

# Putting the “Hermes” Back in Hermeneutics: Designing With the Help of Heidegger’s Gods

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## INTRODUCTION

“If one acknowledges hermeneutics to exist wherever a genuine art of understanding manifests itself, one must begin if not with Nestor in the *Illiad*, then at least with Odysseus.”<sup>1</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer

In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus encounters Hermes. As the namesake of hermeneutics, Hermes’ function is, in part, to reveal the latent potential within one’s world of involvement.<sup>2</sup> For example, Hermes provides Odysseus with the ability to recognize previously unseen attributes of his surroundings and suggests how he might put them into effective use in new situations. In this way, according to Sean Kelly and Hubert Dreyfus, Hermes “...has the job of leading people from world to world.”<sup>3</sup> This task frequently involves being a catalyst for imagination and creative action. Odysseus describes an encounter with Hermes:

He (Hermes) took me by the hand and spoke to me and named me, saying: ‘Where are you going, unhappy man, all alone, through the hilltops, ignorant of the land-lay, and your friends are here in Circe’s place, in the shape of pigs and holed up in the close pig pens. Do you come here meaning to set them free? I do not think you will get back yourself, but must stay here with the others. But see, I will find you a way out of your troubles, and save you. Here, this is a good medicine, take it, and go into Circe’s house; it will give you power against the day of trouble. And I will tell you all the malevolent guiles of Circe. She will make you a potion, and put drugs in the food, but she will not even so be able to enchant you, for this good medicine which I give you now will prevent her. I will tell you the details of what to do. As soon as Circe with her long wand strikes you, then drawing from beside your thigh your sharp sword, rush forward against Circe, as if you were raging to kill her, and she will be afraid, and invite

you to go to bed with her. Do not then resist and refuse the bed of the goddess, for so she will set free your companions, and care for you also; but bid her swear the great oath of the blessed gods, that she has no other evil hurt that she is devising against you, so she will not make you weak and unmanned, once you are naked.’

So spoke Argeiphontes (Hermes), and he gave me the medicine, which he picked out of the ground, and he explained the nature of it to me. It was black at the root, but with a milky flower. The gods call it moly. It is hard for mortal men to dig up, but the gods have power to do all things.<sup>4</sup>

Here, Hermes’ revelations to Odysseus could be seen to represent a fundamental capacity of the designer. This capacity is one of interpreting old or unknown things in the light of new challenges through a kind of seeing that affords constant micro-epiphanies about one’s surroundings and activities therein. Such practices are basic to architecture but sometimes, particularly with students, become mired in calculated problem solving, self-referential expressionism, and simple insensitivity. Escaping such traps requires alternate routes. Hermeneutics offers one possible way; however, this is a specific form of hermeneutics.

Hans-Georg Gadamer argued that our very being is more dependent on our “prejudices” than our rational judgments. In this provocation Gadamer highlights “the epistemological truncation by which the traditional ‘science of hermeneutics’ has been absorbed into the idea of modern science.”<sup>5</sup> Here, Gadamer is suggesting that our hermeneutical consciousness can easily become “restricted to a technique for avoiding misunderstandings.”<sup>6</sup> In response to this problem he seeks to reconnect “...

the objective world of technology, which the sciences place at our disposal and discretion, with those fundamental orders of being that are neither arbitrary nor manipulable by us, but rather simply demand our respect.”<sup>7</sup> Architecture is certainly a realm that is encompassed in this statement, in that it is easy prey for the simple instrumentalism of technological thinking. Unfortunately, this shortcoming continues despite the fact that architecture is clearly underpinned by many fundamental orders that are “neither arbitrary nor manipulable by us...” (the Vitruvian category of delight being a paradigm example of such an order). However, Gadamer’s statement begs the question of what “respect” entails and how it is connected to our “prejudices.” Understanding these key ideas and making them relevant to architecture necessarily lead one back to a vision of hermeneutics that is perhaps best demonstrated by the Greeks and is given modern voice in the thinking of Martin Heidegger.

In this paper, I examine the importance of unreasoned understanding to Homeric ontology and the manner in which it forms the basis of Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology. Such unreasoned understanding will be shown to occur in the space that opens up as a result of the interplay between “prejudice” (as Heidegger’s, “facticity”) and “respect” (as “the gods,” both Greek and Heideggerian thought). Ultimately it will be argued that developing a capacity to inhabit this peculiar space is beneficial for both strengthening and deepening design processes, and by extension strengthening and deepening the work that flows from it.

### RESPECT FOR THE GODS

Jeff Malpas has suggested that “much of Heidegger’s thinking about the gods is determined by Greek thought and experience.”<sup>8</sup> This influence of Greek pantheism on Heidegger is seen explicitly in his ontological structure, “the fourfold,” specifically in the term “divinities.” Malpas goes on to argue that of the four elements in the fourfold, the divinities “...present the greatest difficulty for contemporary readers,”<sup>9</sup> and “that part of the difficulty resides in the common tendency to think of the gods in religious terms.”<sup>10</sup> So in order to understand Heidegger’s divinities, one must seek different avenues for comprehension. Here, Damon Young directs us back to the gods’ role in hermeneutic

consciousness suggesting, “... Heidegger’s notion of divinity cannot be understood outside its context of poetic phenomenological hermeneutics.”<sup>11</sup> This comment provides a good starting point for understanding Heidegger’s gods and Greek thought within his thinking.

In a 1942 lecture course on Parmenides, Heidegger states, “the Greeks neither fashioned the gods in human form nor did they divinize man...they experienced the gods and men in their distinct essence, and in their reciprocal relation.”<sup>12</sup> Heidegger goes on to explain that for the Greeks the gods were the “...attuning ones...,” as well as “...Being itself...”<sup>13</sup> “Being,” for Heidegger, is a phenomenon that is not to be confused with a supreme being (the so-called ontotheological view) and Heidegger offers that one’s relation with Being is one of *attunement*. Here Heidegger is drawing upon the German word *stimmung*, of which Heidegger has claimed that one’s “...openness to the world is constituted by *stimmung*.”<sup>14</sup> Now, because *stimmung* is a word that means both attunement and mood, Heidegger is employing it to suggest that the interdependence of individual and situation is fundamental to understanding either. Further, because *stimmung* is a term associated with the tuning of a musical instrument, it suggests that our being should not be thought of as something certain or definable, but rather a *temporal process of coming into harmonic relation*.

Regarding the divinities specifically, John Caputo’s argued that in Heidegger, “... ‘God’ is not the clearing itself ... ‘God’ makes an appearance within this clearing.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, divinity for Heidegger cannot be reduced to raw physical space or even a situation within a particular place. Instead, divinity becomes palpable as the *significance* of an event. However, although the gods cannot be reduced to the merely physical, they are nonetheless deeply enmeshed with the physical world. That is, the gods are both immanent and atmospheric. Here *stimmung* as *mood* comes into play. Mood is both the key to understanding the phenomenon that Heidegger names the divinities, and it is the beginning to understanding the term “respect” in the context of hermeneutics.

Inspired in large part by the Homeric Greeks, the gods for Heidegger are experienced as moods (and vice versa) insofar as mood *tunes us* toward particular ways of acting in particular situations. Here

mood must not be understood simply as a synonym for emotion. The term "emotion" tends to suggest a feeling both heightened and personal, whereas mood should be understood as an affect that is in the world (not in us). As such, mood generally suggests a much more subtle encounter than that of the "emotional." This subtlety of *stimmung* is well demonstrated in Homer and helps to make clear Malpas' suggestion that, "Heidegger's gods should not be construed as 'supernatural' in any of the usual ways."<sup>16</sup> For example, Athene constantly appears in *The Odyssey* as a sort of harmonic bridge:

Telemachos stepped out of the ship, but Athene went first, and it was the gray-eyed goddess Athene who first spoke to him: 'Telemachos, here is no more need at all of modesty; for this was why you sailed on the open sea, to find news of your father, what soil covers him, what fate he has met with. So come now, go straight up to Nestor, breaker of horses, for we know what intelligence is hidden inside him. You yourself must entreat him to speak the whole truth to you. He will not tell you any falsehood; he is too thoughtful.'

Then the thoughtful Telemachos said to her in answer: 'Mentor, how shall I go up to him, how close with him? I have no experience in close discourse. There is embarrassment for a young man who must question his elder.

Then in turn the gray-eyed goddess Athene answered him: 'Telemachus, some of it you yourself will see in your own heart, and some the divinity will put in your mind. I do not think you could have been born and reared without the gods' will.'

So spoke Pallas Athene, and she led the way swiftly, and the man followed behind her walking in the god's footsteps.<sup>17</sup>

Here Telemachus senses simultaneously his own discomfort brought on by the rupture of a foreign encounter and the reassurance (Athene) of a potential for coming into harmony with the situation. So in this episode, Athene (as mood) is simply the "voice" that alerts Telemachus to the appropriate course of action, and reassures him that his particular course aligns with both his own goals and the specific opportunities of his current situation. Such "attuning" could be seen as akin to, say, meeting a spouse's family for the first time; one might feel awkward and uncertain going into the situation, but invariably has ideas about how to engage, which eventually situates one within the flow of the situation. In design this might be akin to first visiting a project site and meeting with clients – it

is best not to "know" what to say or do, instead allowing the speaking of site and client to draw out one's particular response.

It is important to note, particularly when proposing a translation of this ontology into another context, that Greek consciousness, compared to ours, appears heightened. In other words, it is not necessarily the drama of a god's arrival that is striking as much as it is that Greek consciousness is receptive to (and expects) such encounters. The first example with Odysseus illustrates this point, in that Odysseus recognizes that Hermes is guiding him (He took me by the hand and spoke to me...) but is not in any way taken-aback or confused by this encounter. Kelly and Dreyfus describe this peculiar Greek awareness as:

... importantly different from being *startled*, since when one is startled one's entire sense of the situation is destroyed – one finds oneself at least momentarily lost. In the experience of the sudden, one notices immediately a shift from one situation to another, without ever losing hold of the world.<sup>18</sup>

So in this way the rupture of the foreign for the Greek is not a rupture in the sense of being lost, instead it is a kind of rupture that draws one in; it is an incision into a previous closed system, the moment to insert oneself. And because Greek awareness functions in this manner, it prepares them to experience not only the subtle announcement, but to be sensitive to the nuances of different situations as well. Kelly describes this sensitivity to nuance as "wonder," and he goes on to explain:

Homer's Greeks experienced a plurality of distinct kinds of wonder and the gratitude that goes along with them...I guess you'd have to say that the Greeks really could feel a wonder that indicates the presence of Athena as opposed to one that indicates the presence of Ares or Poseidon. You would have to say that these felt like wonders that share a family resemblance with one another, but that are recognizably distinct nevertheless.<sup>19</sup>

With the suggestion that different situations give rise to different moods, the significance of the gods to hermeneutic phenomenology begins to become apparent. That is to say, the shining of Homer's gods make visible the ways that different situations call to us in different ways with different requirements, and in this manner every individual's response is necessarily kind of interpretation. Here, "respect" reveals itself as the state when one has

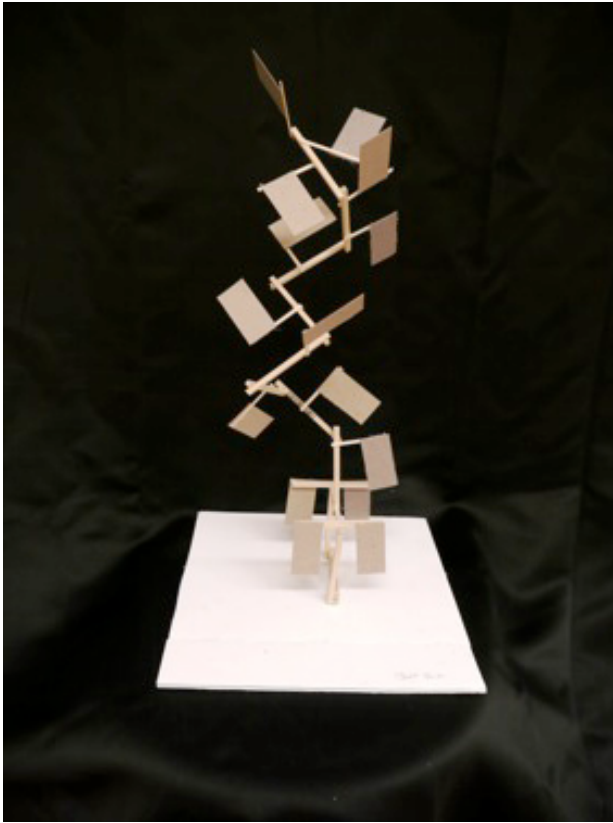


Figure 1: "Stimmung: Making as Mood," Jeff Jacka



Figure 3: "Stimmung: Making as Mood" Blake Wilson



Figure 2: "Stimmung: Making as Mood," Morgan Mende



Figure 4: "Stimmung: Making as Mood," Lauren Kopp

learned to both listen and act appropriately, responding to the call of the situation. Such a relation to one's world is the pinnacle of achievement for Homer's Greeks. Kelly and Dreyfus put it this way:

In the Homeric understanding the highest form of human life is to be open to, and be able to behave appropriately in, as many of the Homeric worlds as possible. Odysseus is the model of this highest form of life, and Zeus's main job is to protect strangers (people who go from world to world).<sup>20</sup>



And so it is too in Heidegger's hermeneutics where our openness to the world becomes our greatest asset, which is why the sensitivity of the Greeks is remarkable to him. Heidegger states: "to undergo an experience with something – be it a thing, a person, or a god – means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us"<sup>21</sup> Openness is critical not just for seeing things for what they are, but it is by this disposition that one's "prejudice" is allowed to fully couple with a situation.

In order to facilitate such understandings I give students explicit exercises that allow them to practice with such often unfamiliar ways of processing, exercises that allow them to simply respond to limited criteria, which would be difficult to treat pragmatically. For example, in the design foundations sequence students take on an assignment that is actually called "Stimmung: Making as Mood." This assignment employs a predefined and pre-cut set of construction parts to respond intuitively to a piece of instrumental music of the student's choosing. The pedagogical intent of using this additive intuitive method is to foster the notion that architectural understanding can *emerge* through making things that are initiated by very small feelings, ideas, and inspirations (Figures 1-4). The ability to engage architecture in this way provides an important counter-balance to top-down formalism and instrumental problem solving.

### PREJUDICE AND RESPONSE

Typically, the notion of prejudice is synonymous with being unresponsive. Why then does Gadamer suggest that our prejudice is more important than our reasoned judgments in our relation to the world? The answer to this question lies in Gadamer's understanding of the term. In "prejudice" Gadamer wants one to hear what he believes to be a pre-enlightenment conception of the term, one that implies that there is never an "unobstructed view of all the facts."<sup>22</sup> Here, Gadamer is also drawing upon several formulations of this idea that Heidegger has put forward; perhaps most helpful to this conversation is the concept of "facticity."

Facticity is a term that is embedded in Heidegger's more well-known concept, "dasein." Facticity addresses the idea that one's specific existence forms an a priori condition for how one will be disposed to-

ward specific situations. Further, despite the publicness of mood (mood as an affect in world), facticity ensures that each of us will attune differently to the same world-historical possibilities.<sup>23</sup> Here, history must be understood to be synonymous with temporality; which is to say that Heidegger intends the fullest reading of what constitutes an influential past. The complex interplay of world history and personal history means that elements influence one another as they coalesce into particular situations, and thus allow the same element to appear differently in different situations—or perhaps not appear at all. For example, when paying bills a pen shows itself as a writing instrument, but when giving a lecture a pen might be understood as a pointing device, and when preparing dinner a pen might not even register. In this way, one attunes to the same thing differently in different "worlds," and different "worlds" highlight different aspects of one's facticity at different times.<sup>24</sup> Facticity specifically addresses the way each human being is a compound of multifarious facts, attributes, and experiences. This is interesting in the discussion of hermeneutics because through the process of de-



Figure 5: "Biocube: Making as Craft," Kirby Morfitt

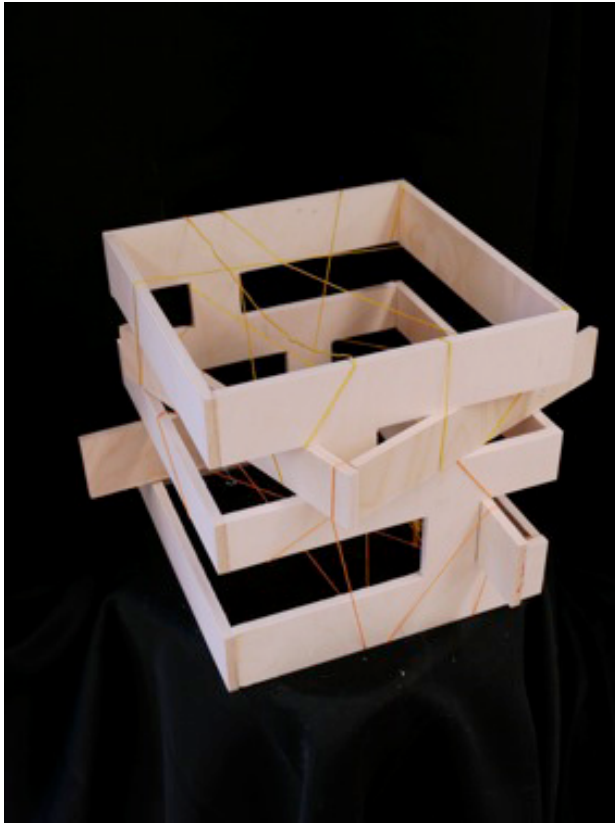


Figure 6: "Biocube: Making as Craft," Mark Beck

veloping openness, Heidegger is basically suggesting that the fullest version of ourselves is nothing willful or contrived. Rather, we are always already our fullest self, and creativity, interpretation, etc., simply require that we align with situations in order to free it. In this way, we are "prejudiced". In short, facticity points out that one's particular perspective and action in a situation become most appropriate when one possesses the ability to listen. In this way, the open state of listening affords the shining of the gods and offers the folds of facticity the greatest points of contact. And it is the process of making this happen that returns hermeneutics to the context of design.

In first year design studio, I have students do an exercise that attempts to, in part, teach them about this particular notion of individuality. In this assignment, the challenge is to "express" one's identity as a plywood cube. In terms of facticity, it is interesting to note that the most successful projects demonstrate an understanding that it is the particular material (plywood plus one other material of the student's choice) and formal constraints that are the

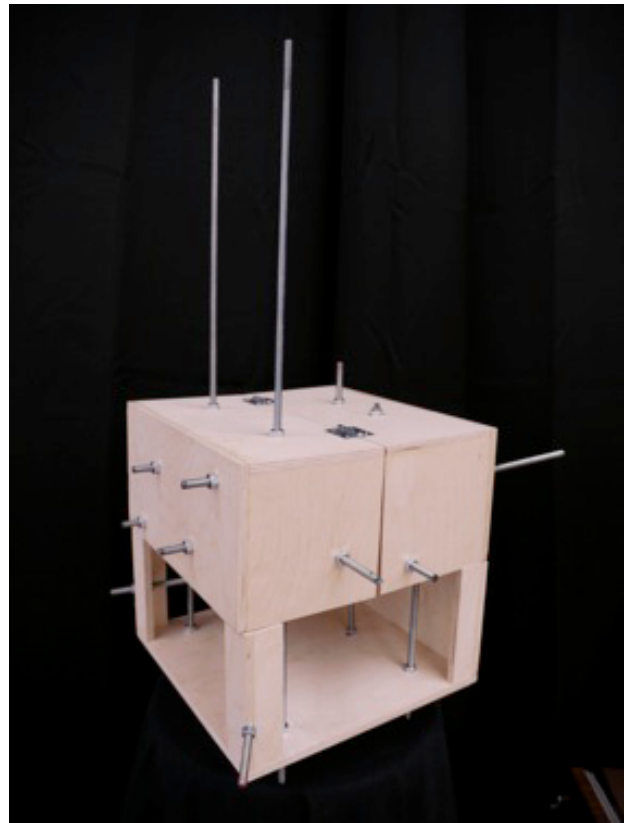


Figure 7: "Biocube: Making as Craft," Nathan



Figure 8: "Biocube: Making as Craft," Rachael Studebaker

catalysts for revealing individuality. That is to say, facticity suggests that endeavoring to express oneself is a misguided gesture, since facticity is always consequential. Further, attempting to represent

some interest, like, dislike, or pastime, simply short-circuits the process of design – it is the attunement that allows one to become "cubic." Here, the world that is the cube and its constraints connect with and reveal certain sensibilities, values, and interests without the student having to force it (figures 5-8).

The fact that Hermes is sometimes referred to with the epithets "fortune-bringer,"<sup>25</sup> and the "keen-sighted"<sup>26</sup> points to a critical aspect of hermeneutics as a design process. Here we encounter *kairos*. According to Debra Hawhee, as opposed to the term *chronos*, which was used to measure the duration of time, *kairos* was used to indicate the force of time.<sup>27</sup> This force becomes manifest in that there are opportune times for action and within these the timing of action determines whether it will be effective or ineffective. The coupling of this opportune moment arising, the recognition of this moment, and one's ability to act upon the recognition is the engine that makes Greek ontology work. Heidegger's hermeneutics picks up on the critical role of *kairos*, almost directly, as the basis for authenticity, and it is *kairos* (or the lack thereof) that frames a constant problem in studio. This problem is one of students not recognizing (nor trusting) the moment of the god's arrival, so to speak. An example of this is the almost clichéd discussion with a student who claims to have no idea what to do. When questioned, the student will relate a list of ideas that have popped up, only to be summarily rejected as unworthy. The moment of the god's arrival is what Heidegger deemed the *augenblick* (literally the glance of an eye). Simon Critchley explains the significance of this term:

This term, borrowed from Kierkegaard and Luther, can be approached as a translation of the Greek *kairos*, the right or opportune moment. Within Christian theology, the *kairos* was the fulfillment or redemption of time that occurred with the appearance of Christ. Heidegger's difference with Christian theology is that he wants to hang on to the idea of the moment of vision, but to do so without any reference to (Christian) God. What appears in the moment of vision is authentic *Dasein*.<sup>28</sup>

So *augenblick* speaks of the critical moment of recognition. Through it, Heidegger is identifying that rupture, when situations change, when something of significance announces itself and it is time for one to act. In Homeric terms, one is being offered direction by the gods. Here, the reason for my emphasis on the subtlety of Greek experience

becomes clear—generally students are not well versed with subtlety. Which is to say, *augenblick*, like the arrival of the gods, is not the announcement of some undismissible event. I spell this out because it seems that frequently in studio this is actually what students expect inspiration to be; they expect something whole, clear, and undeniable – most importantly they expect the inspiration *to be their project*, something for which they just have to work out some details. What I mean by this is that often there is very little understanding of potential, which by definition is something that at first is very small, a mere possibility. Frequently it seems that students view the beginnings represented in potential as merely an inadequate end product and therefore something to be disposed of. Further, this oversight appears to be directly proportional to the distance of an idea from architecture. Yet because of its nature, potential is something that may initially be unrecognizable, something that needs time to grow. This is exactly what the gods show us: there is something important in our midst that requires a commitment in order to come to fruition. It is the task of mortals to take up the possibilities that are offered them *and to do something with them*. And like Odysseus, the designer's challenge is often not in finding inspiration, but rather in recognizing and acting upon it. This is the true hermeneutics of design.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics* ed. David Linge (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966).
- 2 Gadamer says, "As the art of conveying what is said in a foreign language to the understanding of another person, hermeneutics is not without reason named after Hermes, the interpreter of the divine message to mankind." Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics," in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (New York: Routledge, 2000), 183. And Heidegger claims, "The expression 'hermeneutic' derives from the Greek verb *hermeneuein*. That verb is related to the noun *hermeneus*, which is referable to the name of the god Hermes by a playful thinking that is more compelling than the rigor of science." Martin Heidegger, "A Dialogue on Language," in *On the Way to Language* (New York: Harper One, 1971), 29.
- 3 Sean Kelly and Hubert Dreyfus, "Notes on Embodiment in Homer: Reading Homer on Moods and Action in the Light of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty," *Moving Bodies* 4, no. 2 (2007), 10.
- 4 Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1965), 159-60.

- 5 Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics* ed. David Linge (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 7.
- 6 Ibid., 9.
- 7 Ibid., 4.
- 8 Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 274.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Damon Young, "Being Grateful for Being: Being, Reverence and Finitude," *Sophia* 44, no. 2 (2005), 39.
- 12 Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. Andre Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 110.
- 13 Ibid., 111.
- 14 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Seventh ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962), 75.
- 15 John Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas: Being, Place, World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 282.
- 16 Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World*, 274.
- 17 Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, 51-52.
- 18 Kelly and Dreyfus, "Notes on Embodiment in Homer: Reading Homer on Moods and Action in the Light of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty," 21.
- 19 Sean Kelly, "Plurality and Unity in the Modes of Wonder," <http://allthingsshiningbook.wordpress.com/2010/09/07/plurality-and-unity-in-the-modes-of-wonder/>.
- 20 Kelly and Dreyfus, "Notes on Embodiment in Homer: Reading Homer on Moods and Action in the Light of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty," 9.
- 21 Heidegger, "The Nature of Language," 57.
- 22 Patrick Rogers Horn, *Gadamer and Wittgenstein on the Unity of Language: Reality and Discourse without Metaphysics* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 12-13.
- 23 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 82-83.
- 24 Ibid., 413-32.
- 25 Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Squillace and G H Palmer (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003), 95.
- 26 Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer, Done into English Prose: [1906]*, trans. Andrew Lang and S.H. Butcher (Ithaca: Cornell University Library 2009), 2.
- 27 Debra Hawhee, *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 66.
- 28 Simon Critchley, "Heidegger's Being and Time, Part 8: Temporality," <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentsfree/belief/2009/jul/27/heidegger-being-time-philosophy>.