

James K. Lyon. *Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger:*

An Unresolved Conversation, 1951 – 1970.

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It is a sign of the current vogue – or, perhaps better, mystique – attached to the names of Celan and Heidegger in the U.S. academy that the present study, essentially a well-executed piece of philological spade-work, should be appearing under the imprint of one of the more illustrious university presses. Which is not to suggest that the book is undeserving of publication: Lyon sifts through the available evidence with admirable thoroughness, discovering a proto-Heideggerian poetics in Celan's early essay "The Dream of a Dream"; lingering over the copious squiggles, marginalia and underlinings in Celan's copies of the philosopher's books, many of them personally inscribed to him by the author; rereading the central document of their "unresolved conversation", the much-discussed poem 'Todtnauberg', in the light of eyewitness reports of their seminal 1967 encounter at the philosopher's hillside chalet; and pondering the significance of the fascination that Heidegger's thought continued to exert on Celan as he descended ever deeper into mental illness. Heidegger comes across much more sympathetically than in earlier accounts, which tend to treat 'Todtnauberg' as a public rebuke, an expression of the poet's intense disappointment with the philosopher for refusing to come clean with him on his Nazi past. Lyon argues that after some initial awkwardness, smoothed over thanks to Heidegger's formidable charm, the two got along famously, at least for the duration of their first meeting, and that the poem in which the

meeting was protocolled was intended to prod Heidegger into making a public declaration against nascent neo-Nazi tendencies in postwar German society similar to the private declaration he had just made to Celan. Previous critics, Lyon contends, have been too swayed by the bilious reports of the meeting Celan circulated soon after his return to Paris, failing to realize that sudden affective shifts with regard to Heidegger's person had accompanied the Holocaust survivor's reception of his thought almost from the beginning.

While Lyon shows himself to be an attentive and scrupulous reader of the scrapbook of letters, reminiscences, poems and jottings on the basis of which he reconstructs their relationship, his findings, summarized in the final sentence of the study, wear a little thin: "Each resonated to many of the same sounds, but in the end, it was the dissonance or the different tones within the same music each heard that both connected and separated them." (218) This music, presumably the age-old dirge ground out by the hurdy-gurdy player of Being, caused one to drift into a monodic, mantic trance from which little short of the arrival of a god could stir him, the other to reach out for a dialogic partner, a *Du* who would be able to vouch for his testimony to suffering. Lyon draws parallels and notes differences, especially in Celan's "Meridian" address, the fundamental statement of his poeology, but resists the temptation "to speculate and psychoanalyze" (ix). Instead, the reader is treated to long lists of Heideggerian coinages that supposedly "struck a chord" (17) with Celan, informing his own efforts to forge a new poetic idiom from out of the dross he inherited from the Nazis. Against his stated intention, however, Lyon's pro-Heidegger leaning occasionally leads him to imagine an influence where none exists. At one stage, he remarks that Celan "transcribed without commentary many conventional words or phrases [from *Introduction to Metaphysics*] that apparently were unfamiliar to him", concluding that "the words from the text that he entered in his notebook illustrate his interest in expanding his German vocabulary" (48-49). In fact, what the transcribed phrases have in common is their striking banality, which a man of Celan's sensitivity to language could only have found offensive: "in one stroke" (*mit einem Schlag*); "not to mention" (*geschweige denn*); "thousands upon thousands of trees" (*tausende und abertausende von Bäumen*); "from the two aforementioned" (*von den beiden vorgenannten*); and so on (49). While there can be little doubt that Celan – in most moods, at least – took a more charitable view of Heidegger's style than did Adorno, the idea that he would see fit to enrich his vocabulary with such hackneyed ornaments to professorial portentousness beggars belief; more likely he was following the example of Karl Kraus, whose preferred method of denouncing his opponents was to let them

speak for themselves. As Lyon reminds us, in a clearing amidst its thousands upon thousands of trees, *Introduction to Metaphysics* contains a single notorious reference to the “inner truth and greatness” of the National Socialist movement (56). Celan’s double exclamation marks in the margin say it all.

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