

On Heidegger's *Einmaligkeit* Again:

The Single Turn of the Event

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Though appearing prosaic and everyday, being as it happens never repeats, giving each time singularly in its spatio-temporal disposition. In this discrete sense, being ever only begins, and does so always once, bearing no resemblance and brooking no repetition. Yet the repetitive nature of language and signification, of ideas and meaning, persistently covers up this spatio-temporal singularity, or singleness, of being's event, having it appear as if it were recurrent or repetitive in its essence. In the end, singularity appears to carry the inscription of inescapable repetition, not simply as its shadow or companion but even as its condition of possibility. Singularity entails repetition, even demands it, because the event can claim its mark as singular only if it appears repeatable – that is, repeatedly sayable – in its uniqueness, intrinsically engaged in substitution characteristic of linguistic expression.¹ In short, uniqueness is such only because the event's singularity can be repeated in and as its irreplaceable occurrence. What in reality appears repeatable is the “each time” of the singular occurrence, the fact that it can be remarked as such each and every time. It is this line of thinking about singularity that becomes complicated, even slanted in Heidegger's idiomatic understanding of *Ereignis* (event) presented in the recently published “*Ereignis*-manuscripts” dating from 1936 to 1944.² This inflection of singularity still remains largely unexplored in critical responses or scholarly commentaries, in part perhaps because it requires a continuous turning of thinking, that is, it calls for thinking the event in its turn precisely as the very turn (in)to thinking. It

is only when thinking is kept turning in this manner, kept moving through and along this turn, that the *Einmaligkeit*, the “one-timeness,” of singularity (*Einzigkeit*) makes its mark. This becomes possible because the thinking Heidegger advances in the *Ereignis*-manuscripts examines the issue of singularity/repetition simultaneously from two sides: event and language. If from the perspective of the repetitive nature of language, the event seems to be possible as singular only in its impossible repetition, from the event, the one-time, non-repeatable character of its unfolding comes to inflect this dynamic beyond the optics of singularity and repetition. In the course of this unfolding, both event (*Ereignis*) and language change bearings, so to speak, so that they become actuated specifically in their nonrepeatable “once.” For, as Heidegger explains in *Zum Ereignis-Denken*, “Singularity – is both the unexpected and the unrepeatable.”⁵ This altered, inflected bearing of the event comes into view only within the twofold perspective of event and language, or more precisely in view of the constitutive turn of the event *as* language and *into* language. The turning toward human beings, thinking, and language, takes place *from* the event, while at the same time being – and remaining – *of* the event: not simply its part or stage but in fact its actuating pathway. The event thus eventuates as its own turn, and does so in an always one-time, non-repeatable traversal.

This dynamic, instantiating turn, which Heidegger calls “inceptual” or “inceptive” (*anfänglich*), signals merely *that* the event begins *once*. The complex “winding” course of the event’s beginning, which Heidegger often calls *Gewinde* (coil) or even *Kranz* (wreath), is crucial to understanding the role of *Einmaligkeit* with regard to event, language, and thought. Among the *Ereignis*-manuscripts, sections 184 and 185 of Heidegger’s 1941–42 text *The Event* (GA 71: 143–78/125–50) offer some of the most dense but also most significant remarks about the event and the correlates of its essence, namely: word, language, beginning, turn, the human, the singular, and the one time. Although quite difficult, these comments are at the same time remarkably lucid, and, when given appropriate time and attentiveness, they can be recognized as delineating the framework of questioning within which Heidegger’s

Ereignis retains distinctive valence that is not quite translatable into the English term *event* or its French cognate *événement*, both of which are derived, unlike *Ereignis*, from the Latin verb *venire*, to come. This distinction of *Ereignis* from *event* would not be significant beyond scholarly exactitude were it not for the implications that the understanding of the event *as a turn* discloses for a range of issues from the essence of technology and capital to language, the proper, and singularity. In what follows, I will outline the way that Heidegger's "event" (*Ereignis*) must be approached initially apart from any residues of beings (entities) or meaning, that is, how it should be thought and experienced by following along its turn as this turn actuates what Heidegger calls "the domain of what is proper" (*Eigentum*) to the event. Most important, this turn occurs specifically as the turn of language, or in fact the turn *into* language, as Heidegger indicates by writing that "The event words [*Das Ereignis wortet*]" (GA 74: 99).

The first sentence of *The Event*, section 185, which is entitled "The Treasure of the Word," takes us through the event as it turns word while opening its main pathway: the disposition of the relation of the truth of being (*Seyn*) to human beings. "The event is the inceptual word, because its arrogation [*Zueignung*] (as the unique adoption [*Aneignung*] of the human being into the truth of being) disposes the human essence to the truth of being" (GA 71: 170/145). The term *Zueignung* indicates the constitutive turn of the event, as the prefix "zu" keeps pointing at once in both directions of the pathway of language: from being to humans and from humans to being. *Zueignung* signals the manner in which being, having already dispatched itself, as it were, toward the human being, dedicates itself to it and through this dedication adopts the human being by rendering it apt for "understanding" being. The turning evidenced in the prefix *zu-* suggests that in its arrogation being turns the human toward itself, so that being becomes an issue for the way that the human being exists, as Heidegger indicated in *Being and Time*.

Since the *Ereignis* issues through a turn, one can say neither that the *Ereignis* always simply *is* nor that it occurs *only* through the human

carrying out of *Da-sein*. Formulated differently, because the eventuation of the event lies in its turning, the event never “is,” without ever simply “not being.” This is also why the event cannot be stated, described, or given a meaning. For one cannot take or assert a position *about* the event, since any such position could only be partial, disregarding the event’s turn, and thus evacuating its very momentum. Instead of making statements or producing assertions, thinking is called underway to follow along and undergo the event’s turn. This is also why neither the *Ereignis* nor the human “with-standing” of *Da-sein* can be figured as either simply active or merely passive. In this perspective, the prefix “zu” in *Zueignung* can be seen as one of the markers in Heidegger’s thought of how and why the originating “between” of the relation that spans being and humans cannot be grasped in terms of either activity or passivity. For the very possibility and the assignation of the labels of activity and passivity unfold from the originative turning marked by Heidegger through the prefix *zu-* a turning that is neither active nor passive but rather “begins” the relation between being and humans.

What is pivotal for understanding Heidegger, and yet has not been sufficiently appreciated in critical commentaries, is the sense in which the turn marked in the sentence cited above by the German term *Zueignung* constitutes the “inceptual word” as Heidegger claims. In this remark, Heidegger uses the German verb *stimmen* to characterize what transpires as *Zueignung* (arrogation, appropriation, dedication). *Zueignung* takes place as a reciprocal disposition of being to humans and of humans, that is, of human thinking/comportment/doing, to being – a disposition that in the early Heidegger takes the form of the preontological understanding of being. In other words, it is the *Zueignung* that sets the tone, or initiates the pitch, in which the turn of the event not only unfolds in the direction of human beings but at the same time lets humans respond by disposing their thinking into the appropriate key. As will become clear, at issue in this disposition is not simply a temporal coincidence that pre-sets the wavelength for the relation between being and human beings so that it can take its proper shape of language, but also, and perhaps primarily, the non-repeatable

singularity of this turn. In addition to the musical terms deployed in the gloss above, the verb *stimmen* also invokes language, specifically, voice (*Stimme*). It is in this idiomatic sense that, as Heidegger explains, “the event-related beginning is the inceptually disposing voice [*stimmende Stimme*]: the word.”

The quasi-tautological phrase *stimmende Stimme* illustrates the dimension and the manner in which language “begins.” In his formulation *Stimme* is obviously not simply “voice,” for this voice, Heidegger insists, is characteristically soundless (*lautlos*). It is not sound or vocalization that is determinative here but the disposing or tuning (*stimmen*). In other words, the “voice” does not ever resound; it is never voiced and does not become audible. Its “voicing” consists not in vocalization or expression but in disposing, tuning, or toning, that is, in bringing the event in relation with human beings, that is, in tune with their thinking. What being “voices” is not anything audible or inaudible, for this voicing is not auditory but, if one could put it this way, it is instead “dispositive.” It disposes by opening, inaugurating, actuating, and letting be. It is thanks to this disposition (*Stimmung*) that thinking can transpire and come into language, for the dispositive “voicing” opens the pathway for the audible as well as for the visible, that is, for speaking and writing, for sounds and letters. It pre-sets the key for language, in other words. As Heidegger explains, *Stimmung* or “‘disposition’ is not a human state of feeling, but is the event of the word as a self-arrogating adoption [*sich zueignende Aneignung*]” (GA 71: 171/145).

These remarks illustrate quite clearly how Heidegger sees language “begin” and work its pathways. The event occurs word and as word, or, as Heidegger puts it: “The event words [*Das Ereignis wortet*]” (GA 74: 99). This does not mean that the event forms or articulates words as language-signs but rather that the inceptual wording consists in the disposition of the between that draws the event’s turn as *Zueignung*.

The event, in its event-related essence, is soundless. In addition, however, inceptually the word does not have the property of ‘meaning’ or ‘sense,’ because, as the self-arrogating clearing of being, the word first becomes

the ground of the subsequent formation of 'word meanings' and 'word sounds.' Both of these arise concurrently and arise every time the word-sound is intoned. But all sounding is the echo of the fact that beings, previously beingless, enter into the eventuation toward being and persist therein. (GA 71: 171/145-46)

Heidegger plays here with the German *Wortlaut* to have it indicate primarily something that in English could be called "wording": not just word sound but more broadly coming or being formed into words in both of their registers: as meaning and as sounds or letters. The way the event "words" inceptually is without meaning or sense just as much as it is without speech or writing to start with; and in this manner it might be said to take place "prior" to all of them. This inceptual word does not have the properties of a sign, let alone those of a language-sign or dictionary term. It is neither a signifier nor a signified, which means that such word cannot be discussed in terms of language-signs or conceptions of language based on signs, differential meaning, reference, system, or code. The word taken in this valence occurs silent and meaning-free, as it lets signs form and acquire their linguistic shape as word meanings and word sounds.

Event as the inceptual word "intones" language in a specific and idiomatic manner: that is, the word lets word meanings and word sounds – signifieds and signifiers – arise, and does so each time anew through the repetition of similarities and distinctions, of the multiple differentiations required for the existence of language and meaning. The word is inceptual because it allows for the formation and functioning of language in terms of signs. All wording, *Lauten*, that is, all sounding and writing, takes place thanks to and in the aftermath of the event's wording. As Heidegger remarks, "In the inceptual voice of the event-related disposition, there is neither announcing [*Verlautbarung*] nor silence" (GA 71: 171/146). As used in this remark, *Verlautbarung* comprises both speaking and writing, which here mean specifically the announcing and the stating that express in language-signs, that is, in "word meanings" and "word sounds," to echo Heidegger's vocabulary.

This “sounding” (*Verlautbarung*), which brings word meanings and word sounds, is itself only an echo of the way in which “beings, previously beingless [*das Seinlose*] enter into the eventuation toward being” and stay there. What opens the pathway of the language signs is the wording of the event, and, as the comment just quoted clarifies, this wording transpires specifically as the turn from the beinglessness to being, that is, as the entrance of the beingless (*das Seinlose*) into what is (*das Seiende*). This turn from beinglessness to being is what Heidegger refers to as the beginning (*Anfang*). The event takes place through “wording” what is “beingless” into being, thus giving or granting being to what becomes manifest as beings.

As *Über den Anfang* (GA 70) explains in greater detail, such event begins always singly, which means that what comes to be is worded momentarily and only ever once, even as it happens to be “sounded” or uttered in repeatable word-signs. “Singularity is the inceptuality of the inception. The inception is each time more singular; this singularity does not exclude the ‘many,’ for ‘the many’ is already pure semblance, which the singular of re-presentation covers over” (GA 70: 44).⁴ Perhaps the best word to describe the force of this inception or beginning is the rarely used adjective *semelfactive*. With regard to a verb or its aspect, the term “semelfactive” expresses action as single in its occurrence without repetition or continuation. *Semelfactive* comes from the New or neo-Latin *semelfactivus*, where *semel* means once, a single time, and is related to the Proto-Indo-European root *sem* (one, as one, together), which also gives rise to the English “same.” *Factivus* comes from *factum*, event or occurrence. The two components of the term *semelfactive* underscore not simply the link between but in fact – or as fact – the “sameness” of the event and of its “once” or “one time,” manifest in the characteristic non-repetition and non-continuation.⁵ It is the semelfactivity of the event that renders each beginning incomparable and “more inceptual”: not just more intense or more original with regard to the degree of its inceptuality but more inceptual specifically due to each event’s semelfactivity. Because the event does not (just) occur but *begins*, and does so in the wake of nihilation, its inceptual momentum

is not simply new but singly originaive as its proper, non-repeatable once. The beginning that unfolds in the event's turn is thus nonpareil and without compare, which Heidegger indicates by using terms like *einzig*, *einzigartig*, *einmalig*, or also *einstig*, which is given by Heidegger the semelfactive valence of "singly once." Beginning or inceptuality concerns the way in which a being "is" by abiding its while singly one time.⁶ What this notion of beginning discloses about being is that each moment gives the beingless into being and does so once precisely because of the nothingness intrinsic to being's unfolding. This non-repeatable singleness comes to pass because the event lets be thanks to being's departure (*Abschied*): in letting beings be, in allowing them to appear as either present or absent, being departs or takes leave from those beings. It never coincides with beings, with what is, and desists from simply becoming part of their existence or of its meaning. This is why in relation to beings or entities, being appears as "nothing." Yet it is precisely as this "nothing" that being properly occurs.

Exclude for once mere description, which always takes refuge only in "beings," forbid mere reports, which are given over only to the past, desist from plans and calculations, which are attached only to the immediate future – and then still try to think and speak. Then to you it is as if there were nothing [*das Nichts*]. Yet then to you would be what is: beyng [*das Seyn*]. (GA 71: 122/103)

What this entails, however, is that letting be is tantamount to nihilation: emerging and becoming present for a while, beings are let be in the momentum of nothingness proper to being: "What purely and simply is not nothing is a being [*Seiendes*]. Nothingness itself, however, is being [*Sein*]" (GA 71: 121/103). The reciprocal turn of the beginning into the departure, or the beginning *through* departure, takes place once or as the once (*das Einst*), as GA 73 proposes. This is to say that the wording that the event takes as language is shaped as a one-time beginning.

To understand the specifics of the event as one-time, it is important to nuance the relation between beginning and departure on which the *Ereignis* pivots into language, and more specifically into language signs.

The event is the self-sheltering richness of the simplicity because it is down-going into the departure from the inceptuality of the beginning [*aus der Anfängnis der Anfang in der Abschied untergehende*]. It is as this richness of simplicity that the turning of beyng eventuates while disposing and bestows the showing of signs. The event [*Er-eygnis*] is beyng as inceptual voice. The event is the treasure of the word. Nevertheless, the e-vent, as beyng, is inceptually the relation to the essence of the historical human being, an essence which is thereby determined, as regards attitudes and comportments, with respect to this relation and thus with respect to disposedness through voice. The relation eventuates in the departing-differentiating counter-turn [*in der abschiedlich-unterschiedlichen Gegenwendigkeit*]. (GA 71: 173/147)

The last phrase in this quotation specifies the manner in which the event's turn, initially as the turn of being toward human beings, transpires as a simultaneous countering of departure and differentiation. What is of course lost in translation is that the German words *Abschied* (departure) and *Unterschied* (difference) share the same root *Schied*, which indicates scission and parting. This scission is precisely what (dis)joins and is shared by departure and difference, which explains why in the event's turn departure and difference acquire distinct momentums. Though forming one jointure, difference and departure counter each other, which means that the event transpires simultaneously as the momentum of differentiation and as the backtracking pull of being's departure from beings, which counters any pretense to stable or abiding

presence, that is, to “beingness,” conjured up by the difference between being and beings.

Understanding Heidegger's *Ereignis* solicits a thinking that eschews statements and assertions about the event and instead proceeds, grammatically and semantically, to engage the counter-turn of departure and difference. The difference Heidegger names in *The Event* as the *Unterschied* is the uneasy scission and collapse constantly marking the differentiation of being from beings as it is underpinned by departure (*Abschied*) and nothingness (*Nichts*). The *Unterschied* spells out the predicament of the ontological difference, which by the mid-1930s Heidegger identifies more as an obstacle than as the access to the question of being promised in *Being and Time*. In this altered context, Heidegger introduces the antiquated spelling of *Seyn* with a “y” to signal precisely this counter-turning, which means here the manner in which beyng (*Seyn*) de-parts from the ontological difference, that is, from the unsuccessful attempt to distinguish between beings and being (*Sein* in its conventional modern spelling), which merely reduplicates beings into beingness while failing expressly to register the nihilating pull of the *Abschied* and thus of beyng (*Seyn*).

The counter-turning of the *Abschied* and the *Unterschied* signals the distinctness of *Ereignis* from other ways of thinking the event. To put it simply, *Ereignis* is never only or simply about difference or differentiation, whether thought in terms of the trace, as in Derrida, or an immanent multiplicity and folds, as in Deleuze, or the notions of the event proposed by Foucault or more recently by Badiou. Difference constitutes only one momentum of the *Ereignis*, against which the event turns the nihilating backdraft of the de-parting beyng. It is significant that what Heidegger calls the *Unterschied* is not a *Differenz*, as, for instance, in his better-known term “ontological difference” (*ontologische Differenz*).⁷ Difference as *Differenz* is difference unfolding with regard to beings, which means that difference, even the ontological difference between being and beings, is still formed and determined in terms of beings. That is why within the ontological difference being appears as beingness (*Seiendheit*). *Unterschied*, by contrast, opens through the

scission between being and nothingness, the scission that is integral to being itself in just this sense that being occurs properly as nothingness. In *Zum Ereignis-Denken*, Heidegger explains that the only way to enter and sink into the ontological difference, and thus into difference as such, is to let unfold its essence as the *Unterschied*, that is, specifically with regard to departure and nothingness (GA 73.2: 987). This may explain why Heidegger introduces the old spelling *Seyn*: in order to suggest that “beyng” (*Seyn*) occurs as the parting of being (*Sein*) and nothingness (*Nichts*), the parting that initiates ‘in turn’ the difference between being (*Sein* as *Seiendheit*) and beings (*Seiende*). The *Unterschied* is thus more complex than the ontological difference, and, moreover, it centrally or essentially involves nothingness. For without nothingness, without its nihilating momentum, no difference – whether between being and beings or among beings themselves – would be possible. In short, difference and differentiation transpire in the wake of the “one-timeness,” of the *Einmaligkeit*, that gives, or metes out, the proper pace of nothingness.

Another way of looking at this distinctness of the *Ereignis* could be phrased in the following manner. If what comes to the fore in difference is the between underpinning and spacing the momentum of differentiation in Heidegger’s understanding of the event, then the originative fold of being into beings, the inceptive between, is actuated by nothingness and takes place as already turning (back) into nothingness. This is why Heidegger refers to nothingness as inceptual:

The inceptual nothingness [*das anfanghafte Nichts*] is the purely bestowing clearing as the event of the turning [*Kehre*]. In this nothingness, the refusal essentially occurs as the basic trait of the abyss. / Out of this nothingness and its nothinging [*Nichten*], i.e. its refusing, i.e. its inceptuality, the ‘not’ and the ‘no’ [*das Nicht und Nein-hafte*] are determined in the difference [*Unterschied*]. Yet inasmuch as nothingness is beyng, beyng is essentially the difference [*Unterschied*]

as the inceptually concealed and refused departure
[*Abschied*]. (GA 71: 124/106)

The German suffix *-haft* underscores a particular feature or propensity, which in the quotation above indicates that nothingness, charged with beginning (*anfanghaft*) is what lets being begin. The quote also makes clear that *Unterschied* is to be understood first with regard to departure (*Abschied*), and thus in the perspective of nothingness and its inceptuality. Only as such a “departure” can the *Unterschied* also unfold (as) a *Differenz*. In this interpretation, the *Unterschied* always pivots between departure (*Abschied*) and difference(s), which means that differentiation starts to unfold already within the nihilating momentum of the clearing. The *Ereignis*, while certainly being about the tracing of difference (the *Unterschied*, and, “subsequently,” *Differenz*), occurs, counter to the production of difference it keeps enabling, as the simultaneous nihilation not only of differences but of the differentiating scission as well. The *Abschied* has always already turned against the *Unterschied*. It is in this manner that *Ereignis* counter-turns between *Unterschied* and *Abschied*.

While the *Unterschied* opens, through the ontological difference, onto differences and distinctions – from being(ness) to beings to differences between beings – the *Abschied* opens onto the nothing and its nihilating (*Nichten*), all the way to the “beingless” (*das Seinlose*). The turning between the *Abschied* and the *Unterschied* points in both directions at once: toward being as beingness in its difference from beings and toward the departure, the *Ab-schied*, which nihilates the *Schied*. Yet this nihilation does not annul the difference and produce unity or uniformity in its place but instead actuates the abyss of the being-less, or the being-free. If I understand Heidegger well, then his writings from the mid-1930s onward indicate that what transpires with regard to the *Abschied* and the *Unterschied* is not difference – that is, a difference or a distinction between them – but a turn or a counter-turn. The obvious conclusion, and the real difficulty for thinking, is that the event’s turn cannot, therefore, be thought in terms of difference and/or identity. This becomes even more salient since *Ereignis* eventuates

only once, without repeating its traversal. Its turning brings beings into what is proper to them, namely the while of their existence, at the same time also freeing itself in the direction of the nothing, as the event departs from being into the being-less. In other words, the event draws from the being-less into being, into the ontological difference and the play of differentiation, while in the same gesture releasing into nothing. The event's turn bespeaks the fact that nothingness is not the negation or the opposite of being: it is not not-being but rather forms part of the momentum proper to being (*Seyn*) as event.

The departure is so crucial to Heidegger's *Ereignis* because it is its nihilating momentum that renders what has come into being "being-less" once more.⁸ In other words, it is the *Abschied* that gives the event its semelfactively inceptive momentum, which eventuates the being-less each time anew into being. Without nihilation, which is not just negation or the difference that negation brings into the open but constitutes the nihilating pull into the abyss, there would be no beginning; or the beginning would be merely a species of repetition. The counter-turning between the *Unter-schied* and the *Ab-schied* is the *Ab-grund*, the de-grounding over which the event stretches the play of the differences it springs into the clearing. This is why what seems like an iterative mode of instantiation in truth does not repeat. Yet to the extent that the *Ereignis*, beginning from the being-less, opens difference and distinctness, it also makes iteration possible, even necessary. Still, this iteration is subtended and stirred by the semelfactive traction of nothingness (*Nichtung*): it is nihilated, trailed ever singly into nothing. If repetition becomes possible on the event's side of the difference (the *Unterschied*), it does not operate on the side of the departure (the *Abschied*), and this is why the event begins in such a way that the beginning takes place singly once. This semelfactivity is enabled by the nihilating traction or sweep of the abyss. One could say that the beginning is both *the charge* and *in the charge* of the nihilation. The single, non-repeatable surge of the beginning comes from the way in which *Nichtung* does repeat, because, as the force of nihilation, it vacates and frees always like nothing else, nonpareil. In other words, nihilation (*Nichtung*) is not of the order

of repetition and non-repetition, as its sweep instates, that is “begins,” those very possibilities. The way in which the nothing already sweeps away and empties the present makes each coming moment of being appear as the sole and only one in being, existing awhile just this once. Through nihilation, the momentum of the event “begins” ever so new as to make comparison impossible.

As “late” Heidegger was fond of saying, the nothing is not different from or opposed to being but inaugurates being’s own true momentum. What is both important and difficult here is that nothingness, which pulses within, at once actuating and departing being, and makes difference possible, is itself “beyond-differential” and yet “non-unitary” in relation to being. This is why it cannot be stated or rendered into meaning but instead endured and carried out – I am thinking here of what Heidegger names *Inständigkeit* and *Austrag* – through what might be called the event’s “departive” turn. This counter-turn is of course not the only momentum at work in the event, for the *Ereignis* opens and carries out being’s relation to human beings, projecting open the time-space for the human relation to being. The attending difficulty lies in the fact that what might be seen as the two sides of this relation, being and human beings, are in fact submitted to a critical turn eventuating as Da-sein. Dasein is accessed through and as the human mode of being – in the manner extensively elaborated initially in *Being and Time* – only for this perspective to be turned so that Da-sein becomes the site opened from or granted by being itself as a possibility for humans to enter, stand in, and withstand. The “care” implied here is of course not passive, since Da-sein does not really open, or is withstood, until the human being takes part in carrying it out and stands or holds *with* and *in* Da-sein. Differently said, only through humans with-standing it, can Da-sein stay open and engaged as it were.

Taken together, the counter-turn between departure and difference, and then the ensuing turn from being to humans, all form the outline of language. This jointure also specifies one of the most difficult and underestimated distinctions crucial to Heidegger’s *Ereignis*, namely the one between the word of being and language signs, or word-signs

(*Wörterzeichen*) as Heidegger on occasion calls them. Heidegger invokes this distinction by pointing, though often only implicitly, to the double plural of “word” in German: *Worte* and *Wörter*. Let me indicate this crucial distinction through another quote from section 185.

Because being itself is inceptually the word (the event-related disposition which knows neither utterance nor silence and stillness), the treasure of the word (treasure [*Schatz*] as the origin of the ‘vocabulary’ [*Wortschatz*] of ‘language’) must be experienced in the saying of being. Out of the apparently emptiest and poorest word, out of the ‘is’ and its inceptual truth, there originates the ordained fullness of words [*Wörter*] and of their cases and inflections. (GA 71: 172/146–47, tm)

What Heidegger calls the “treasure of the word” constitutes the originative force for the entire vocabulary of language and thought. But this treasure is not limited to linguistic or conceptual capacity. Most important, it indicates exactly the momentum of the beginning or inception (*Anfang*). Heidegger’s phrase “the event words” ties the origin of language specifically to the semelfactive momentum of the beginning. What “begins” is the each time singular disposing, which exerts itself and takes shape as the “word” or the “voice” of being. This “word,” which Heidegger evokes through the term “is,” is the emptiest, but not for the reasons Nietzsche claimed. To be precise, this word is inceptive through its force of emptying and freeing, that is, through nihilation. It marks the poverty of being, which constitutes also the richness of the simplicity with which the event begins (its) while nihilating. The difficult simplicity, the simple of being, that Heidegger repeatedly invokes, is the once, the semelfactivity, of this beginning.

Describing the event and its signature departure/beginning, Heidegger uses predominantly the German adjective *einzig* and its noun, *Einzigkeit*. I deliberately want to foreground, however, the second term he sometimes employs to reinforce *einzig*, especially to underscore the one-time character of the singularity at issue, namely the adjective

einmalig. On occasion one can find in Heidegger's texts *einzig einmalig* paired together, and in such instances English translations render *einmalig* specifically as "non-repeatable," thus highlighting the key role that non-iteration plays in the way in which the event's simultaneous departure and beginning transpire. In GA 73, Heidegger employs another adverb *einst* (once) as well as the adjective *einstig* (one-time) and the substantive, *das Einstige* (the one-time) in order to intensify further the non-repeatable signature of the event. ("The one-time, however, is first the discharge of the present, which eventuates right now"⁹; that is, at this very moment, in the blink of an eye; GA 73.1: 791). Heidegger in fact goes as far as to turn the adverb *einst* into a neologism *das Einst*, in order to indicate the nonrepetable "once," that the event marks.¹⁰ This "one time" or "once" indicates not the temporality of the event but rather the way in which the event "times," that is, gives and begins time as a while that opens always only once. In other words, the semelfactivity here does not describe a moment in or of time but rather the nihilating force of giving time. Focusing on the adjective *einmalig* in this context is important especially for developing the understanding of the event specifically *through* the turn, which not only occasions the event but also actuates it as language. Language is thought of here in the specific, originative dimension that Heidegger calls "the word 'of' beyng [*Seyn*]." To see more clearly the confluence or the juncture between "event," "turn," and "word," an etymological query into the German term *mal* can provide an important and helpful indication.

Mal functions in German as both noun and adverb, which indicates the term's crucial mobility between key grammatical categories, the nominal and the verbal. According to the Grimms' dictionary, *mal* derives from the Gothic *mêl*, which meant on the one hand, *kairos* and, on the other, *graphie* and *gramma* or *grammata*.¹¹ Its primary meaning in Gothic is associated with time, as it was used to translate the Biblical Greek terms such as *kairos*, *kronos*, and *hora* (moment, time, hour). On the other hand, the Gothic *mel* also referred to writing and letters, as well as to signs, marks, spots, flecks, etc. *Mal* thus indicates a *Zeitpunkt*: moment, time, instant of time, date, point in time, point of time, or

even hour, though not as a temporal extension but rather as a kairotic marker. But it also points this idea of *kairos* toward, even fleshes it out, into writing, *Schrift*, into script or written signs, *Schriftzeichen*. Furthermore, *Mal* is related to *malen*, which means to picture, to paint, to image, and thus to another verb, *zeichnen*, meaning to draw, to sketch, to outline. Both German verbs, though especially *zeichnen*, once again draw the term *mal* directly into a relation to language, making it a precursor to both signs and marks.

As a word, the German *Mal* sketches – it literally draws out spatio-temporally – the while unfolding out of the event and textures it into language. The relations between time and writing, temporality and language, marking and signs, contained in the German *Mal* form the sinews and ligatures through which the event turns, and turns out “to be.” The compound *einmal* intensifies the singleness indicated by *mal* beyond the notions of singularity or uniqueness. It lets me take the terms *einmalig* and *Einmaligkeit* as they are deployed in Heidegger’s work in the direction that stretches and frays the philosophical discourses on singularity. This is the case because *einmalig* refers neither to anything singular (a being or an entity) nor to a singular instance or occurrence (an event – but not *Ereignis* – in the sense of a happening, a happenstance, or an occasion) but instead to the once of the event’s turn. The language of singularity or singularization is indebted to the language and the thought of beings, and to the understanding of time as a kind of being (a moment or an instance), which means that, for all its importance and dexterity, such language is not capable of registering the turn – *abschiedlich-unterschiedlich* – of the *Ereignis*, the turn of nothingness turned being turning nothing. The etymological ligature between the temporal moment, the momentum of time itself, on the one hand, and writing, on the other, instantiated by the term *Mal/mal* is echoed by its fluctuation between nominal and verbal resonances. Graphically, it also oscillates between the capitalized nominal form *Mal* and the non-capitalizable adverbial *mal*.

I do not have the time to develop here the importance of this non-capitalizable turn evidenced in the term *mal*, especially for ways of

critiquing capital and its imbrication in the essence of technology, or the *Gestell* as Heidegger terms it. Here I only can show briefly how this trade-off also begins and operates in language, capitalizing words into signs and providing the flexibility and power of meaning. It binds into a turn both a non-repeatable temporal once and the repeatability and generality associated with signs, writing, and language. To put it simply, the German word *mal* turns, profitably, one might say, from its semelfactivity to proliferating difference and repetition, from the one-time to the explosive production of meaning. In other words, one could say that *Einmaligkeit* is what makes writing, letters, and language, possible. Could one think here of the impossible bind of a one-time or a one-off writing: a semelfactive writing before writing? Though in his text on language Heidegger employs predominantly the vocabulary of saying, voice, and tuning to describe the unfolding of the event, the writing register of *Einmaligkeit* indicates the very turn that leads into language by forking into speech and writing. *Einmaligkeit* thus lets us position the event with regard to language, specifically as the turn through which the event “words” (*Das Ereignis wortet*) and also with regard to temporality, especially the timing implied in the idea of repetition.

Signs and their components, both signifiers and signifieds, rely on repetition: of sounds, letters, and meanings. Even new meanings can arise only through the gesture of extending or rupturing repetition. *Einmaligkeit* provides a corrective to this operation, manifesting – to the extent that a “once” can be said to manifest – precisely the underhanded, necessarily concealable and mostly covered, trade-off of semelfactivity into repetition. Once again the German term *einmal* is instructive here: take the phrase *noch einmal*, “once more” or “one more.” What appears to be once more – whether as a being, an occurrence, a sign, or a meaning – seems, at least structurally and with regard to its meaning, to be a repetition, a once again, while in fact – and it is the word “while” that remains crucial here – it is nonetheless still only once, still one time: *noch ein mal*. The verb “seems” must remain ambivalent here, indicating both appearance, or

manifestation, and seeming, or semblance. Language is based on this semblance, on trading off the semelfactivity of manifestation for the appearances of meaning. This trade-off is secured through the iterative nature of language signs, which seem to capitalize – stabilize and repeat – what one might call the non-repeatable, semelfactive “word ‘of’ beyng [*Wort ‘des’ Seyns*].”

The German word *mal* reveals one more interesting etymological shoot. Its Gothic predecessor was related to the Gothic verb *mitan*: to measure or to deal out, etymologically tied to the Greek *metron*. The tie between “once” and “measure” suggests an important way in which we should perhaps rethink the poetic measure discussed in Heidegger’s texts on Hölderlin. This poetic measure needs to be thought not simply as the inverse of scientific measure: while science measures the unknown by establishing and using a known standard, poetry measures through exposure to the unknown. What is important is that the unknown Heidegger evokes through Hölderlin’s poetry is not a question of otherness or alterity but rather of what, in words from *Contributions to Philosophy*, makes possible and enforces otherness yet itself has no other: namely, the simple once of being.¹² The difficulty of the poetic measure lies in that it needs to be taken semelfactively in spite of the apparent repetition of word-signs, images, and meanings.

Even though to my knowledge Heidegger did not elaborate anywhere the etymological resonances of *einmalig* and *Einmaligkeit* the way I have sketched them out here, these adduced characteristics do serve to crystallize and develop the intricate twists and turns through which the event, at least in the Heideggerian valence of *Ereignis*, issues. As we know, the turn from being to humans as well as the corresponding turn of human thought to being should be thought as *abschiedlich-unterschiedlich*. In parallel with this turn, the word of being turns into word-signs just as it departs from those signs and the play of signification. In a way, this emptiest word as Heidegger defiantly calls it, speaks by nihilating signs, which means here that it allows for differences while emptying out these differences into the abyss of the departure. With the thought of the fourfold, another layer of cross-relatedness is

mapped onto this already complex unfolding of the event. The relations delineated out of the event are again re-oriented within the active sense of regioning that spans the between of what Heidegger names “earth” and “sky,” “mortals” and “the godlike.” At this point, at issue is no longer just the turning between being and humans but also the fourfold crossing and counter-turning that inflect, that is, counter and re-dimension, or re-measure, the relation between being and human beings, that is, they “multi-fold” the *Seinsfrage*. What is more, this kinetic topographic of the fourfold has to be both inflected through the prism of the tension between difference and departure and remarked with the index of *Einmaligkeit*, or semelfactivity.

In this context, it is important to note that the turn of the event points to the way in which also the notion of the proper comes to be indexed as *einmalig*. Explaining the correct etymology of *Ereignis*, Heidegger begins to dislocate the notion of *eigen*, precisely by evoking the false etymology, which mistakenly links *er-äugen* with *er-eigen* (GA 71: 184-85/156-57). By making the word *Ereignis* Janus-faced as it were, these remarks draw attention to the way in which the proper ever only comes through as its own disappropriation. This was indicated, though perhaps still with some hesitation, in the oscillation between *Uneigentlichkeit* and *Eigentlichkeit* sketched out in *Being and Time*. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the rejoinder or the counter to *Being and Time*, namely the talk entitled “Time and Being,” this rethinking of the proper is conveyed through the figure of *Ereignis* turning into, and thus fittingly taking place as, *Enteignis*.¹⁵ In *Zum Ereignis-Denken* Heidegger calls this turn “*das einstige Enteignis*” (GA 73.1: 795). This turn is not only nothing negative but is in fact the proper turn of the event as the turn of the proper. By the turn of the proper I mean here the manner in which the event eventuates through its “proper” dis- or de-eventuation. What this implies about the proper is that it only ever comes as its own momentary, punctiliar, expropriated, and nihilated “one time.” The proper not *is*, neither as proper nor as improper, but rather turns its once.¹⁴ This becomes evident in Heidegger’s formulations in *Zum Ereignis-Denken* such as “The de-event in the once [*Die*

Enteignis in die Einst]” and “The once(on)ly of the once [*das Einstige des Einst]*” (GA 73.2: 1179). So translating *er-eignen* as appropriating, *an-eignen* as appropriation, etc., may be in fact mistaken, because the *eigen* in *Ereignis* is always already being “de-propered.” Such translation tends to forget the turning intrinsic to the event, which makes Heidegger’s term *Ereignis* spin terminologically between manifestation and appropriation, between *Er-äugen* and *Er-eigen*, between the non-repeatable once of manifestation and the notion of the proper. One could say that just as the event illuminates or lights the proper, it also lightens it, emptying it anew into nothing. This is the double-play of the *Lichtung*, the clearing, in Heidegger: The clearing is not only an opening that makes room and projectively brings to light, but also an emptying which, as the abyss, renders beginning semelfactive.

As my close attention to Heidegger’s language suggests, the fact that the event “words,” that its turn disposes by turning “the word of being” into word-signs, is not merely a matter of a philosophical conception or a set of assertions about language. Heidegger’s thought is not a theory of language but an attempt at transforming the scope and the “language” of thinking through a changed relation to it, and thus a new experience of it. This attempt is also no mere language play, for its significance comes from the way it renders thinking pliable, moving it away from limiting itself to or giving priority to propositional statements, argument, or analysis. It makes thinking follow in its language the turns and twists of the event, and do so both in its grammar and lexis. Deliberate quasi-tautological statements that work through propositional structures only to leave them altered; patient restatements or multiple rephrasing, sometimes shifting just a word or a word category, for instance from the noun *Anfang*, through the adjective *anfänglich*, to another noun, *Anfänglichkeit*, or its more contrived yet also more resonant and evocative variant, *Anfängnis*, may seem like unnecessary multiplication of terms. Yet these shifts in fact register the modulations in experience whereby what exists fluctuates between a verbal and a nominal status, constantly making thought attentive to the slippage between beings and being. Such rephrasing also tries to have thought

begin always afresh, so that instead of describing and generalizing, it follows along the originative turn of the event in its singly one time trajectory. In other words, it tries to sound out the word's inceptual force, what Heidegger, playing on the German term "vocabulary" (*Wortschatz*), called the word's "treasure" (*Schatz*). For Heidegger, it was the only way for thinking to try to become a response to the event, which would mean getting its language in tune with the event's semelfactive turn, that is, with the idiomatic way the event comes to word.

Notes

- 1 "...the event cannot appear to be an event, when it appears, unless it is already repeatable in its very uniqueness. It is very difficult to grasp this idea of uniqueness as immediately iterable, of singularity as immediately engaged in substitution, as Lévinas would say." Jacques Derrida, "A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event," trans. Gila Walker, *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Winter 2007), 452.
- 2 The texts in question are the *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)* (GA 65), *Mindfulness* (GA 66), *The History of Beyng* (GA 69), *Über den Anfang* (GA 70), *The Event* (GA 71), and *Zum Ereignis-Denken* (GA 73.1–73.2).
- 3 "Die *Einzigkeit* – ist das Unerwartete sowohl wie das Unwiederholbare" (GA 73.1: 261).
- 4 "Die *Einzigkeit* ist Anfänglichkeit des Anfangs. Der Anfang ist je als einziger; diese *Einzigkeit* schliesst nicht das 'Viele,' aber 'das Viele' ist bereits nur rein Schein, der das Einzige vom Vorstellen her überdeckt."

- 5 Derrida draws attention to the semelfactivity, the one time of the event in “Typewriter Ribbon”: “singularity, semelfactivity (that is, the concept of what happens just once), ‘the one time only’ of the event.” Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 332.
- 6 “Auch ist das Sein nicht nur das Seiende noch einmal, so daß im Sein das Seiende sich wiederholte, sondern im Sein ist das Seiende das einzige Mal und ragt so in die Einzigkeit des Seins” (GA 70: 119).
- 7 Heidegger discusses at length the relation between *Unterschied* and (*ontologische*) *Differenz* in various texts in GA 73. See, for instance, GA 73.2: 987–88.
- 8 “Weil das Seyn ist und weil nur das Seyn ist, das Seyn aber vom Wesen des ereignenden Anfangs, deshalb muss das Seyn auch nicht sein” (GA 71: 15–16).
- 9 “Das Einstige aber ist der Austrag erst der Gegen-wart, die im Augenblick ereignet wird.”
- 10 He writes about the *Einst* of “poverty” (*Armut*), of the “same” (*Selbe*), of “beginning” (*Anfang*), and of the “parting” (*Letze*), and of the “event of de-event in the dif-ference [*Das Einst des Ereignisses der Enteignis in den Unterschied*]” (GA 73.2: 924–25, 1168, 1176).
- 11 *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jakob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm Online* (<http://woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB/?sigle=DWB&mode=Vernetzung&lemid=GMoo651>).
- 12 “Insofar as beyng essentially occurs as permeated with negativity [als nichthaftes wesend], it at the same time makes possible and enforces otherness” (GA 65: 267/210).
- 13 See the discussion of *Ereignis* in “Time and Being,” GA 14: 24–30/19–24.
- 14 In *Zum Ereignis-Denken* Heidegger also writes of the span of truth as that which is only once: “Die Wahr-heit ist das Einstige” (GA 73.1: 758).