

Review of Martin Heidegger's *Country Path Conversations*, trans. Bret W. Davis. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. Pp. 208. ISBN 9780253354693. \$39.95.

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"I have the clear knowledge that I'm standing right on the threshold to a more experienced & simpler saying," wrote Martin Heidegger in a letter to his wife in January 1945 as he worked on what he would later, with some hesitation, describe as a form of Platonic dialogue.¹ Written during one of the most intellectually productive and personally challenging periods of his life, *Country Path Conversations* is the first complete English translation of Volume 77 of Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe*. Written in the form of three separate "conversations" (*Gespräche*), this volume represents not only a radical shift in the style of his writing from the previous decades but also a profound reorientation towards his most important meditations on science, technology, and the nature of thought. Heidegger's conversational structure further provides a format well suited for readers less comfortable with Heidegger's earlier more abstruse prose. Bret Davis's able translation deftly navigates the extreme difficulty of Heidegger's idiosyncratic German and provides a translation that is both close to the text yet eminently readable.

The text is divided into three chapters, with a translator's foreword and editor's afterword. Each chapter presents a different conversation, although similar themes persist throughout all three. Heidegger is most concerned with a cluster of different approaches, "ways, not works" (*Wege, nicht Werke*), to several issues that will become central to his later thought. It is also in the pages of the later conversations that we see Heidegger, albeit in an indirect way, strongly critical of the German political situation of 1944/1945, with the interlocutors uttering only thinly veiled criticism of the German leadership.

The first and longest conversation takes place between a scientist, a scholar, and a guide (or sage, *Weise*) as they walk a country path discussing the essence of thinking. The conversation is kept on track by the scientist who, perhaps echoing many of the sentiments of Heidegger's readers, insists on clarity, explanations of both obvious and not so obvious distinctions, and a single-minded devotion to the question at hand, the fundamental trait which "fuels and rules our cognitive behavior"(33). Although the scientist is frequently baited by the guide it is often the scientist who is the first to realize many of the deeper insights of the conversation. It is through the scientist that Heidegger delivers the strongest counterarguments to the claims of the guide in a straightforward

and refreshingly direct manner. Interestingly it is the scientist who first realizes the character of Heidegger's "open-region" and *Gelassenheit* (translated as "releasement" or "letting-be"), the central theme of the conversation, which releases the truth of being into presence, is contrasted to science, technology, and calculative thinking, and which does not let the truth of being come to presence, but closes it off.

The second conversation takes place at an old castle watchtower, no doubt the same watchtower of Wildenstein Castle in which Heidegger himself spent the winter of 1945 teaching in as part of the displaced faculty of the Freiburg University philosophy department. The dialogue opens with an almost humorous exchange between a teacher and what Davis translates as a "tower warden" (the German is *Türmer* or literally "Towerer," tower-abider) and a conversation about thinking and the wondrous. This second conversation continues many of the themes of the previous one including the nearness and farness from the open-region, the will to think, representation and the technological-scientific world. There is an extended discussion of language, the relation of word, reference, and definition and the tower as a metaphor for the activity of thought. Considerably shorter and less refined stylistically than the first conversation, the second conversation has a few comedic exchanges that nevertheless demonstrate a rich festival of Heidegger's thought and will be of particular interest to researchers already working on similar topics in Heidegger's other later texts.

The final conversation is set in a Russian prisoner of war camp, almost certainly a reflection of Heidegger's concern for his two sons, both of whom were missing on the Russian front during the writing of the conversation. Here the interlocutors are an older and a younger man, the younger man having come to an epiphany during his morning forest walk, an image carried over in all three conversations, about the healing character of the forest's openness. The conversation begins with a reflection on the nature of evil, and its relation to the devastation of the war. This conversation contains some of Heidegger's strongest, although still veiled, critiques of the Nazi leadership and a forlorn regret of the state of Germany and the German people. Unsurprisingly the conversation turns to an extended discussion of Nietzsche and nihilism, and the human essence as "the being in the gathering." Many of the points of the first conversation are carried over and continued but examined from new directions, including an unusual reference for Heidegger to the Chinese philosophy of the *Zhuangzi*, a discussion of poetry and a call to what is inexhaustibly given to the human to think (156).

As Davis points out in his foreword, one of the greatest strengths of this volume is that it is in many ways the culmination of much of Heidegger's most insightful thinking from 1936 to 1944, yet its conversational structure provides an approachable and engaging freshness, a contrast to Heidegger's other deep yet difficult reflections of the time. Yet, despite the dialogical form of the text, Heidegger's dialogue is at times artificial and unusually abstract, an understandable byproduct

of trying to provide both the representation of a conversation and the philosophical and rhetorical effect of a Platonic dialogue. Davis's succeeds most in inviting an Anglophone audience to an engaging and thoughtful translation.

This translation is important to both Heidegger scholars and non-Heidegger scholars for a number of reasons. The first conversation is by far the longest and the most familiar to readers of Heidegger's later work. A substantial portion, roughly the last 36 of the 104 pages of the conversation, was published in an amended version in 1959 under the title *Gelassenheit* (and later included in GA 13) and subsequently translated into English in 1966 as "Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking" in the collection *Discourse on Thinking*. The dialogue presented in Bret Davis's translation of GA 77 *Feldweg-Gespräche* (1944/45), however, presents the full conversation for the first time in its entirety, providing a significant addition to the previously available material in English. Given the recent renewed interest by philosophers working in both the analytic and continental traditions in Heidegger on science, technology, philosophy of mind and cognition, Davis's skillful translation is an important and much needed contribution to this discussion. For scholars of Heidegger, the other two conversations will no doubt provide a fruitful vein of research on the related themes for years to come.

Note

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Letters to his Wife, 1915-1970*, edited by Gertrud Heidegger, translated by R.D.V. Glasgow (Cambridge: Polity, 2008) 182.