

## *Bedeutsamkeit* as scaling: *das Offene*, ὁ καιρός, *ma* and *mu*

“A scaling object includes as its defining characteristic the presence of very many different elements whose scales are of any imaginable size. There are so many different scales, and their harmonics are so interlaced and interact so confusingly that they are not really distinct from each other, but merge into a continuum.”<sup>1</sup>

Bill the Butcher is teaching his new recruit Amsterdam how to kill a man with a knife. As trauma-medicos will attest, knife-killing in a standup fight is not easily done – the blade needs to go in with enough force at the right spot. Bill touches the eviscerated carcass of a pig suspended by its hind legs from a rafter. Then he touches the corresponding place on Amsterdam’s body: “This is the liver. The kidneys. The heart.” Bill points his knife into the empty abdomen: “This is a wound. The stomach will bleed and bleed.” He stabs the carcass with force: “This is a kill.” Stabs a different spot: “This is a kill.” He slices the foreleg: “Main artery. This is a kill. You try.”

Bill hands the knife to Amsterdam as the music rises and a close-up shows the knife passing into the younger man’s hand. We the audience know that Amsterdam joined Bill’s gang in order to kill him. Is this the moment? Will he turn and ram the blade into Bill? ‘Deliberation in his *thumos*’ moves across Amsterdam’s face. The moment passes; he complies with the lesson by angrily stabbing the carcass: “Lung, good,” says Bill. “Don’t foul the blade on the rib.”<sup>2</sup>

This scene from *Gangs of New York* exhibits exactly both the physical and the figurative sense of καιρός: ‘opening.’ Onians cites Euripides referring “to a part of the body where a weapon can penetrate to the life within (above all, within the head) as a καιρός, speaking of a man as εἰς καιρὸν τυπεῖς, ‘struck in(to) a καιρός.’” Onians goes on to comment that **this** use of καιρός

“appears to be older than the use commonly translated by ‘opportunity’ or ‘due measure’. For in the vicissitudes of Homer’s epics there are countless possibilities for the sense ‘due measure’, ‘opportune’, etc.; but neither καιρός nor any derivative is used thus. Homer’s references to καιρός are confined to his use of καιρός in four different contexts to describe a place in the body where a weapon could easily penetrate to the life within.<sup>3</sup> . . . καιρός described where a weapon might fatally penetrate and described that at which archers aimed in practice. But

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<sup>1</sup> Benoit B. Mandelbrot, “Scalebound or Scaling Shapes: A Useful Distinction in the Visual Arts and in the Natural Sciences,” 40 *Leonardo* 45 (1981).

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vV\\_Q7YaFpSM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vV_Q7YaFpSM). *Gangs of New York* (dir. Martin Scorsese 2002).

<sup>3</sup> E.g.: οὐκ ἐν καιρίῳ ὄξυ πάγη βέλος, ἀλλὰ πάροιθεν

εἰρύσατο ζωστήρ τε παναίολος ἠδ’ ὑπένερθε

ζῶμά τε καὶ μίτρη, τὴν χαλκῆς κάμον ἄνδρες. *Iliad* 4.185-187. Menelaus speaking: “The keen bolt did not stick in a bare spot, instead my war-belt (etc.) kept me safe.” As Onians says, “The shaft that misses the opening (i.e. that goes παρὰ καιρὸν) either hits the iron around it or, in the case of the body, hits something against which it is ineffective [rib, tactical vest], or it misses altogether.”

what was the latter if we omit birds and beasts? At what were the archers to aim in the great shooting contest for the hand of Penelope? At what was Odysseus in the habit of aiming on other occasions? At a penetrable opening, an aperture, a passage through the iron of an axe or rather of twelve axes set at intervals in a straight line. . . . Such a sense . . . will explain *καῖρός* and *καίριος* of parts of the body through which weapons could penetrate to the life within. It will explain *καῖρός* apparently with a sense like ‘parting, division’. It will also explain the use of *καῖρός* to express ‘opportunity’, *εἰς καιρὸν, κατὰ καιρὸν*, etc. We, ourselves, speak of ‘an opening’ in just this sense (cf. also ‘loophole’). It will also explain the uses in which *καῖρός* has been translated by ‘due measure’, etc. Such an opening is limited. *ὁ γὰρ καιρὸς πρὸς ἀνθρώπων βραχὺ μέτρον ἔχει*, says Pindar.”<sup>4</sup>

The answer to Heidegger’s question, What makes being possible and necessary in the first place?, as Sheehan expounds it, is the phenomenon *Ereignis*. Yet Sheehan maintains, “One could just as easily argue that the focal topic of Heidegger’s philosophy is not *Ereignis* but *die Lichtung*, a.k.a. *das Offene* – the so-called ‘clearing’ or ‘open space’ that Heidegger designated as an *Urphänomen*.”<sup>5</sup>

In orthodox Heideggerian fashion we take *das Offene* as *καῖρός* in two ways, existential (structural) and existentiel (personal).<sup>6</sup> Existentially as the Grand Opening of The Human Experience™: “With the existence of human beings there occurs an irruption into the totality of beings, so that now [*jetzt*] the being in itself first [*erst*] becomes manifest, i.e., as being, in varying degrees, according to various levels of clarity, in various degrees of certainty.”<sup>7</sup> Before *das Offene* opened “though the ether is filled with vibrations the world is dark” (Wittgenstein), and after *das Offene* closes with our extinction “it will have been as if nothing had happened” (Nietzsche).

We take *das Offene per capita* as avatar of the Grand Opening: a human life opens at birth and closes at death; the brief measure between birth and death is an opening onto vulnerability and possibility.<sup>8</sup> It is this mass flickering into and out of existence which sustains *das Offene* in the large.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Broxton Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate* (1951) 343-345; quoting *Pyth.* IV.286.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Sheehan, “Heidegger Never Got Beyond Facticity” 5, 7.

[https://religiousstudies.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj5946/f/heidegger\\_never\\_got\\_beyond\\_facticity.pdf](https://religiousstudies.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj5946/f/heidegger_never_got_beyond_facticity.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> “The distinction between ex-sistence [Dasein] as personal and ex-sistence as structural is supremely important. The first refers to any one of us living ahead in a range of concrete possibilities, whereas the second refers to our very essence as possibility.” Thomas Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger: A Paradigm Shift* (2015) 136.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (5<sup>th</sup> ed. tr. Richard Taft 1997) 160. *Mit der Existenz des Menschen geschieht ein Einbruch in das Ganze des Seienden dergestalt, daß jetzt erst das Seiende in je verschiedener Weite, nach verschiedenen Stufen der Klarheit, in verschiedenen Graden der Sicherheit, an ihm selbst, d.h. als Seiendes offenbar wird.*

<sup>8</sup> Following here Withy who follows John Haugeland in taking persons as ‘cases’ of Dasein. Katherine Withy, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny* (2015) 70.

And within the individual's βραχὺ μέτρον there occurs the rapid, spontaneous opening and closing of all varieties of becoming manifest: 'seeing that,' 'seeing how,' 'seeing as;' intuition, insight, inspiration, epiphany, guess, dream; all manner of anagnorisis, revelation, awakening, enlightenment; *Aufleuchten* at all scales of intensity.<sup>9</sup>

Mandelbrot remarks "the importance of near empty portions to the whole of a nontrivially scaling object." Just as, he writes, "a typical Renaissance portrait depicts a seemingly obligatory juxtaposition of featureless areas (including draperies) and of finely detailed areas (including background landscapes that may often seem to lack any other purpose)," so also "it is indeed an important characteristic of a typical scaling pattern in nature that a portion selected without a systematic bias tends to include substantial featureless portions."<sup>10</sup>

The Japanese word for this phenomenon is *ma*, "empty space and time;" the *ma* "constitutes temporal zero units between words in discourse, or spatial zero units purposely left 'empty' in architecture, gardens, etc."<sup>11</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney cites the empty brushstroke of calligraphy, the silent beat in the structures of *haiku* and *waka*, the moment during a *Noh* play when the performers, amidst their rhythmic sounds and movements, synchronously halt their breath and "cause the breathing of the audience to stop by the tension," the *ma*, thus created.<sup>12</sup>

The *ma* shows up in Heidegger's contemplation of a painting by Van Gogh: "There is nothing surrounding [*herum ist nichts*] this pair of peasant shoes in or to which they might belong—only an undefined space [*nur ein unbestimmter Raum*]. There are not even clods of soil from the field or the field-path sticking to them, which would at least hint at their use. A pair of peasant shoes

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<sup>9</sup> Distributed as  $1/f$ ? Maybe not: <http://bactra.org/weblog/491.html> . Would you believe log-normal? All that's genuinely important here is that "*the tail is heavy*, and it doesn't really matter whether it decays linearly in the log of the variable (power law) or quadratically (log-normal) or something else." 'The tail is heavy' in that "insights [*Aufleuchten* in general] are a dime a dozen" (Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*); moreover "small things are more numerous than large things, and there is a tendency for the step between sizes to be equal to a fixed fraction of the last preceding phenomenon or event." Frank Benford, "The Law of Anomalous Numbers," 78 *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 571 (1938). Hill has shown that "If distributions are selected at random (in any 'unbiased' way) and random samples are then taken from each of these distributions, the significant digits of the combined sample will converge to the logarithmic (Benford) [skew] distribution." Theodore P. Hill, "A Statistical Derivation of the Significant-Digit Law," 10 *Statistical Science* 354 (1995). If "history's stuff, human experience, is self-similar" (Kenner, cited below) in the sense of symmetry-conserving by statistically scaling, then to what extent do random interactions with a random variety of probability distributions account for this texture of experience? As in "now dark and perplexing, now again lightning-sharp like a sudden insight." Martin Heidegger, "A Dialogue on Language," in *On the Way to Language* (tr. Peter D. Hertz 1971) 41.

<sup>10</sup> "Scalebound and Scaling" 46. As in the large-scale texture of the (radiant) universe: "a rich structure with a foam-like pattern, containing possible walls or filaments with long strands of galaxies, clusters, and large empty regions." <https://ned.ipac.caltech.edu/levels/March12/Coil/Coil1.html> .

<sup>11</sup> Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, "The Power of Absence. Zero Signifiers and their Transgressions," 34 *L'Homme* 61, 65 (1994).

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* 65. As Heidegger has 'a Japanese' say, "To allow you to see, even if only from afar, something of what the *Noh*-play defines, I would assist you with one remark. You know that the Japanese stage is empty. *Inquirer*: That emptiness demands uncommon concentration. *Japanese*: Thanks to that concentration, only a slight additional gesture on the actor's part is required to cause mighty things to appear out of a strange stillness." "A Dialogue on Language" 18.

and nothing more [*und nichts weiter*]. And yet—From the dark opening [*aus der dunklen Öffnung*] of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth.” Whereupon Heidegger riffs on details of the shoes to imagine the life of the person who wore them. The surrounding *ma* pops the shoes out *as* shoes “and nothing more,” while the *ma* of the dark, featureless opening triggers a reverie of their richness as metonymy of the owner’s life. An epiphany; itself a metonymy for what art ‘does.’ As Heidegger puts it, “This painting spoke. In the vicinity of the work we were suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be. . . . If there occurs in the work a disclosure of a particular being, disclosing what and how it is, then there is here an occurring, a happening of truth at work. . . . The work holds open the Open of the world [*Das Werk hält das Offene der Welt offen*].”<sup>13</sup>

“The temporal and spatial *ma*,” according to Ohnuki-Tierney, “is a zero signifier whose presence is predicated by objectified signifiers, such as words, events, activities, drum beats, visible brushstrokes, or rocks in the rock garden.” (As being is predicated by entities?) “The objectified signifiers which signal the presence of the absence, *ma*, are in turn given meaning by the *ma*. The *ma* is in itself devoid of specific meaning; its power rests in providing meaning to other signifiers/symbols.”<sup>14</sup>

The use of *ma* in everyday discourse bears senses congruent with those of *καρπός* as ‘due measure,’ ‘opportunity,’ ‘fittingness.’ Thus “*ma o motsu* (to hold the *ma*), *ma o motanai* (to be unable to hold the *ma*), *ma ga warui* (wrong *ma*; inconvenient, unlucky); *ma ni au* (to meet the *ma*; to be in time, to come in handy).”<sup>15</sup>

So also the various modes of the *unsuitability* (*Unverwendbarkeit*) of equipment are *ma*-like in their disclosing power; pre-eminently:

“when something ready-to-hand is found missing [*Fehlen*], though its everyday presence has been so obvious that we have never taken any notice of it, this makes a break [*ein Bruch*] in those referential contexts which circumspection discovers. Our circumspection comes up against emptiness [*Leere*], and now sees for the first time what the missing article was ready-to-hand with, and what it was ready-to-hand for. The environment announces itself afresh. What is thus lit up [*aufleuchtet*] is not itself just one thing ready-to-hand among others; still less is it something present-at-hand upon which equipment ready-to-hand is somehow founded: it is in the ‘there’ before anyone has observed or ascertained it.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (tr. Albert Hofstadter 1971) 33, 35, 44. Kenner remarks, “Mandelbrot’s categories do group artists plausibly. To concentrate, with him, on the visual: Mondrian, Brancusi, yes, Picasso: all scalebound. Come close, see less. Agostino di Duccio, Van Gogh, Pollock: scaling, with rewards for distance, other rewards for closeness.” Hugh Kenner, “Self-Similarity, Fractals, Cantos,” 55 *English Literary History* 723-724 (1988).

<sup>14</sup> “The Power of Absence” 66.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* 65-66. Cf. our idiom of ‘window’ in the sense of *καρπός*.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson 1962) 105.

At broader scale than *ma* is “the *mu*, nothingness or emptiness.” The *mu* as “a zero signifier predicated by material signifiers, that is, *all* its surroundings” holds “infinite possibilities for meaning.”<sup>17</sup> Lévi-Strauss says of such large-scale zero or ‘floating’ signifiers that “conceptions of the *mana* type are so frequent and so widespread that it is appropriate to wonder whether we are not dealing with a universal and permanent form of thought.”<sup>18</sup>

“force and action; quality and state; substantive, adjective and verb all at once; abstract and concrete; omnipresent and localised. . . . *mana* is all those things together; but is that not precisely because it is none of those things, but a simple form, or to be more accurate, a symbol in its pure state, therefore liable to take on any symbolic content whatever? . . . a zero symbolic value, that is, a sign marking the necessity of a supplementary symbolic content over and above that which the signified already contains, which can be any value at all, provided it is still part of the available reserve, and is not already, as the phonologists say, a term in a set.”<sup>19</sup>

Zero signifiers of the scale of *mu*, *mana*, *teotl*,<sup>20</sup> *Vairocana*,<sup>21</sup> God,<sup>22</sup> and their like encode a fundamental, perseverant situation which “arises out of the human condition: namely, that man has from the start had at his disposition a signifier-totality which he is at a loss to know how to allocate to a signified, given as such, but no less unknown for being given.”<sup>23</sup> “[A]t the moment when the entire universe all at once became *significant*, it was none the better *known* for being so.”<sup>24</sup> The inexplicable fact of this ongoing moment of the totality of significance – *Es gibt, Welt*

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<sup>17</sup> “The Power of Absence” 67.

<sup>18</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* (tr. Felicity Baker 1987) 53.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* 64.

<sup>20</sup> “If *teotl* can be likened to any nonautochthonous notion it would be the Melanesian notion of *mana*, Taoist notion of *dao*, Chinese notion of *qi*, Jicarilla Apache notion of *usen*, Sioux notion of *wakan orenda*, and Mixtec notion of *yii*.” James Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* (2014) 120.

<sup>21</sup> “In all the varieties of forms which Buddhism has assumed in its 2,500-year history, one of the common elements which has bound these diverse forms together has been the consistent and insistent denial of any kind of essence in things, including a divine or transcendental essence. The doctrine of the emptiness of all things is the very cornerstone of Buddhist philosophy and practice . . . We know that the emptiness of phenomenal reality, which is conceived by Buddhists to be the absolute, and anthropomorphized in the form of *Vairocana*, is the interdependent, or intercausal, mode by which things come into existence, exist, and cease to exist. It would already seem evident, then, that ‘*Vairocana*’ is merely a name given to the law of interdependent origination or interdependent existence. Far from being a substance or metaphysical essence, it is the law which utterly denies the existence of such an entity. . . . ‘*Vairocana*,’ then, is a mere sound, a symbol for the manner in which things exist, and therefore there is no point in praying to *Vairocana*, loving him, fearing him, asking for favors, and so on.” Francis H. Cook, *Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra* (1977) 96, 104, 106.

<sup>22</sup> “An impression grew upon me, as I made my way through these obdurate old texts, that to the ancient Hebrews God was simply a word for what was: a universe often beautiful and gracious but also implacable and unfathomable.” John Updike, “The Great I Am: Robert Alter’s new translation of the Pentateuch,” *The New Yorker* November 1, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* 62. *à savoir que l’homme dispose dès son origine d’une intégralité de signifiant dont il est fort embarrassé pour faire l’allocation à un signifié, donné comme tel sans être pour autant connu.*

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* 60.

weltet – is denoted by some zero-signifier, “the subjective reflection of the need to supply an unperceived [*non perçue*] totality;” a totality “which is closed and complementary to itself.”<sup>25</sup>

‘Unperceived’ as in *Das Ereignis ist das Unscheinbarste des Unscheinbaren* – “Ereignis is the most inconspicuous of inconspicuous phenomena.”<sup>26</sup> In Sheehan’s words “Meaningfulness is the mostly unnoticed dimension through which alone I can encounter whatever shows up. . . . the barely heard white noise enveloping everything I meet and the unnoticed gleam that lets everything shimmer with reality.”<sup>27</sup>

This dimension is a positive phenomenon, and by Heidegger’s heuristic “Everything positive becomes particularly clear when seen from the side of the privative.”<sup>28</sup> To see the gleam or hear the ‘pure noise’ of meaning requires the occurrence of some mode of *ma*, a darkness or a stillness, a rift in the continuum of *Bedeutsamkeit*. For Heidegger that privation, the *ma* that discloses *Urphänomen*, the *καρπός* that opens onto ‘how it is,’ occurs through fundamental moods, *Grundstimmungen*, pre-eminently the mood of *Angst*: “An experience of being as that which is other than all beings is bestowed in anxiety.”<sup>29</sup>

Just what the *Angster* experiences has been the subject of controversy, at least in the West. In key passages Heidegger calls it *das Nichts*, ‘the nothing;’ which has led to accusation that “A ‘philosophy of nothing’ is complete ‘nihilism’.”<sup>30</sup> To deflect this accusation Heidegger has his Japanese visitor say, “We marvel to this day how the Europeans could lapse into interpreting as nihilistic the nothingness of which you speak in that lecture [“What is Metaphysics?”]. To us, emptiness is the loftiest name for what you mean to say with the word ‘Being’.”<sup>31</sup>

Despite the “major element of free invention”<sup>32</sup> in Heidegger’s version of this conversation, and notwithstanding that ‘the Japanese’ in this dialogue “is at least ninety percent Heidegger,”<sup>33</sup> it does appear from Tezuka Tomio’s memoir that Heidegger not inaccurately distills Tezuka’s remarks assimilating emptiness and being. Tezuka recalls saying to Heidegger,

“To characterize the meanings of these words in more detail, *shiki* would be colour and colouring, and, by extension, appearance; and though *kū* originally means

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<sup>25</sup> *Id.* 58, 61.

<sup>26</sup> “The Way to Language” in *On the Way to Language* 128. See Jason W. Alvis, “Making sense of Heidegger’s ‘phenomenology of the inconspicuous’ or inapparent (*Phänomenologie des Unscheinbaren*),” 51 *Continental Philosophy Review* 211 (2018).

<sup>27</sup> *Making Sense of Heidegger* 113.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (tr. Albert Hofstadter 1985) 309.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Postscript to ‘What is Metaphysics?’,” in *Pathmarks* (ed. William McNeill 1998) 233. *Eine Erfahrung des Seins als des Anderen zu allem Seienden verschenkt die Angst*.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* 232.

<sup>31</sup> “A Dialogue on Language” 19.

<sup>32</sup> Graham Parkes, “Rising Sun over Black Forest: Heidegger’s Japanese connections,” in Reinhard May, *Heidegger’s Hidden Sources: East Asian Influences on his Work* (tr. Graham Parkes 1996) 97.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* 107.

emptiness, or sky (*sora*), it also means ‘the open’ (the opened-up world). In one respect it is empty nothing (*kū mu*), although this doesn’t have a merely negative meaning, but rather refers to the primordial way of being of all things, and thus to a condition that is striven for as an ideal. Buddhist doctrine is especially aware of this. . . . Precisely there where appearance (*shiki*) is emptiness (*kū*), appearance begins to approach what is essential. This premonition of the essential is thus oriented to this empty nothing and limitlessness, which is the traditional orientation of our [Japanese] ways of thinking and feeling.”<sup>34</sup>

This orientation was likely not news to Heidegger in 1954. In 1922 Tanabe Hajime, devoted student of Nishida Kitarō, had given a series of talks at Husserl’s home. Heidegger was present for at least some of these sessions. Parkes comments, “In the absence of a direct record of Tanabe’s presentations, one can only speculate on their content. But since Nishida had been developing his ideas about *mu* since 1911, and Tanabe was at the time the best interpreter of his mentor’s thinking, the presentation could not have helped dealing with Nishida’s conception of nothingness (especially since the idea of *mu* was soon to become so central to Tanabe’s own thinking).”<sup>35</sup>

Another of Heidegger’s names for ‘the nothing’ is ‘the abyss,’ *Abgrund*; sometimes the lurid ‘abyss of horror,’ *Abgrund des Schreckens*. By whatever name the experience of it discloses “the wonder of all wonders: *that beings are*,”<sup>36</sup> “the scarcely broached realm of being from whose clearing every being first returns to what it is and can be.”<sup>37</sup>

The nothing, the abyss, is the *mu* of not-meaningfully-present; the zero-signifying emptiness which holds “infinite possibilities for meaning.” In Hesiod’s image, *πρώτιστα χάος γένετο*, ‘First was chaos.’<sup>38</sup> “As that which is altogether other than all beings,” Heidegger writes, “being is that which is not. But this nothing essentially prevails as being [*west als das Sein*].”<sup>39</sup> And this essential prevailing of being – meaningfulness, *Bedeutsamkeit* – has the structure characteristic of a scaling phenomenon: “history’s stuff, human experience, is self-similar;” “now dark and perplexing, now again lightning-sharp like a sudden insight;” an opening onto openings and closings of any imaginable size, all merging into a continuum.

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<sup>34</sup> Tezuka Tomio, “An Hour with Heidegger,” in *Heidegger’s Hidden Sources* 63-64.

<sup>35</sup> “Rising Sun over Black Forest” 93.

<sup>36</sup> “Postscript to ‘What is Metaphysics?’” 234. *das Wunder aller Wunder: daß Seiendes ist*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid. den kaum befretenen Raum des Seins, aus dessen Lichtung erst jegliches Seiende in das zurückkehrt, was es ist und zu sein vermag.*

<sup>38</sup> *Theogony* 116.

<sup>39</sup> “Postscript” 233.