

James Phillips. *Heidegger's Volk: Between National Socialism and Poetry*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005. ISBN: 0-8047-5071-8

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The space of the “in between” is a central figure in James Phillips’ study of Heidegger’s *Volk* (“the people”). Phillips’ reading of Heidegger manages to navigate a path between so many dangerous, because dogmatic, views of his engagement with National Socialism. The picture of Heidegger’s thought that Phillips constructs is one marked by *das Fremde* (the strange; the alien) and *Unheimlichkeit* (uncanniness, or the unhomeliness of that which lacks a home) that characterise Heidegger’s conception of Dasein’s poetic dwelling. The “in between” (80) which Heidegger’s thought inhabits is marked, on the one hand, by what in 1933 he saw to be the promise of National Socialism’s appeal to “the people,” and which he still saw in 1953 to be the movement’s “inner truth.” The other pole of the “in between” of Phillips’ study is that of Heidegger’s inevitable disillusionment with National Socialism, which his ontology exceeded but “could not leave... behind and cut itself off from” (53).

The many faces of this “in between” are well known to Heidegger’s readers: between presence and absence; unconcealing and concealing; visibility and invisibility; *das Man* (the “they” or “the One”) and the authentic Self. Phillips’ reading of Heidegger’s engagement with National Socialism raises several more, specific to this context: Heidegger is between liberalism’s ahistorical, autonomous subject and the “*völkische Wissenschaft*” (folkish science) of Dasein’s transcendent, co-historizing, Being-with-one-another (25); between liberal self-assertion and death as the “unforeseeable event of the true” (20); between the present-at-hand manifestation of a people and a *Volk* who is always missing (28), or whose essence is its concealment (96); between a people’s sovereignty and their “essential poli-

ticality" which their sovereignty annuls; between Russia and America; between the Heideggerian *polis* of the concealment of Being, and the National Socialist *polis* which controls Being (118); and between National Socialism, which presences the people in its vulgar biologism, and poetry, which unconceals the absence of the *Volk* (113).

Faithful to Heidegger, Phillips refuses to reduce Heidegger to either pole of such 'oppositions', but maintains his reading of Heidegger's *Volk*, and his engagement with National Socialism, within the "questionability" of Heidegger's guilt and innocence. Phillips argues that it is untenable both to excuse Heidegger for his engagement with National Socialism and to condemn his ontology as a racist philosophy. Since Heidegger's notion of the *Volk* is one which understands "the people" to be constituted on the basis of their ontological questionability and *Unheimlichkeit*, and since the *Volk* is always other than how it (or any political system) may seek to manifest it, it is thus anti-Heideggerian to determine Heidegger himself, either excusing or condemning his engagement with National Socialism. Phillips' refusal to contain Heidegger, and his seeking to maintain Heidegger's thought within the uncanny openness it opens up, despite the ardour of those who seek to excuse and condemn Heidegger, means that this study offers its reader a most accessible entry point into Heidegger's thought.

Phillips argues that it is clear that Heidegger's disillusionment with National Socialism was inevitable when one contrasts the Heideggerian view of *Volk* with that put forward by National Socialism. Heidegger's view of the German people was one which centred on their inherent unhomeliness (19; 169ff.). Phillips writes of Heidegger's view that the German people "have still to assert themselves as a people. More precisely, they have to assert themselves as the people whose essence lies in the deferral of its assertion as a people present-at-hand... the homecoming of the Germans... is the future: the essence of the *Heimat* [native place] to which the German people is to come is not something that can ever be present-at-hand" (19). Heidegger's *Volk* lies between its assertion and the deferral of its assertion. The question with which Heidegger's *Volk* concerns itself (if "it" were ever able to assert such a question) is of the order: "who are the German people?" In contrast, National Socialism all too readily transforms this question to read "what are the Germans?" (36) The "unanswerable" of Heidegger's *Volk* becomes the present-at-hand of "the people" of National Socialism. Thus, the tension between Heidegger's *Volk* and "the people" of National Socialism is that the former can only raise "the question concerning the essence of Being," which Heidegger sees to be the "mission" of the German people, "less on behalf of other peoples than against the standardization by which the various peoples [the Russians and the Americans, for example]

have fallen away from the possibility of grasping their own essential historicity" (33). National Socialism, in contrast, accepts "the people" as something present-at-hand, and thus all too easily reifies and standardises the "questionability" of Heidegger's *Volk*.

Heidegger's disillusionment with National Socialism was inevitable, moreover, insofar as the former's conception of the homelessness of the *Volk* inevitably found itself in conflict with the expanded home that National Socialism sought to establish for "the people". If the politics of the former is one which resides in the "in between" and "priority" of "the decision" between politics and ontology, the politics of the latter lies in the raising of the people to a position of sovereignty. For Heidegger, "a people cannot find itself either in power or out of power, but only in that which is ontologically prior to power" (26). The "essential politicality" of Heidegger's *Volk* is one which is prior to any ontic determination of political power, prior to any delineation between the powerful and the powerless. The "essential politicality" of Heidegger's *Volk* lies between a politics which makes power possible, and a power which purports to manifest the politics of the people. The uncanniness of Heidegger's *Volk* with regards to his engagement with National Socialism is that it elides both power and politics in its permanently deferring its self-assertion, either politically or powerfully.

Phillips' reading of Heidegger's *Volk* remains faithful to its intrinsic "questionability". The view of Heidegger's thought that Phillips proffers is, like Heidegger's *Volk*, one "whose time has not yet come" (33). Phillips' book situates Heidegger *between* the tyranny and totalisation which his fundamental ontology and National Socialism always threatens, and an ethical thinking of Being (the perceived lack of which spurred so many of Heidegger's critics, most notably Levinas) which is the promise of poetry. The paradox of Heidegger's *Volk* and Heidegger's own "grotesquely sophisticated" (55) engagement with National Socialism are nowhere more evident than in the person of Heidegger himself. The abusive biologism to which National Socialism subjected 'the *Volk*' mirrors the abusive reductionism to which Heidegger's critics subject his thought, when viewed through the prism of 1933. And just as Heidegger grew disillusioned with the simplistic biologism of National Socialism, so too does Phillips offer a view of Heidegger's *Volk* which refuses its reduction to the Heidegger of 1933. 1933 provided no home or sanctuary for Heidegger's *Volk*; neither can 1933 offer a home or sanctuary to any who seek to reduce the infinite complexity of Heidegger's thought, his destruction of fundamental ontology, and his insistence on the historicity and *Unheimlichkeit* of Dasein, to the dangerous simplicity that 1933 offers.

Phillips presents a masterly and irresistibly learned reading of Heideg-

ger's *Volk* which locates Heidegger between his engagement with the regime, and the impossibility of excusing this engagement (38-9), between the "gray" "inner truth" of Heidegger's "private National Socialism" (99) and its "outer falsehood" (40), between the regime's polemics against liberalism and its collapse into liberalism (43). As such, Phillips offers a view of Heidegger in which he emerges somewhere between his being to the right of the far Right (as his criticisms of National Socialism for being too liberal suggest), and the appearance of his *Volk* and Dasein to the left of the far Left (which their destruction of presence, and the questionability and *Unheimlichkeit* of their ontological structure would suggest).

This, in the end, is the "in between" where Heidegger must rightly appear: between what Levinas sees to be the inevitable totalisation of Being in his fundamental ontology, and Being's disruption and deferral of its ontological totalisation in its constitution on the basis of *Unheimlichkeit*. Being – *Volk* – is always other to however either ontology or the crude biologism of National Socialism may seek to grasp it. As Phillips writes:

What must, but cannot, be rescued in Heidegger's abasement before Hitler is this rupture. The intoxicated and unreserved acquiescence to dictatorship is inseparable from the suspicion of the contradictory reterritorialization of European identity and yet cannot be vindicated by it. And that it cannot be vindicated by it is because this acquiescence raises the *question* as such, as the proper-improper site of Europe's difference from dogmatism, first of all against itself. Heidegger's people is, and is not, the people of National Socialism. (52)

Heidegger's conception of the *Volk* both ties him to, as well as signals his distance from, National Socialism. Heidegger's *Volk* exists, if anywhere, in the intimacy of this distance. And so too does his thought. Heidegger is forever other than – *between* – however one may seek to judge him. As Phillips notes, "understanding between peoples neither levels nor codifies their differences. It calls the identities of the peoples into question" (35). The major achievement of Phillips' book is that it calls into question the very determinateness which 1933 so often imposes upon Heidegger's thought. Phillips' study itself opens up this space "in between" Heidegger's innocence and guilt, and allows his thought to once more dwell in that space which is proper to it.