

Heidegger on Hebel: The Inexhaustible Depth of “Things”

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Heidegger’s appreciation for Hebel’s poetry is not sufficiently noted. He saw in Hebel a lover of things, the poet of things. This is perhaps never more evident than in Heidegger’s brief remarks given in thanks for being awarded the Hebel Prize at the celebration of the poet’s 200th birthday held in Wiesental, May 10, 1960 [GA 16: 565-67; my translation*].

This little talk is hardly known, but it beautifully reveals the Heidegger that I think we must always keep in view; and I have a planned essay on it. But for this brief talk, I will get right to the point.

Heidegger shares with his audience how he cherishes Hebel’s *Alemannic Poems*, the poems written in the Alemannic dialect spoken in the Swabian region. On this day, Heidegger highlights Hebel’s reference to “things,” *Sachen*, and he refers to a charming poem by Hebel titled “The Summer Evening” (*Der Sommerabend*). The poem describes the manifold activities of the sun each day, and Heidegger makes note of all the “things” that are touched by the sun in its “astonishing daily work.” The sun gently illuminates the wondrous character of every particular “thing,” every individual being. And he cites one line from the poem (in the Alemannic dialect):

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

I render it in standard German:

*Es ist eine Sache, bei meiner Treu,
am Morgen Gras und am Abend Heu!*

And in English translation:

It is a thing, I do say,

In the morning grass and evening hay!

Heidegger focuses on “*e Sach*” or “*eine Sache*”—“a thing”—and he offers his audience this striking commentary:

e Sach—this is to say: something astonishing because full of mystery. Insofar as no thing is understood on the face of it, each thing is “a thing” [that is wondrous]. Every being “has a secret door” [het e geheimi Tür] into the mystery, through which the being comes forth and shines forth toward us. The calling of the poet is: to point to this “secret door” in all things or even to guide us through it.

In just these few lines we learn from Heidegger, in yet another way, that there is a depth to every “thing” that cannot be exhausted by the word, even the poet’s word. Every being is always *more* than what we can say or think about it; every being is always *more*—it exceeds or overflows—sense or meaning.

And Heidegger underscores this by citing two lines from another poem by Hebel, *Ekstase*:

No word of language says it—

No picture of life paints it

The poet “brings each thing into word.” Yet, it is never sufficient because there always remains what is more, “the unthinkable” [*das Unausdenkbare*]:

The unthinkable becomes present in the poetic word; it draws near to the human being.

A being is present to us in the word, but it is always more than the word. The “unthinkable” remains. There always remains the “mystery” of each and every “thing.”

Similarly, there always remains the inexhaustible depth of Being (be-ing)—the singular ontological temporal process or “way” (the Being-way) whereby and wherein all “things” come to be. For this very reason, Being has so many names in Heidegger’s thinking, among them: *physis*, *aletheia*, the primordial *Logos*, *kosmos*, *hen*, *Ereignis*, *Lichtung*. And it is our task to name Being—the inexhaustible “it” that “gives” (*Es gibt*)—yet again in our own way and in our own words.

*With thanks to Miles Groth, whose earlier translation I have consulted, *Delos*, 19-20 (1997), 30-34, but note that I have made significant changes. For more on Hebel, see my *Heidegger’s Way of Being*, 47-49.