

BOOK REVIEW

Adam Knowles *Heidegger's Fascist Affinities: A Politics of Silence*

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What has come to be known as the “Heidegger affair” has a long history. It turns on the vexed question of the *philosophical import* of Martin Heidegger’s anti-Semitic writings and relationship with Nazism. As the popular quandary goes, “If Heidegger was a great philosopher, then he was not a Nazi, and if he was a Nazi, then he was not a great philosopher” (di Cesare 2018, 1). The controversy began almost immediately after World War II, within the pages of the French existentialist journal *Les temps modernes*. This was to be revived in the 1960s, the 1980s, and the 2000s (Malpas 2016, 3). Most recently, Heidegger scholarship was thrown into crisis once again with the publication of the *Black Notebooks*.

The *Black Notebooks* are so-called for the black oilcloth booklets into which Heidegger wrote down his thoughts from 1931 to the early 1970s. There are at least thirty-six notebooks, the first three volumes of which, spanning the years 1931-1941, were published in the spring of 2014. These were followed by a fourth volume, spanning the years 1942-1948, which was published in 2015. Since then, notable anthologies and a book-length analysis have sifted through the issues re-introduced by the *Notebooks* (see di Cesare 2018, Mitchell and Trawny 2017, and Farin and Malpas 2016). These issues primarily concern what Malpas (2016, 5) calls “the role of the personal in philosophical thought and engagement.” This is because the *Black Notebooks* contain new revelations about Heidegger’s evolving stance toward Nazism and his thoughts concerning “World Jewry,” so much so that, as di Cesare (2018, viii) notes, “Heidegger’s antisemitism (*sic*) cannot in any way be minimized, much less denied.”

It also cannot be denied that the *Black Notebooks* have a special status among the body of Heidegger’s philosophical output. Von Hermann (2016, 90-91) characterizes the *Notebooks* as “ontohistorical, critical commentaries about contemporary affairs.” Serving as a companion and supplement to Heidegger’s ontohistorical thinking, they can only be understood in terms of his major works. Indeed, Heidegger considered them to be part of the preparatory steps toward a planned sequel to *Being and Time* (Fain 2016, 292). In them, he develops the nascent topological thinking evident in the earlier masterwork, i.e. his thinking of the place of being, as well as his critique of technological modernity or *das Gestell* (Malpas 2016, 13). Di Cesare (2018, 10) affirms the *Notebooks’*

status as philosophical writings. In light of Heidegger's express wish concerning their posthumous publication, she writes that "They should have been the *eschaton*—not just the last word, but the absolutely final word, uttered at the final frontier, at the abyss of silence" (11).

Indeed, at the heart of the "Heidegger affair" is Heidegger's own resounding silence concerning what Lang (1996, 5) calls the Jewish Question, as well as "the Jewish Question." The first concerns the place of the Jews among the nations of Europe, which lost currency after the creation of the state of Israel. Meanwhile, the second, in scare quotes, designates the question's new plurality of meanings in the post-Holocaust era. Lang argues that Heidegger remained silent about both. Despite prodding from friends, colleagues, and various interviewers, he never explicitly apologized for nor retracted his early positive statements concerning the Nazi party and Hitler, notwithstanding his later characterization of his position as a form of "spiritual Nazism" that was to be distinguished from "vulgar Nazism." His references to the "gas chambers" and "extermination camps" in his so-called Bremen lectures in 1949 did not address the subjectivity of the victims—i.e. "how those victims came to be victims, who they were and who *made* them victims"—so much as evince only a general critique of technological modernity (19). His silence "constitutes an expressive and significant response *just as* silence. . . . Here silence is not something that can be replaced by words (that is, a silence of omission) but a space in which silence *is* the answer" (28).

Lang's book, *Heidegger's Silence*, is an exegesis of what the philosopher did and did not say concerning Jews. Although they preceded the release of the *Black Notebooks* by almost 20 years, Lang's remarks—concerning the possibility of further revelations from posthumous publications—remain prescient: "... although the possibility cannot be ruled out, there is no reason to believe that the archives contain anything that would amount to a retraction or significant qualification of the [anti-Semitic] statements by Heidegger that have been mentioned. . . ." (26). Echoing Lang's position in light of access to the *Black Notebooks*, Trawny (2016, 176) ultimately accuses Heidegger of ignoring the moral claim of the Shoah. He further notes that his silence about the Shoah has considerable philosophical significance, that it "could be discussed and assessed with reference to Heidegger's own ideas about silence" (177).

Adam Knowles takes up this challenge in *Heidegger's Fascist Affinities: A Politics of Silence* (Stanford University Press, 2019). It is by far the most sustained study of Heidegger's silence in light of his own philosophical thinking about silence, or *sigetics* (after the Greek *σιγή*, or "silence"). "Through a reading centered around the theme of silence, I will ultimately argue that Heidegger's politics and philosophy are not separate entities, but instead constitute an integral, yet complex whole," Knowles writes (8). In making this claim, he adopts one of seven main positions identified by di Cesare (2018, 16) concerning the relationship between Heidegger's philosophical thought and Nazism. He aligns himself with contemporary views that assert a strong continuity between *Being and Time* and Heidegger's subsequent writings, as well as the inseparability of such from his political commitments. For Knowles, the connection between the philosophical and the political inheres in the context of the production of the *Black*

Notebooks themselves. This is because the space of Nazi Germany allowed the performance of silence as *the handicraft of thinking*. While Heidegger did not publicize his critical thoughts about the Nazi party, which he believed was failing at its essential task of the spiritual renewal of the German people and language, the notebooks became for him the site of a non-vulgar politics and language (15-16).

For Knowles, the *Black Notebooks* occasion a major reorientation in Heidegger scholarship, which over the years has evolved in interpretive emphasis: from existentialism to the question of being to the concepts of the event and the thing (32). The *Notebooks*, as Heidegger's most sigetic work, represent the sigetic turn. Knowles also sees his own book as a version of Heidegger's sigetic project; he thus aims to analyze the different manners of keeping silent (i.e. its causes and grounds), as well as the different levels and depths of silence. He identifies three main questions: (1) *What did Heidegger not say in his performance of silence?*, (2) *How did he not say it?*, and (3) *Why did he not say it?* The answers to these questions constitute the content of Heidegger's politics of silence (35).

Knowles proceeds through his project with remarkable comprehensiveness and erudition, drawing on writings by *völkisch* thinkers (Chapter 2), by Heidegger himself (Chapters 3, 4, and 7), and by classical Greek philosophers (Chapters 5 and 6).

The *völkisch* movement, a German ethnic and nationalist movement that preceded the era of Nazism, involved a now-obscure philosophy that has startling affinities with Heidegger's own views concerning silence and authenticity. "Like many Germans of his time, in the 1930s, Heidegger viewed his present with a heavy pessimism and was drawn to the *völkisch* movement's agenda of restoring Germany's political and spiritual greatness" (40). *Völkisch* themes include the idea of an essential Germanic silence that is bound to a Germanic landscape; the equation of capitalism and technological modernity with "World Jewry"; the dichotomy between nomadic (characterized as Jewish) scattering and Germanic or Aryan gathering; and a valorization of the handiwork of the German peasant. Knowles carefully shows the presence of these themes in Heidegger's own writings, concluding that his sigetics is invested with "profoundly anti-Semitic resonances" (56). However, Knowles also notes that there is a key difference between Heidegger and the *völkisch* thinkers, namely his tendency toward a Nazi philhellenism, i.e. his advocacy of a return not to a "pre-Christian ur-Germanic essence" but to a "Greek-Germanic essence" (41).

With regard to Knowles's sigetic analysis of Heidegger's own writings, he devotes a chapter each to *Being and Time*; Heidegger's 1931 lecture on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*; and finally, some post-*Being and Time* lectures and essays, particularly in relation to the sigetic reading of the *Black Notebooks*.

Knowles characterizes *Being and Time* as representative of Heidegger's early philosophy of language. Here, Heidegger critiques traditional philosophy of language, which privileges the spoken word and equates language with logical technics (64). He inveighs against the "scattering effect" of this concept of language in the public sphere (60). On the primordial level, *logos* or discourse is a manner of letting-be-seen or disclosing, which involves understanding and attunement. That is to say, human

communication is not a way of articulating what is “inside”; our being-with-one-another (*Mitdasein*) is already an attunement with, an understanding with. Thus, talking is an expression of Dasein being “outside” (Heidegger 1996, 152). Heidegger thus emphasizes the logic-defying ontological dimensions of language, equating the terms discourse, word, and world (Knowles 2019, 68-69).

However, in *Being and Time*, the notion of silence is presented merely as negative concept set up in opposition to the chatter of idle talk (70). It is contrasted with speaking a lot about something, which covers over the unintelligibility of the trivial. Authentic silence is possible only in genuine discourse, that is, when one truly has something to say (Heidegger 1996, 154). It is the call of conscience which wrenches Dasein from the influence of the average, impersonal “they”; the call to reticence is a reminder that one has nothing of import to say (Knowles 2019, 73). In contrast, in his post-*Being and Time* writings, in particular the 1933 lecture “On the Essence of Truth,” Heidegger rethinks the ontological nature of discourse, realigning it with a positive view of silence. Here, silence becomes not just the absence of language, but “the presence of the absence of language” (75).

Central to Heidegger’s rethinking of his notion of silence, from negative to positive, so to speak, is Aristotle’s concept of withdrawal or *sterēsis*, which “folds nonbeing into being” (80). Knowles writes that Heidegger used this concept to develop the “ontological framework, grammar, and vocabulary necessary to help bring silence to language” (81). Of special interest to Heidegger is the ontological relation between steric contraries, as when Aristotle characterizes rest as the *sterēsis* of movement (94). Being at rest implies the *withdrawal* of movement; so that which is at rest must also be capable of movement, which withdraws from it. Conversely, what is incapable of movement is also incapable of rest. Per Heidegger’s notion of steric silence, “only what can speak can be silent” (93). Silence is the withdrawal (not the absence of) speech, i.e. *the presence of the absence of speech* (94, italics supplied).

The positivity of steric silence allows for the possibility of a “worded silence,” a specific manner of speaking which preserves silence. The paradox is that in order to preserve this kind of silence, one must indeed speak, but speak in a certain way (95). This is where, for Heidegger, the handicraft of thinking comes in. It is a manner of gathering and gleaning involved in the production of language, with reference to the space of a people as a space of attunement (97). And therein, for Knowles, lies “the link between the ontological and the political” (100).

Before Knowles presents his culminating analysis of the *Black Notebooks*, he digresses with a pair of chapters dealing with sources from ancient Greek philosophy and literature. First, he undertakes a sigetic analysis of ancient Greek pedagogical practices, in which silence, self-mastery, philosophical training, and masculinity are conflated. This chapter is followed by one that focuses on a different species of silence associated with women, in which Knowles appears to make sweeping generalizations based primarily on a reading of Euripides’s *Medea*. Taken together, these chapters point to the gendered dimension of the ancient Greek conception of silence. However, it is questionable to what extent Heidegger’s sigetics is also built on *sexist* as well as racist

exclusion; the latter is ably demonstrated in Knowles's book, the former, not so much.

Finally, the chapter on the *Black Notebooks* brings together Knowles's conclusions from the previous chapters, to wit: the *völkisch* elements in Heidegger's thought and the evolution of Heidegger's notion of silence toward a steric direction. Knowles begins by elaborating on the meaning of silence in Heidegger's lecture courses, "Basic Questions of Philosophy" (1937) and "On the Essence of Truth" (1933). In a reversal of the analysis of silence in *Being and Time*, these lectures present silence itself as the ground of language (151). Knowles then draws a connection between Heidegger's Nazi activities (as the Nazi-appointed and Nazi-admiring rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933-34) and his practice of silence concerning Nazism:

... the politics of silence practiced in the *Black Notebooks* is not contrary to the public voice of the rector of Freiburg University as a spokesman for National Socialism. That public voice, and all the snares of the "dictator" of the public realm, enable what Heidegger calls the "freedom" of the handiwork of thinking. . . . In other words, the public "mask" of Rector Heidegger as the voice of "vulgar National Socialism" enables his deeply antisemitic (*sic*) and ferociously nationalistic private voice espousing "spiritual National Socialism" and a deeply *völkisch* agenda. (152)

Drawing on a section entitled "The Ability to Keep Silent as the Origin and Ground of Language" in the lecture "On the Essence of Truth," Knowles characterizes the production of the *Black Notebooks* as Heidegger's performance of a particular form of not talking (157).

In section 5 of the above lecture, Heidegger compares the being of the human and that of the animal. The animal does not and need not speak (Heidegger 2010, 80), whereas the human being can, and does, inasmuch as he or she exists in language. Humans speak not so much because they want to make declarations or to communicate (which they may occasionally, though not always), but because ontologically, they are beings who can keep silent. This shows that "*The ability to keep silent is therefore the origin and ground of language. All speaking is a breach of keeping silent, a breach that does not have to be understood negatively*" (84). Silence, in this sense, does not mean simply not talking, as in the case of animals or the mute; rather, it implies *being unwilling to talk*, which ultimately is "a definite, exceptional way of being able to talk" (86). Heidegger notes that this definition of silence passes beyond what he had written in section 34 of *Being and Time*: "Keeping silent is not just an *ultimate* possibility of discourse, but discourse and language *arise from* keeping silent" (87).

If silence is not the absence of discourse, but its very ground, it follows that human silence—such as that of Heidegger—paradoxically speaks volumes. As Knowles notes, the *Black Notebooks* are not just his private diaries; they are "the reservoir for the unsaid in Heidegger's work" (167). Furthermore, this manner of not talking, embodied by the keeping and withholding of the notebooks in which Heidegger words his silence,

is also philosophical work *par excellence*. In terms of his sigetics, it is a form of authentic keeping things to oneself, what Heidegger himself calls “*the openedness* for beings that is *gathered in itself*” (Heidegger 2010, 87). Inasmuch as the originary meaning of *logos* is gathering and saying, language becomes a kind of gathering through and within philosophy (92).

And Heidegger’s philosophy, being bound to a particular place and a particular time (Knowles 2019, 155), is demonstrably *völkisch*. Knowles supports this claim by citing what he considers to be one of Heidegger’s more overtly *völkisch* texts, “Creative Landscape: Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?”, in which Heidegger celebrates the silent life and contrasts its shelter from the bustle of calculation (159-60). Knowles also mentions the essay “The Origin of the Work of Art,” which associates the production of art with harmony with landscape (161). For Knowles, the *völkisch* thinker Heidegger is most similar to is Ludwig Ferdinand Clauss (171).

Ultimately, Knowles concludes that the meaning of Heidegger’s silence has to do with an ethical indifference toward the Holocaust (172). Read in terms of his sigetics—which construes it as an active way of not talking, that is to say, an unwillingness to talk—Heidegger’s silence is morally suspect indeed. What, then, are the implications for the reception of his philosophy? For his part, Knowles refuses the two extreme positions of taking Heidegger as Nazism’s naïve dupe, on one hand, and banishing him altogether, on the other hand (183-85)—much like what Mitchell and Trawney (2017, xx) refer to as the camps that either exonerate or condemn. At the very least, given the undeniable affinities between Heidegger’s sigetics and *völkisch* philosophy (and hence, anti-Semitism), these affinities must be “untangled” (Knowles 2019, 178). In so doing, one may use Heidegger’s ontology of language itself as a way to diagnose the philosopher’s own moral failure. As Mitchell and Trawney quote Habermas, one may endeavor “to think with Heidegger against Heidegger” (2017, xxv).

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Noelle Leslie dela Cruz
De La Salle University
Manila