured by language, and as a result not only leads to difficulties in communication with others, but also in communication with oneself. It might be this very »inexpressible«, of which Plato speaks in the seventh letter, which makes thinking such a lonely thing, and at the same time it is the constantly varying source, from which thinking stems and in which it is continually renewed. One can readily imagine - although this was not the case with Heidegger - that the passion for thinking suddenly possesses the most gregarious person, and destroys them with the loneliness that comes with it.

The first and, as far as I know, the only one who spoke of thinking as a *pathos*, as something to bear with suffering which one is overcome by, was Plato, who in *Theatet* (155 d) defines astonishment as the beginning of philosophy, not of course referring to the mere wonder that arises in us when we meet something alien. This astonishment, which sets the thinking process into motion - much like wonder is the beginning of science - concerns the common place, the self-evident, the known and familiar, and this is also why it can not be quenched by understanding. At some point Heidegger speaks, much after Plato, of the »ability to be astonished by the simple«, but unlike Plato he adds: »and to make this astonishment one's home« (in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 1957, Teil III, S. 55). To me, this seems a critical addition to the reflection on he who is Martin Heidegger. Thinking, and the loneliness that comes with it, is known by many people (we might hope), but doubtlessly they do not make a home there, and when they are overcome by the astonishment of the simple, and they follow their astonishment into thinking, it is done with the knowledge that they are only being temporarily ripped out of their daily routine, the continuum of dealings and occupations which reflect human affairs, to which they will return after a short while. The home of which Heidegger speaks, lies thus, metaphorically speaking, outside of the homes of people; and although this place may be very stormy at times, the storms are to a degree more metaphorical compared to the storms of time ravaging the homes of people - as compared to other places on earth that concern human affairs, the place of thinking is a »place of silence« (*Zur Sache des Denkens*, S. 75).

At first it is the astonishment itself that creates and propagates this silence, and it is the need to maintain the silence that makes the protection against all noise, including one's own voice, the absolutely necessary condition to allow astonishment to unfold into thinking. This process leads to a specific transformation that happens to everything that comes into the sphere of this thinking. In its essential remoteness, thinking only ever deals with something absent - with matters and things that are withdrawn from immediate perception. If one is face to face with another person, one perceives them in the flesh, but one does not *think* of them, because if one were to think about them, one would create a barrier separating the two parties, thereby secretly withdrawing from the immediate encounter. In order to come close to a thing (or person) in thought, the object must be distant to immediate perception. Thinking, Heidegger says, is »the coming close at a distance« (*Gelassenheit*, S. 45).

This can be easily envisioned with a familiar experience. When we travel to distant sights, we look at them up close; and yet it happens frequently that only in memory and with hindsight, when perception no longer weighs heavily on us, the things we have seen come very close to us, as if their meaning is only revealed when they are no longer present. This inversion of proportion and relation: that thinking pushes the proximate away, or withdraws from it bringing the distant close, is critical if we are to understand Heidegger's home of thinking. The memory, which is transformed into remembrance by thinking, has played an eminent role in the history of thought as mental ability, because it vouches for us that proximity and distance, as they are given to the senses, allow such an inversion at all.

Heidegger has only occasionally, allusively and mostly negatively, spoken about his proper »residence«, the residence of thinking, for example when he says that the question of thinking stands »not in the usual order of the everyday«, not »in proximity of the most pressing commission and satisfaction of ruling desires«, and that »questioning itself is outside of order« (*Einführung in die Metaphysik*, 1953, S. 10). But it is this proximity distance relation, and its inversion in thinking, that runs like a shaping undercurrent through his whole opus. The interlinking and interrelations running between presence and absence, veiling and unveiling, proximity and distance, have basically nothing to do with the platitudinal truism, that there could be no presence without the experience of absence, proximity without distance, and unveiling without veiling. From the residence of thinking, which is surrounded by, what is to others: the »commonplace order of the everyday« and general human affairs, the surroundings instead are characterized by a »deprivation of being« or »forgetting of being«, which is just what thinking is about when the immoderately present is removed from the object of thought. This removal from everyday affairs in the mind is always paid for by the physical withdrawal from the world of human affairs, and this also, when the thinking, in its peculiar isolation, ponders these everyday affairs. Already Aristotle, to whom the great example of Plato was still very vivid, strongly advised philosophers not to want to play kings in the world of politics.

»This ability«, at least occasionally, to »astonish in the face of the simple«, is presumably shared by all people, and the thinkers we know from the past and present set themselves apart by their ability to develop this astonishment into thinking, or rather into their respective ways of thinking. This is different to the ability to »take this astonishment as residence«, which is exceptionally rare, so that we really only find it well documented in Plato, who strongly spoke several times, and most dramatically, about the dangers of this residence in *Theaetetus* (173 d to 176). There he also relates, apparently for the first time, the story of Thales and the Thracian peasant girl, who upon observing how the »sage« looking up in an attempt to see the stars fell into the well, laughed at how someone who wanted to know the heavens did not know what lay beneath his feet. Thales, if we want to believe Aristotle, was pretty offended, also because his fellow citizens used to already mock him for his poverty, and so he wanted to prove through grand speculation with oil presses, that it would be easy for the »sage« to get rich, if he only wanted to (*Politik*, 1259 a 6 ff.). And because, as is generally well known, books are not written by peasant girls, the frolicking Thracian child had to still hear Hegel tell her that she just didn't have a sense for higher things.

Plato, who, as is well known in the *state*, not only wanted to put a stop to the poets, but wanted to forbid laughing for the citizens, or at least the class of guardians - feared the laughter of his fellow citizens more than the hostility of opinions against the truth's absolute claim to truth. Perhaps it was just him who knew that the residence of thinking, from an outside perspective, can easily seem an Aristophanic castle in the sky. He knew in any case, that thinking is unable to fend off others laughter when it brings its thoughts to the market, and it might have been this fact that made him, in his later years, embark three times for Sicily in an attempt to give a helping hand to the tyrant of Syrakus, by teaching him the mathematics which he thought necessary as an introduction to philosophy. It escaped his notice that this fantastic endeavor, from the perspective of the peasant girl, is even more comical than the mishap of Thales. And he might be excused, because as far as I know, nobody else took the hint and laughed, and I do not know of an account of this episode which so much as smiles. People obviously have not yet discovered what laughter is good for, perhaps because their thinkers, who since time immemorial have spared few good words in laughter, have abandoned them - even if here and there one of them has racked his brain about the immediate cause of laughter.

Now we all know, that also Heidegger once gave into temptation to change his »residence«, and link up with the world of human affairs. And as far as his attempt at influencing the world is concerned, he fared much worse than Plato, because the tyrant and its victims were not beyond the sea, but in his own country.¹ But regarding himself, I

¹This escapade, which today - after the animosity has receded and numerous false reports have been corrected - is mostly referred to as »mistake«, has a multitude of aspects, among others that of the time of the Weimarer Republic, which presented itself to those living in it not at all in the rosy light in which it is viewed today against the terrible background of that which followed. The content of this fallacy differs substantially from the widespread »fallacies« common at the time. Who outside of Heidegger could have come up with the idea to view the national-socialism as »the encounter of planetary technology and the man of the modern age« - except if they had instead of reading Hitler's *Mein Kampf* had read some of the writings of the Italian futurists, which here and there referred to fascism (in opposition to national-socialism). This mistake is negligible compared to the much more critical mistake, which consisted in evading the reality of Gestapo basements and torture hells of the concentration camps, which came into being immediately after the burning of the Reichstag, to turn towards supposedly more important areas. Robert Gilbert, the German folk- and schlager-poet, put unforgettably what really happened in early 1933 in four verses:

»No one needs to knock anymore,
with axes splintering every address -
cracked open is the nations core,
- like a plaque's abscess.«

Heidegger quickly realized his »fallacy«, and then risked much more as was customary at the German universities. The same can not be said of the numberless intellectuals and the so called scientists, who not only in Germany still prefer, instead of talking of Hitler, Auschwitz, Genocide and the »eradication« as permanent depopulation politic, depending on idea and liking stick to Plato, Luther, Hegel, Nietzsche or also to Heidegger,

think, he is not worse off, because he was still young enough to learn from the shock of the impact, which drove him back to his proper residence after ten short and hectic months 35 years ago, and to anchor what the impact had taught him into his thinking. Resulting from this was the discovery of the will as the will to will, and with that as the will to power. Much has been written about the will in the modern age, and especially in modernity, but not much has been thought about its character, despite Nietzsche. In any case, nobody before Heidegger saw how this characteristic of the will works in opposition, and towards the destruction of thinking. As »equanimity« is vital for thinking, the thinker has to say: »I want not to want anything« in response to the will, for only »through this«, can we »wean ourselves of the will«, can »we ... be open for the searching quality of thinking, which is not a willing« (*Gelassenheit*, S. 32 f).

We, who we want to honor the thinkers, even if our residence is right here on earth, can not help but be struck and annoyed that Plato and Heidegger, as they meddled in human affairs, sought refuge with tyrants and Führers. This is not only due to the respective times, and even less a preformed character, but more due to that which the French call a *déformation professionnelle*. Because the tendency towards tyranny can be theoretically shown by almost all of the great thinkers (Kant is the big exception). And if this tendency was not detectable in what they did, then only because very few of them were ready to go beyond »the ability to be astonished by the simple« and to accept »this astonishment as residence«.

And it does not matter where the storms of their centuries blew these few great thinkers. Because the storm that goes through the thinking of Heidegger - like the one whose gales we can make out through the centuries in Plato's work - is not of this century. It comes from the ancient, and what he leaves in his wake is something complete, that as everything complete, collapses back into the ancient.

Jünger or Stefan George, to up-manipulate the terrible phenomena from the gutters via the humanities or history of ideas. One can rightfully say that the evasion of reality has become a profession; but not into intellectuality, which with the gutter was never associated, but into a spirit realm of conceptions and »ideas«, which have deviated from every possible and experienced reality so far into the merely »abstract«, where all the great thoughts of all thinkers have lost all consistency, and like formations of clouds, where the one constantly becomes the other, flow into each other.