Heidegger in Benjamin's City

Jeff Malpas

On the steep slope/of a mountain valley/a little chalet/eighteen feet by twenty /all around/meadow and pinewood … – Kenneth White, 'Black Forest – Heidegger at Home', in Open World. The Collected Poems 1960-2000 (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2003), p.92.

The work of Walter Benjamin is inextricably bound with the images and ideas associated with the metropolitan spaces and places that figure so prominently in his writing, and in close proximity to which his own life, from his childhood in Berlin to the last years in Paris, was lived. The work of Martin Heidegger, on the other hand, is usually taken to bring with it an almost entirely contrary set of associations – those of the rural and the provincial, of the peasant and the countryside – that can be seen as themselves deriving from Heidegger's own rootedness in the Alemannic-Swabian countryside, and in particular, his connection to the village of Messkirch in which he was born, in which he spent his childhood, and in whose churchyard he lies buried. It would seem that the distance between Benjamin and Heidegger – between Paris and Messkirch – could not be greater. But to what extent is Heidegger's apparent attachment to the provincial and the rural actually tied to the philosophical positions that he developed? Might it be the case that such details of personal attitude and preference are actually secondary to a more basic and philosophically salient set of considerations in which the difference between the metropolitan and the provincial, at least as ordinarily understood, is of much less significance than it might otherwise appear? How might Heidegger find himself in Benjamin's city, and what might be the place of the city in Heidegger's own thought? Moreover, what light might such considerations shed, in turn, on the work of Benjamin, and how might Benjamin be placed in relation to the landscape in which Heidegger's locates himself?

Let us start, however, by leaving Benjamin, and the city, to one side for the moment, and looking instead to the provincialism that seems so apparent in Heidegger– a provincialism that is often taken to be most clearly expressed, not only in his attachment to his home village of Messkirch, but also by the role played by another place, and a particular building in that place, namely, Todtnauberg, in the Black Forest, and the small two room hut Heidegger built there.[1] It was to this hut that Heidegger retreated in times of personal crisis, as well as in times of intense philosophical productivity – it was there that the final draft of Being and Time was completed – and it was also to the hut that Heidegger invited his most important guests. The significance of the hut, and its rural location, in Heidegger's life, and so also, one might assume, in his thought, is indicated by the short essay, published in 1934 (and first given as a radio talk the same year), 'Why Do I Stay in The Provinces?' There he describes the world of Todtnauberg:

[1] See Adam Scharr's Heidegger's Hut (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).

On the steep slope of a wide mountain valley in the southern Black Forest, at an elevation of 1150 meters, there stands a small ski hut. The floor plan measures six meters by seven. The low-hanging roof cover three rooms: the kitchen, which is also the living room, a bedroom, and a study. Scattered at wide intervals throughout the narrow base of the valley and on the equally steep slope opposite, lie the farm houses with their large overhanging roofs. Higher up the slope the meadows and pasture lands lead to the woods with its dark fir-trees, old and towering. Over everything there stands a clear summer sky, and in its radiant expanse two hawks glide around in wide circles.[2]

The reality of this world, Heidegger tells us, has a space opened for it by the work undertaken within it, a work that 'remains embedded in what happens in the region', and he goes on:

This philosophical work does not take its course like the aloof studies of some eccentric. It belongs right in the midst of the peasants' work. When the young farmboy drags his heavy sled up the slope and guides it, piled high with beech logs , down the dangerous slope to his house, when the herdsman, lost in thought and slow of step, drives his cattle up the slope, when the farmer in his shed gets the countless shingles ready for his roof, my work is of the same sort. It is intimately rooted in and connected to the life of the peasants… The inner relationship of my own work to the Black Forest and its people comes from a centuries-long and irreplaceable rootedness in the Alemannic-Swabian soil … my whole work is sustained and guided by the world of these mountains and their people.[3]

Moreover, Heidegger himself draws attention to the contrast between the world of Todtnauberg and the world of the city. In particular, and in contrast with mountain landscape of Todtnauberg, the city leaves no space for the solitariness of thought that allows things to come near to us in their simple and essential presence. The city, Heidegger tells us, allows for loneliness, but not for solitude; it fosters 'a very active and very fashionable obtrusiveness' that brings with it the risk of 'destructive error'.[4] Given Heidegger's own tendency to employ images drawn from rural life and landscapes, the attitude and feeling articulated in this essay readily appear as giving us a true insight into the sustaining ground and essence of Heidegger's thought – so much so that we may conclude that Heidegger's thought is not merely rooted in peasant life, but actively extols it in opposition to the rise of the urban, the metropolitan, and also, of course, the modern.

The solitude that Heidegger finds in the mountain landscape of Todtnauberg has, says Heidegger, 'the peculiar and original power not of isolating us but of projecting our whole existence out into the vast nearness of the presence [Wesen] of all things,'[5] and what dominates in his descriptions of Todtnauberg is indeed a

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[2] 'Why Do I Stay in The Provinces', in Thomas Sheehan (ed.), Heidegger: The Man and The Thinker (Chicago: Precedent, 1981), p.27.

[3] Ibid., p.28.

[4] Ibid., p.29.

[5] Ibid., p.28.

certain clarity and lucidity in the simple being there of the landscape, and of that which is found within it – a landscape that is not observed, but emerges in and through the active engagement in and with it. The solitude that Heidegger finds in Todtnauberg is thus as much a solitariness of the thing – a standing out into the world – as it is a solitariness experienced by Heidegger himself, and yet it is also not a solitude that is constituted through isolation, but rather the solitude that comes from the letting-be that allows things to be present as what they are, but also, therefore, in intimate connection with that to which they belong.

If this is the solitude that Heidegger fears is lost in the city, then this is perhaps partly because, as critics from Simmel to Soja have often observed, what one finds in the city is never the thing as it simply stands forth in its own presence, but rather a constant proliferation of things, or rather, of the appearances of things, in Simmel's words: 'the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions.'[6] The experience of the city as an experience of multiple images obtained through one's own movement as well as the movement that characterizes the urban surroundings through which one moves, is an essential part of the experience of the flâneur as he strolls through the city taking in its sounds and especially its sights – for the experience of the city in Simmel, as well as is Benjamin, is intimately tied to the visual – as a constantly changing montage in which images are juxtaposed with and overlaid by other images. Thus, as has frequently been observed, the city is itself essentially cinematic, and so Benjamin can imagine the very spatial form of the city as itself transformed into film, and the act of flânerie as itself achieving something like such a cinematic transformation:

> Couldn't an exciting film be made from the map of Paris? From the unfolding of its various aspects in temporal succession? From the compression of a centuries-long movement of streets, boulevards, arcades, and squares into the space of half an hour? And does the flâneur do anything different?[7]

Although Benjamin's interest in the flâneur is an interest in a phenomenon that belongs, properly, to the nineteenth century, rather than the twentieth, the flâneur provides both a means to uncover certain aspects of the past, as well as to analyse certain critical elements of the future – the flâneur thereby allows access to both the advent of modernity as well as to that which it portends. Consequently, Benjamin's most essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical reproduction', while making no mention of the flâneur nor of the Parisien arcades, is nevertheless also

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[6] Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', The Sociology of Georg Simmel, ed. Kurt Wolff (New York: 1950), p.410.

[7] Benjamin, The Arcades Project, trans. Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1999), (C 1, 9), p.83.

preoccupied with the image, its multiplication and transformation, as lying at the heart of the experience of the modern.

If we try to place Heidegger in this modern city of images, then it seems that we immediately find Heidegger in a position that must be counter-posed to Benjamin. Indeed, Heidegger's own essay on the work of art, which was first given as a lecture the year before the appearance of Benjamin's famous essay, appears to assert the primacy of the artwork in its singularity as a work in a way that seems to be consistent with Heidegger's emphasis on the solitude of the thing in his 'Provinces' talk – not only does it hark back to a pre-modern paradigm, that of the Greeks, and a work as it stands within a natural landscape, but it also focuses on the way that work, in its own self-standing presence, gathers world and earth to it – and also stands against what Benjamin's declares to be the destruction of the singularity and solitude of the work that occurs as a result of its reproducibility, and the proliferation of its image. It is hard to imagine Heidegger in the role of flâneur, but it is perhaps equally strange to imagine him in the cinema, and the reason is surely the same in both cases: neither flâneurie nor cinema allow for the kind of 'dwelling' that is involved in letting things stand forth in the singular presence (a dwelling that appears in contrast to Benjamin's occasional use of that notion); both flâneurie and cinema constantly move us onward, away from the thing, into a constantly fleeting set of images and impressions. In terms of the language of Heidegger's Being and Time, whether we walk the streets with the flâneur or sit before the flickering images of the cinema, we are in each case immersed in the world of the anyone, of the anonymous das Man – dispersed, displaced and distracted – literally, in the case of the flâneur, in the world of the crowd.

Inasmuch as the city is seen as essentially tied to such anonymous dispersal, to such movement and proliferation, and inasmuch as such dispersal and proliferation is seen, in Heidegger, as tied to the 'forgetfulness' of being, the 'forgetfulness' of the presence of things, that is characteristic of modernity, then the city must be the essential locale for such forgetfulness – with Benjamin, perhaps, as one of its most conscientious attendants. Yet one should be cautious about one's conclusions here. It would, I suggest, be grossly mistaken to treat Benjamin as exemplifying the kind of 'forgetting' that Heidegger may be said to have in mind here – although it is true that Benjamin's response to, as well as his understanding of, what such forgetting may consist in is rather different from that which is found in Heidegger. The concern with the presence, the nearness, of things can also be discerned in Benjamin, but it is pursued precisely through the preoccupation with the image, its multiplication, and its condensation, even its remnants as 'trace' – 'The trace is appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be [...] In the trace, we gain possession of the thing'.[8] In Benjamin the problem of what Heidegger refers to as the 'nearness of the presence of things' is not absent nor is its overlooked, but rather it is explored through the specifically urban spaces and

[8] See Benjamin, The Arcades Project, p.447.

places that do indeed appear to be so characteristic of modernity. Here the presence of things is no less possible, and no less significant, than in the rural landscape that to which Heidegger seems to refer us, even though the way in which that presence is formed may appear somewhat differently.

If the focus in Benjamin's work is said to be on the image, then the image can be understood either in terms of a mode of presence of the thing or its absence. Understood as the mode by which the thing is present, then the image, which is never a single image, but always multiple, can be said to allow a presencing of the very multiplicity that is already given in the thing. It is when we focus on the image as the surrogate for the thing, as its replacement, and at the same time treat the image as unitary rather than multiple in itself, that the image turns out to lead away from the thing, or, at least, solidifies the thing into a single presentation in which the thing, as always itself multiple, is effectively lost. What the proliferation of the image can enable – whether that proliferation arises through the movement of the city-street or of the cinematic projection – is a realization of the manner in which the thing always supports a multitude of images, without the necessary loss of the thing itself. Indeed, it is through that proliferation that the thing as thing is itself made available. In this way, the image may lead us back to the thing in a way in which the mere concentration of attention on the thing in its apparent solitude can also be seen to have the potential to lead us away from the thing through encouraging an identification of the thing simply with the singular appearance that it presents in any one moment of its presence. Heidegger can be seen to argue against the forgetfulness of the thing whether that forgetfulness arises through the treatment of the thing as merely identical with its presence in the present, and so as present in a single appearance, as well as against the loss of the thing that might be thought to occur through the proliferation of the image. Yet what Heidegger seems not to attend to, and what Benjamin may perhaps bring to our attention, is the continuing presence of the thing in the midst of the multiplicity of its images, and the potential in such proliferation, therefore, for a reawakening of what the thing itself may be that always exceeds that which is given in the merely present or in the single image.

The way the presence of the thing appears in Benjamin is not only through the proliferation of the image in relation to the thing, but also through the possibility of the recapturing of the thing through its traces. Thus the solidification of memories within the complex and constantly overwritten texture of the city allows for the ever-present possibility of things appearing and re-appearing in ways that draw attention to their character as things, precisely through the way in which they remain, even if only as traces or memories. The possibility of things persisting in this way, in spite of the loss that may occur over time, is indicative both of the way the city may serve to preserve things in their traces or remnants (as the city constantly overwrites itself, it also retains something of that which is written over), and also the character of the city as itself built up through the retaining of things in their remnants and traces. Benjamin's project, then, is one that is directed at the constant excavation of such traces, and the recuperation of the lives of things in the life of the city – and in doing

so, illuminating the complex character of the thing, and of the spaces and places in which, in a sense that is not entirely disconnected from Heidegger, it does indeed dwell.

The path back to the thing that leads through the city street or the Parisian arcade or, alternatively, by way of the flickering interiority of the cinema, is a path that allows the thing to be seen in the way it is embedded, almost archaeologically, one might say, within a dense deposit of things, paths, images. Even in its solitude, then, the thing, like the thinker, never stands alone. One way of grasping the embeddedness of the thing in its world, which may perhaps be clearer to grasp within the densely packed space of the city, than in the openness of the countryside, is through deconstructing the separation between the spaces of the interior and of the exterior – not merely between the spaces within which the thing may be located as opposed to the spaces that lie without, but also the space that might be thought to lie interior to the thing as opposed to its own externality. Moreover, this spatial deconstruction must apply not only to the thing, but also to the one who finds herself already standing in a relation to the thing. While the flâneur may stand somewhat outside and apart from that which he observes, what he observes is nevertheless also part of his own mental and material mode of being. The attraction of flâneurie is thus the attraction to be found in the exploration of a dream work in which one is oneself caught up even as one already recognises it as a dream world. In Heidegger's Being and Time, the way in which the world emerges for a being that has a sense of its own there, is through its movement in and through a multiply connected network of things, places and regions, bound together in the temporality of care, but from which that mode of being can never disentangle itself. In both Heidegger and Benjamin, though in very different ways, the spatial deconstruction of the dichotomy of interior and exterior (which is not to say its dissolution) is integral to allowing the thing, and the self, to appear in their presence as singular, and yet also as essentially connected within the mutuality and multiplicity of the world.

The idea of the thing that emerges here, and that is tied always to multiplicity in spite of Heidegger's sometime preference for a language of solitariness and singularity, is actually an idea that is essentially bound to a certain conception of the public realm that is exemplified in, though not restricted to, the specific form of the built city. The multiplicity of the thing, and the way in which the thing is present through its multiple character, is possible only through the multiple character of its relatedness to the human. The deconstruction of the space of interiority and exteriority is not only, in this regard, a deconstruction of a certain spatial separation in respect of the thing, nor even of the individual self in relation to the thing, but also of the self in relation to others. The theme of transparency that one finds so prominent in Benjamin (the transparency that he takes to be an essential characteristic of modernity) is, once again, not a transparency that is to be understood in terms of a loss of self, other, or of thing, but rather in terms of the essentially embeddedness of things, their nesting, in relation to other things, of their

mutual incorporation and implication. Moreover, the multiplicity of the thing is directly tied to the multiplicity of the public realm which is itself made possible through its unification in the thing as singular. This is, of course, a theme that is particularly evident in Arendt, but it is a theme that one can perhaps view Arendt as already taking from Heidegger, and that is also present, though in much less clear-cut fashion in Benjamin. The city, which is to say, the concrete space, of human being together, is the space in which we are constantly engaged in a process of negotiation of self and other, through our relatedness to one another in our corporeality, including the corporeality of speech, and as that is enabled through our mutual engagement with the multiply present thing. Thus Heidegger can speak of the city, understood in terms of the Greek 'polis', as:

> …the πολος the pole, around which everything appearing to the Greeks as a being turns in a peculiar way. The pole is the place around which all beings turn and precisely in such a way that in the domain of this place beings show their turning and their condition…The πολις is the essence of the place [Ort], or, as we say, it is the settlement [Ort-schatf] of the historical dwelling of Greek humanity…Between πολις and being there is a primordial relation.[9]

Here Heidegger's emphasis is on the polis as that place in which human being establishes the 'there' of its own being, which is always a 'there' belonging to the many rather than the one – a 'there' that must be always multiple and never single in any simple fashion – and so also as the place in which being, that is, the nearness of the presence of things, also comes to light.

The fact that this 'nearness of presence' always occurs in a place, albeit a place that opens into and out of multiplicity, means, however, that such presence always occurs with respect to a certain sort of singularity, even if it is not that of a simple singleness. Moreover, the appearing of things in this place, and the appearing of self, both in terms of an experience of personalized interiority and of public exteriority, is always both an experience of being drawn into and belonging to this place, as well as of being able to stand apart from it. This dynamic of approach and withdrawal, of belonging and alienation, is evident, to some extent, in the experience of the flâneur, but it is also what u underpins the experience of uncanniness that is such a central element in both Heidegger and Benjamin. Heidegger's own language of the 'homely', as well as of the domestic, and the origin, is always a language that sees these as essentially unhomely, as strange, and estranging – in Heidegger, then, it is crucial to see the way in which the uncanny emerges even in the midst of that which is most familiar – even in the Heimat of Todtnauberg or Messkirch.

The language of Heimat, albeit an uncanny Heimat,[10] need not be construed as applying only to the world presented to us in Heidegger's images of the rural and

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[9] Heidegger, Parmenides, trans. André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp.89-90.

[10] See James Phillips, Heidegger's Volk (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), esp. Chapter Four, pp.169ff.

the provincial. For Benjamin, the streets of Paris and Berlin also appear as a Heimat of sorts, incongruous thought that language might be. Moreover Benjamin too has a work-world – a version perhaps of the Heideggerian hut – that is his own, and in which his work is rooted. One might be tempted to take that work-world to be the city as such, but, as Arendt seems to suggest, the Benjaminian counterpart to the Heideggerian hut is actually the bookroom or library that is itself to be found within the landscape of the city. One might, of course, treat the street as such a library, a library or archive of images, and similarly the space of words that is language can be thought to constitute a library of sorts, and the way both of these may function as part of Benjamin's world should not be overlooked, but the library that is the heart of Benjamin's work-world is surely the actual library, those very book-filled rooms, in which Benjamin wrote and read, in which his work was undertaken, and from which his work emerged.

All thinking has a certain solitariness about it, and for Benjamin it is the library that constitutes the 'solitary' space in which thinking becomes possible – not just the private space of Benjamin's own collection of books (his single most valued possession), but also public spaces such as the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris in which the Arcades Project was undertaken. Contrary to Heidegger, thought is possible in the city – although it is also true that the spaces that the city opens up for thinking may well impress themselves on the character of that thinking in significant, though perhaps not always obvious or expected ways.[11] Benjamin himself seems to have had some sense of the place of his own thinking within the space of the library, and that stands in contrast to Heidegger's evocation of his own embeddedness in the mountain landscape of Todtnauberg. As Benjamin writes of the Arcades Project and its relation to the Bibliothèque Nationale:

> These notes devoted to the Paris Arcades were begun under an open sky of cloudless blue that arched above the foliage; and yet – owing to the millions of leaves that were visited by the breeze of diligence, the stertorous breath of the researcher, the storm of youthful zeal, and the idle wind of curiosity – they've been covered with the dust of centuries. For the painted sky of summer that looks down from the arcades in the reading room of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris has spread out over them its dreamy, unlit ceiling. [12]

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[11] One may argue, of course, that Heidegger does not deny the possibility of thought within the space of the city, but is instead concerned to criticize a certain deadening of thought that takes place within modernity – something that is also the focus of the famous discussion of Das Man in Being and Time §27, H126ff, and that is also briefly taken up by Hannah Arendt in the Preface to Men in Dark Times (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), p.ix. So far as Heidegger's comments in the 'Provinces' essay are concerned, it is important that the particular context of that essay should not be overlooked – it is written just after Heidegger's resignation from the position of Rector at Freiburg.

[12] Benjamin, The Arcades Project (N 1, 5), pp.457-58. W. G. Sebald, a writer who has much in common with Benjamin, has one of his characters, Austerlitz, speak eloquently of the

What matters is perhaps less the character of the particular places in which each thinker – Benjamin and Heidegger – locates their thinking as the way in which both thinkers see that thinking as indeed having a location that is proper to it, that supports, sustains, and also enables it. Both thinkers see their thinking as having an essential placedness, and it is this placedness of thinking that here deserves our primary attention, not whether it is place din relation to the urban or the rural, the French metropolitan or the German provincial. The placedness of thinking that emerges in both thinkers, reflect not only their own placedness, but also their common preoccupation with the character of place, and its philosophical centrality. In both we find a similar topological orientation – an orientation turned toward the topos of their own thinking that is also thereby turned towards topos as such.

Image Gisèle Freund, Walter Benjamin in the Bibliothèque National, 1939.

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same strange place in the rue Richilieu: "In the week I went daily to the Bibliothèque Nationale … and usually remained in my place there until evening, in silent solidarity with the many others immersed in their intellectual labours, losing myself in the small print of the footnotes to the works I was reading, in the books I found mentioned in those notes, then in the footnotes to those books in their own turn, and so escaping from factual, scholarly accounts to the strangest of details, in a kind of continual regression expressed in the form of my own marginal remarks and glosses, which increasingly diverged into the most varied and impenetrable of ramifications. .. my mind often dwelt on the question of whether there in the reading-room of the library, which was full of a quiet humming, rustling and clearing of throats, I was on the Islands of the Blest or, on the contrary, in a penal colony…" – Sebald, Austerlitz (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), pp.363-5.