

Martin Heidegger at Eighty

Hannah Arendt, translated from the German by Albert Hofstadter

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Martin Heidegger's eightieth birthday was also the fiftieth anniversary of his public life, which he began not as an author—though he had already published a book on Duns Scotus—but as a university teacher. In barely three or four years since that first solid and interesting but still rather conventional study, he had become so different from its author that his students hardly knew about it. If it is true, as Plato once remarked, that “the beginning is also a god; so long as he dwells among men, he saves all things” (*Laws* 775), then the beginning in Heidegger's case is neither the date of his birth (September 26, 1889, at Messkirch) nor the publication of his first book, but the first lecture courses and seminars which he held as a mere *Privatdozent* (instructor) and assistant to Husserl at the University of Freiburg in 1919.

For Heidegger's “fame” predates by about eight years the publication of *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*) in 1927; indeed it is open to question whether the unusual success of this book—not just the immediate impact it had inside and outside the academic world but also its extraordinarily lasting influence, with which few of the century's publications can compare—would have been possible if it had not been preceded by the teacher's reputation among the students, in whose opinion, at any rate, the book's success merely confirmed what they had known for many years.

There was something strange about this early fame, stranger perhaps than the fame of Kafka in the early Twenties or of Braque and Picasso in the preceding decade, who were also unknown to what is commonly understood as the public and nevertheless exerted an extraordinary influence. For in Heidegger's case there was nothing tangible on which his fame could have been based, nothing written, save for notes taken at his lectures which circulated among students everywhere. These lectures dealt with texts that were generally familiar; they contained no doctrine that could have been learned, reproduced, and handed on. There was hardly more than a name, but the name traveled all over Germany like the rumor of the hidden king.

This was something completely different from a “circle” centered around and directed by a “master” (say, the Stefan George circle), which, while well-known to the public, still remained apart from it by an aura of secrecy, the *arcana imperii* to which presumably only the circle's members are privy. Here there was neither a secret nor membership; those who heard the rumor were acquainted with one another, to be sure, since they were all students, and there were occasional friendships among them. Later some cliques formed here and there; but there never was a circle and there was nothing esoteric about his following.

To whom did the rumor spread, and what did it say? In the German universities at the time, after the First World War, there was no rebellion but widespread discontent with the academic enterprise of teaching and learning in those faculties that were more than professional schools, a disquiet that prevailed among students for whom study meant more than preparing for making a living. Philosophy was no breadwinner's study, but rather the study of resolute starvelings who were, for that very reason, all the harder to please. They were in no way disposed toward a wisdom of life or of the world, and for anyone concerned with the solution of all riddles there was available a rich selection of world views and their partisans; it wasn't necessary to study philosophy in order to choose among them.

But what they wanted they didn't know. The university commonly offered them either the schools—the neo-Kantians, the Neo-Hegelians, the Neo-Platonists, etc.—or the old academic discipline, in which philosophy, neatly divided into its special fields—epistemology, aesthetics, ethics, logic, and the like—was not so much communicated as drowned in an ocean of boredom. There were, even before Heidegger's appearance, a few rebels against this comfortable and, in its way, quite solid enterprise. Chronologically, there was Husserl and his cry “To the things themselves”: and that meant, “Away from theories, away from books” toward the establishment of philosophy as a rigorous science which would take its place alongside other academic disciplines.

This was still a naïve and unrebelling cry, but it was something to which first Scheler and somewhat later Heidegger could appeal. In addition, there was Karl Jaspers in Heidelberg, consciously rebellious and coming from a tradition other than the philosophical. He, as is known, was for a long time on friendly terms with Heidegger, precisely because the rebellious element in Heidegger's enterprise appealed to him as something original and fundamentally philosophical in the midst of the academic talk *about* philosophy.

What these few had in common was—to put it in Heidegger's words—that they could distinguish “between an object of scholarship and a matter of thought” (*Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*, 1947)¹ and that they were pretty indifferent to the object of scholarship. At that time the rumor of Heidegger's teaching reached those who knew more or less explicitly about the breakdown of tradition and the “dark times” (Brecht) which had set in, who therefore held erudition in matters of philosophy to be idle play and who, therefore, were prepared to comply with the academic discipline only because they were concerned with the “matter of thought” or, as Heidegger would say today, “thinking's matter” (*Zur Sache des Denkens*, 1969).

The rumor that attracted them to Freiburg and to the *Privatdozent* who taught there, as somewhat later they were attracted to the young professor at Marburg, had it that there was someone who was actually attaining “the things” that Husserl had proclaimed, someone who knew that these things were not academic matters but the concerns of thinking men—concerns not just of yesterday and today but from time immemorial—and who, precisely because he knew that the thread of tradition was broken, was discovering the past anew.

It was technically decisive that, for instance, Plato was not talked *about* and his theory of Ideas expounded; rather for an entire semester a single dialogue was pursued and subjected to question step by step, until the time-honored doctrine had disappeared to make room for a set of problems of immediate and urgent relevance. Today this sounds quite familiar, because nowadays so many proceed in this way; but no one did so before Heidegger.

The rumor about Heidegger put it quite simply: Thinking has come to life again; the cultural treasures of the past, believed to be dead, are being made to speak, in the course of which it turns out that they propose things altogether different from the familiar, worn-out trivialities they had been presumed to say. There exists a teacher; one can perhaps learn to think.

The hidden king reigned therefore in the realm of thinking, which, although it is completely of this world, is so concealed in it that one can never be quite sure whether it exists at all; and still its inhabitants must be more numerous than is commonly believed. For how, otherwise, could the unprecedented, often underground, influence of Heidegger's thinking and thoughtful reading be explained, extending as it does beyond the circle of students and disciples and beyond what is commonly understood by philosophy?

For it is not Heidegger's philosophy, whose existence we can rightfully question (as Jean Beaufret has done), but Heidegger's thinking that has shared so decisively in determining the spiritual physiognomy of this century. This thinking has a digging quality peculiar to itself, which, should we wish to put it in linguistic form, lies in the transitive use of the verb “to think.” Heidegger never thinks “about” something; he thinks something. In this entirely unreflective activity, he penetrates to the depths, but not to discover, let alone bring to light, some ultimate, secure foundations which one could say had been undiscovered earlier in this manner. Rather, he persistently remains there, underground, in order to lay down pathways and fix “trail marks” (a collection of texts from the years 1929-1962 had this title, *Wegmarken*).

This thinking may set tasks for itself; it may deal with “problems”; it naturally, indeed always, has something specific with which it is particularly occupied or, more precisely, by which it is specifically aroused; but one cannot say that it has a goal. It is unceasingly active, and even the laying down of paths itself is conducive to opening up a new dimension of thought, rather than to reaching a goal sighted beforehand and guided thereto.

The pathways may safely be called *Holzwege*, wood-paths (after the title of a collection of essays from the years 1935-1946), which, just because they lead nowhere outside the wood and “abruptly leave off in the untrodden,” are incomparably more agreeable to him who loves the wood and feels at home in it than the carefully laid out problem-streets on which scurry the investigations of philosophical specialists and historians of ideas. The metaphor of “wood-paths” hits upon something essential—not, as one may at first think, that someone has gotten onto a dead-end trail, but rather that someone, like the woodcutter whose occupation lies in the woods, treads paths that he has himself beaten; and clearing the path belongs no less to his line of work than felling trees.

On this deep plane, dug up and cleared, as it were, by his own thinking, Heidegger has laid down a vast network of thought-paths; and the single immediate result, which has been understandably noticed, and sometimes imitated, is that he has caused the edifice of traditional metaphysics—in which, for a long time, no one had felt quite at ease in any case—to collapse, just as underground tunnels and subversive burrowings cause the collapse of structures whose foundations are not deeply enough secured.

This is a historical matter, perhaps even one of the first order, but it need not trouble those of us who stand outside all the guilds, including the historical. That Kant could with justice, from a specific perspective, be called the “all-crushing one” has little to do with who Kant was—as distinguished from his historical role.

As to Heidegger’s share in the collapse of metaphysics, which was imminent anyway, what we owe him, and only him, is that this collapse took place in a manner worthy of what had preceded it: that metaphysics was *thought* through to its end, and was not simply, as it were, overrun by what followed after it. “The end of philosophy,” as Heidegger says in *Zur Sache des Denkens* (*On the Matter of Thinking*); but it was an end that is a credit to philosophy and holds her in honor, prepared for by one who was most profoundly bound to her and her tradition. For a lifetime he based his seminars and lectures on the philosophers’ texts, and only in his old age did he venture to give a seminar on a text of his own. *Zur Sache des Denkens* contains the “protocol for a seminar on the lecture ‘Zeit und Sein’ [‘Time and Being’],” which forms the first part of the book.

I have said that people followed the rumor about Heidegger in order to learn thinking. What was experienced was that thinking as pure activity—and this means impelled neither by the thirst for knowledge nor by the drive for cognition—can become a passion which not so much rules and oppresses all other capacities and gifts, as it orders them and prevails through them. We are so accustomed to the old opposition of reason versus passion, spirit versus life, that the idea of a *passionate* thinking, in which thinking and aliveness become one, takes us somewhat aback. Heidegger himself once expressed this unification—on the strength of a proven anecdote—in a single sentence, when at the beginning of a course on Aristotle he said, in place of the usual biographical introduction, “Aristotle was born, worked, and died.”

That something like Heidegger’s passionate thinking exists is indeed, as we can recognize afterward, a condition of the possibility of there being any philosophy at all. But it is more than questionable, especially in our century, that we would ever have discovered this without the existence of Heidegger’s thinking. This passionate thinking, which rises out of the simple fact of being-born-in-the-world and now “thinks recallingly and responsively the meaning that reigns in everything that is” (*Gelassenheit*, 1959, p. 15),² can no more have a final goal—cognition or knowledge—than can life itself. The end of life is death, but man does not live for death’s sake, but because he is a living being; and he does not think for the sake of any result whatever, but because he is a “thinking, that is, a musing being” (*ibid.*).

A consequence of this is that thinking acts in a peculiarly destructive or critical way toward its own results. To be sure, since the philosophical schools of antiquity, philosophers have exhibited an annoying inclination toward system building, and we often have trouble disassembling the constructions they have built, when trying to uncover what they really thought. This inclination does not stem from thinking itself, but from quite other needs, themselves thoroughly legitimate. If one wished to measure thinking, in its immediate, passionate liveliness, by its results, then one would fare as with Penelope’s veil—what was spun during the day would inexorably undo itself again at night, so that the next day it could be begun anew. Each of Heidegger’s writings, despite occasional references to what was already published, reads as though he were starting from the beginning and only from time to time taking over the language already coined by him—a language, however, in which the concepts are merely “trail marks,” by which a new course of thought orients itself.

Heidegger refers to this peculiarity of thinking when he emphasizes that “the *critical* question, what the matter of thought is, belongs necessarily and constantly to thinking”; when, on the occasion of a reference to Nietzsche, he speaks of “thinking’s recklessness, beginning ever anew”; when he says that thinking “has the character of a retrogression.” And he practices the retrogression when he subjects *Being and Time* to an “immanent criticism,” or establishes that his own earlier interpretation of Platonic truth “is not tenable,” or speaks generally of the thinker’s “backward glance” at his own work, “which always becomes a *retractatio*,” not actually a recanting, but rather a fresh rethinking of what was already thought (in *Zur Sache des Denkens*, pp. 61, 30, 78).

Every thinker, if only he grows old enough, must strive to unravel what have actually emerged as the results of his thought, and he does this simply by rethinking them. (He will say with Jaspers, “And now, when you just wanted really to start, you must die.”) The thinking “I” is ageless, and it is the curse and the blessing of

thinkers, so far as they exist only in thinking, that they become old without aging. Also, the passion of thinking, like the other passions, seizes the person—seizes those qualities of the individual of which the sum, when ordered by the will, amounts to what we commonly call “character”—takes possession of him and, as it were, annihilates his “character” which cannot hold its own against this onslaught. The thinking “I” which “stands within” the raging storm, as Heidegger says, and for which time literally stands still, is not just ageless; it is also, although always specifically other, without qualities. The thinking “I” is everything but the self of consciousness.

Moreover, thinking, as Hegel, in a letter to Zillmann in 1807, remarked about philosophy, is “something solitary,” and this not only because I am alone in what Plato speaks of as the “soundless dialogue with myself” (*Sophist* 263e), but because in this dialogue there always reverberates something “unutterable” which cannot be brought fully to sound through language and articulated in speech, and which, therefore, is not communicable, not to others and not to the thinker himself. It is presumably this “unsayable,” of which Plato speaks in the Seventh Letter, that makes thinking such a lonely business and yet forms the ever varied fertile soil from which it rises up and constantly renews itself. One could well imagine that—though this is hardly the case with Heidegger—the passion of thinking might suddenly beset the most gregarious man and, in consequence of the solitude it requires, ruin him.

The first and, so far as I know, the only one who has ever spoken of thinking as a *pathos*, as something to be borne by enduring it, was Plato, who, in the *Theaetetus* (155d), calls wonder the beginning of philosophy; he certainly does not mean by this the mere surprise or astonishment that arises in us when we encounter something strange. For the wonder that is the beginning of thinking—as surprise and astonishment may well be the beginning of the sciences—applies to the everyday, the matter-of-course, what we are thoroughly acquainted and familiar with; this is also the reason why it cannot be quieted by any knowledge whatever. Heidegger speaks once, wholly in Plato’s sense, of the “faculty of wondering at the simple,” but, differently from Plato, he adds, “and of taking up and accepting this wondering as one’s abode” (*Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 1954, Part III, p. 259).

This addition seems to me decisive for reflecting on who Martin Heidegger is. For many—so we hope—are acquainted with thinking and the solitude bound up with it; but clearly, they do not have their residence there. When wonder at the simple overtakes them and, yielding to the wonder, they engage in thinking, they know they have been torn out of their habitual place in the continuum of occupations in which human affairs take place, and will return to it again in a little while. The abode of which Heidegger speaks lies therefore, in a metaphorical sense, outside the habitations of men; and although “the winds of thought,” which Socrates (according to Xenophon) was perhaps the first to mention, can be strong indeed, still these storms are even a degree more metaphorical than the metaphor of “storms of the age.”

Compared with other places in the world, the habitations of human affairs, the residence of the thinker is a “place of stillness” (*Zur Sache des Denkens*, p. 75). Originally it is wonder itself which begets and spreads the stillness; and it is because of this stillness that being shielded against all sounds, even the sound of one’s own voice, becomes an indispensable condition for thinking to evolve out of wonder. Enclosed in this stillness there happens a peculiar metamorphosis which affects everything falling within the dimension of thinking in Heidegger’s sense. In its essential seclusion from the world, thinking always has to do only with things absent, with matters, facts, or events which are withdrawn from direct perception. If you stand face to face with a man, you perceive him, to be sure, in his bodily presence, but you are not *thinking* of him. And if you think about him while he is present, you are secretly withdrawing from the direct encounter. In order to come close, in thinking, to a thing or to a human being, it or he must lie for direct perception in the distance. Thinking, says Heidegger, is “coming-into-nearness to the distant” (*Gelassenheit* p. 45; cf. *Discourse on Thinking*, p. 68).

One can easily bring this point home by a familiar experience. We go on journeys in order to see things in faraway places; in the course of this it often happens that the things we have seen come close to us only in retrospect or recollection, when we no longer are in the power of the immediate impression—it is as if they disclose their meaning only when they are no longer present. This inversion of relationship—that thinking removes what is close by, withdrawing from the near and drawing the distant into nearness—is decisive if we wish to find an answer to the question of where we are when we think. Recollection, which in thinking becomes remembrance, has played so prominent a role as a mental faculty in the history of thinking about thinking, because it guarantees us that nearness and remoteness, as they are given in sense perception, are actually susceptible of such an inversion.

Heidegger has expressed himself only occasionally, by suggestion, and for the most part negatively, about the “abode” where he feels at home, the residence of thinking—as when he says that thinking’s questioning is not “part of everyday life...it gratifies no urgent or prevailing need. The questioning itself is ‘out of order.’ ” (*An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Anchor Books, 1961, pp. 10-11). But this nearness-remoteness relation and its inversion in thinking pervades Heidegger’s whole work, like a key to which everything is attuned. Presence and absence, concealing and revealing, nearness and remoteness—their interlinkage and the connections prevailing among them—have next to nothing to do with the truism that there could not be presence unless absence were experienced, nearness without remoteness, discovery without concealment.

Seen from the perspective of thinking’s abode, “withdrawal of Being” or “oblivion of Being” reigns in the ordinary world which surrounds the thinker’s residence, the “familiar realms...of everyday life,” i.e., the loss of that with which thinking—which by nature clings to the absent—is concerned. Annulment of this “withdrawal,” on the other side, is always paid for by a withdrawal from the world of human affairs, and this remoteness is never more manifest than when thinking ponders exactly these affairs, training them into its own sequestered stillness. Thus, Aristotle, with the great example of Plato still vividly in view, has already strongly advised philosophers against dreaming of the philosopher-king who would rule *ta ton anthropon pragmata*, the realm of human affairs.

“The faculty of wondering,” at least occasionally, “at the simple” is presumably inherent in all humans, and the thinkers well-known to us from the past and in the present should then be distinguished by having developed out of this wonder the capacity to think and to unfold the trains of thought that were in each case suitable to them. However, the faculty of “taking up this wondering as one’s permanent abode” is a different matter. This is extraordinarily rare, and we find it documented with some degree of certainty only in Plato, who expressed himself more than once and most drastically in the *Theaetetus* (173d to 176) on the dangers of such a residence.

There too, he tells, apparently for the first time, the story of Thales and the Thracian peasant girl, who, watching the “wise man” glance upward in order to observe the stars only to fall into the well, laughed that someone who wants to know the sky should be so ignorant of what lies at his feet. Thales, if we are to trust Aristotle, was very much offended—the more so as his fellow citizens used to scoff at his poverty—and he proved by a large speculation in oil presses that it was an easy matter for “wise men” to get rich if they were to set their hearts on it (*Politics*, 1259a ff.). And since books, as everyone knows, are not written by peasant girls, the laughing Thracian child had still to submit to Hegel’s saying about her that she had no sense at all for higher things.

Plato who, in the *Republic*, wanted not only to put an end to poetry but also to forbid laughter, at least to the class of guardians, feared the laughter of his fellow citizens more than the hostility of those holding opinions opposed to the philosopher’s claim to absolute truth. Perhaps it was Plato himself who knew how likely it is that the thinker’s residence, seen from the outside, will look like the Aristophanic Cloud-cuckoo-land. At any rate, he was aware of the philosopher’s predicament: if he wants to carry his thoughts to market, he is likely to become the public laughingstock; and this, among other things, may have induced him, at an advanced age, to set out for Sicily three times in order to set the tyrant of Syracuse right by teaching him mathematics as the indispensable introduction to philosophy and hence to the art of ruling as a philosopher king.

He didn’t notice that this fantastic undertaking, if seen from the peasant girl’s perspective, looks considerably more comical than Thales’s mishap. And to a certain extent he was right in not noticing; for, so far as I know, no student of philosophy has ever dared to laugh, and no writer who has described this episode has even smiled. Men have obviously not yet discovered what laughter is good for—perhaps because their thinkers, who have always been ill-disposed toward laughter, have let them down in this respect, even though a few of them have racked their brains over the question of what makes us laugh.

Now we all know that Heidegger, too, once succumbed to the temptation to change his “residence” and to get involved in the world of human affairs. As to the world, he was served somewhat worse than Plato, because the tyrant and his victims were not located beyond the sea, but in his own country.³ As to Heidegger himself, I believe that the matter stands differently. He was still young enough to learn from the shock of the collision, which after ten short hectic months thirty-seven years ago drove him back to his residence, and to settle in his thinking what he had experienced.

What emerged from this was his discovery of the will as “the will to will” and hence as the “will to power.” In modern times and above all in the modern age, much has been written about the will, but despite Kant, despite even Nietzsche, not very much has been found out about its nature. However that may be, no one

before Heidegger saw how much this nature stands opposed to thinking and affects it destructively. To thinking there belongs “*Gelassenheit*”—serenity, composure, release, a state of relaxation, in brief, a disposition that “lets be.” Seen from the standpoint of the will the thinker must say, only apparently in paradox, “I will non-willing”; for only “by way of this,” only when we “wean ourselves from will,” can we “release ourselves into the sought-for nature of the thinking that is not a willing” (*Gelassenheit*, p. 32f.; cf. *Discourse on Thinking*, pp. 59-60).

We who wish to honor the thinkers, even if our own residence lies in the midst of the world, can hardly help finding it striking and perhaps exasperating that Plato and Heidegger, when they entered into human affairs, turned to tyrants and Führers. This should be imputed not just to the circumstances of the times and even less to preformed character, but rather to what the French call a *déformation professionnelle*. For the attraction to the tyrannical can be demonstrated theoretically in many of the great thinkers (Kant is the great exception). And if this tendency is not demonstrable in what they did, that is only because very few of them were prepared to go beyond “the faculty of wondering at the simple” and to “accept this wondering as their abode.”

With these few it does not finally matter where the storms of their century may have driven them. For the wind that blows through Heidegger’s thinking—like that which still sweeps toward us after thousands of years from the work of Plato—does not spring from the century he happens to live in. It comes from the primeval, and what it leaves behind is something perfect, something which, like everything perfect (in Rilke’s words), falls back to where it came from.

(Translated from the German by Albert Hofstadter)

Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) was a German political theorist who, over the course of many books, explored themes such as violence, revolution, and evil. Her major works include *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition*, and the controversial *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in which she coined the phrase “the banality of evil.”

Albert Hofstadter

1. This short poetical work has been translated and will appear under the title *The Thinker as Poet* in the near future in a volume of translations from Heidegger entitled *Poetry, Language, Thought*, by the present translator, in the Harper & Row series of Heidegger’s *Works* under the general editorship of Professor J. Glenn Gray. (Tr.) ↵
2. Cf. the translation of this work under the title *Discourse on Thinking*, done by J. M. Anderson and E. H. Freund (Harper & Row, 1966), p. 46. (Tr.) ↵
3. This episode, which today—now that the embitterment has cooled and, above all, the innumerable canards have been somehow set right—is usually called an “error,” has many aspects, among others that of the Weimar Republic, which didn’t at all display itself to those who lived in it in the rosy light in which, viewed against the horror of what followed, it is nowadays often seen. ↵