

Miles Groth translates Martin Heidegger's

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT ON THE CONFERMENT OF THE NATIONAL HEBEL MEMORIAL PRIZE

Translator's Note: This brief address was given by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) on May 10, 1960, during a three-day commemorative festival honoring the bicentenary of Johann Peter Hebel's birth. The speech was first published in *Hebel-Feier. Reden zum 200. Geburtstag des Dichters* (1960). During his life, Heidegger published several other brief reflections on Hebel and a longer study entitled *Hebel—der Hausfreund* (1957), which has been reprinted in *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens 1910-1976* (1983), Volume 13 of the *Heidegger Gesamtausgabe*.

The poems in Hebel's *Alemannische Gedichte*, which first appeared in 1803, are written in the High German Alemannic dialect spoken in the extreme western part of Austria and in the region of Heidegger's birthplace, Messkirch, in the Swabian Alps. They are now available in Hebel's *Gesammelte Werke* (1960). Wilhelm Altwegg, whom Heidegger mentions towards the end of his address, prepared the third edition of Hebel's *Werke* in 1943 and in the same year published a critical edition of the *Alemannische Gedichte*. Altwegg also published a biography of Hebel in 1935, which is Volume 22 of *Die Schweiz im deutschen Geistesleben*.

The line with which Heidegger begins his discussion of Hebel is from "Der Wegweiser [The Guide Post]" :

Doch wandle du in Gottis-Furcht!
i roth der, was i rothe cha.
Sel Plätzli he e gheimi Thür,
und 's sin no Sachen ehne dra.

Walk then in fear of God!
I tell you this, if I may say:
That little place has a secret door
and, there, still other things come into play.

Heidegger's gloss of Hebel's line includes, essentially, a direct quotation from the penultimate stanza of the poem:

Wo mag der Weg zum Chilchhof sy?
Was frogsch no lang? Gang, wo de witt!
Zum stille Grab im chüele Grund
führt iede Weg, und 's fehlt si nit.

What's the way to the churchyard gate?
What do you care? Go where you will,
You'll not fail to get there.
All ways lead to earth's chill grave.

Bayard Taylor translated the two stanzas as follows:

And now, the road to Church-yard gate
You needn't ask! Go anywhere!
For whether roundabout or straight,
All roads, at last, 'll bring you there.

and

Go, fearin' God, but lovin' more!—
I've tried to be an honest guide,—
You'll find the grave has got a door,
And somethin' for you t'other side

I mention this "folksy" translation only because it appeared in the year of Heidegger's birth (1889).

The couplet cited at the end of Heidegger's address is from "Auf den Tod eines Zechers [On the Death of a Drunk]."

Heidegger's Acceptance Comments

Honorable Minister!

Mr. President of the Basel Hebel Foundation!

Mr. Vogt von Huuse!

Dear Friends of Hebel! Dear Citizens of Todtnau!

I thank you sincerely, Honorable Minister, for the honor of being awarded the Hebel Prize. Even though I may have this distinction bestowed on me, honor and praise belong only to the poet, to his native land, and to what he has come to mean throughout the world.

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The final line of the last of Hebel's *Alemannic Poems* reads:

und 's sin no Sachen ehne dra.

and, there, still other things come into play.

namely, on the other side of the quiet grave in earth's cold ground.

Sel Plätzli het e gheimi Tür,
und 's sin no Sachen ehne dra.

That little place has a secret door
and, there, still other things come into play.

We note the fact that this final line closes the *Alemannic Poems*, yet in such a way that at the same time it discloses them and for the first time opens them up as a whole. Where?

There, in that domain, that of all poetry, where any thinking originates. Accordingly, it is not only acceptable, but even necessary for every thoughtful hearing of it, to discern the sound of this last line everywhere in the lines of all the poems.

and, there, still other things come into play.

Things? In the poem "The Summer Evening," these "things" call out of the sun's extraordinary and therefore stunning daily round:

Es isch e Sach, bi miner Treu,
am Morge Gras und z'obe Heu!

There's something strange
on the morning grass and evening hay.

Something strange. Inasmuch as no thing is understood in and of itself, each thing is **something strange**. Every essence has a secret door into the mystery through which it advances and appears over against us.

The poet's calling is to show this secret door in all things or even to escort us through it. Only Johann Peter Hebel, who was permitted to comply with the poetic calling in a unique way, discerned early on what we call the mysterious in everything and brought to expression that which is **something strange** in every thing. Ten years *before* the appearance of the *Alemannic Poems*, however, Hebel wrote the following in a great poem he did not publish, but which was discovered by Wilhelm Altwegg:

Die Sprache, die in Tönen schallt,
Der Laut, der sich durch Silben bricht
Die Sprache, die im Echo hallt,
Sie sagt es nicht, und kann es nicht
Wie selig sichs im Nichts zerwallt.

Language that intones in sounds,
Speech that breaks on syllables,
Language that resounds in echo:
It does not say, it cannot say how it goes
Blissfully asunder into nothingness.

And the following lines from the same poem, which bears the title "Ekstase" are even more intense:

Kein Wort der Sprache sagt's —
Kein Bild das Lebens malts

No word says it —
No picture of life paints it

Yet the inconceivable, present in the poetic word, draws close to man—in audible to the ear in the silence of things whose illumination in their essence is invisible to the senses.

When we thus hold the poetic word of Johann Peter Hebel to our inward ear and keep it before the eyes of our heart, we render the poet his proper honor and give Hebel the praise that befits him. And so each of us becomes a holder of the Hebel Prize, though unacclaimed as such. These unknown holders of the Hebel Prize say nothing to each other in the silence of the words which originate only with Hebel, words that can be spoken about Johann Peter Hebel, words in which everything comes together. Here, then, are two lines from the first verse of the next to last of the *Alemannic Poems*:

Gang, wo de witt, suech no so ein!
Sei isch verbei, de findsch mer kein

Go where you will, searching for one such as him!
He's gone. You won't find the like of him again.

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