



Get the nothingness back into words. The aim is words with nothing in them; words that point beyond themselves rather than to themselves; transparencies, empty words. Empty words, corresponding to the void in things.

~Norman O. Brown

6. Divinities

Historically, religion has been associated with "belief in" a god or gods; such belief has tended to be expressed in terms of propositions representing ontical facts about the divinities who have been believed in. At times, pure credulousness has been taken to be the essence of faith, as one reading of the *credo quia absurdum* that is attributed to Tertullian would have it. Ontically descriptive (i.e. "realistic") propositions having to do with gods, which the faithful are enjoined to believe by their clergy and by each other, have certainly been characteristic of religion as a phenomenon, but they are not part of the ontological constitution of religion.

While ontically descriptive propositions having to do with factual gods are not properly part of the ontological constitution of religion, the ontology of gods in general is. Through the ontology of gods that our critical theory develops (and it would be unjustified to dismiss critical theory from performance of this service), the possibility of gods becomes essential to the possibility of religion. It is important to think these signifiers ontologically. The ontological role of gods in religion has essentially nothing to do with particular powers or acts in history that religions may publicize in their own ways and for their own purposes; it consists solely in the fact that gods have a necessary place in the world that is implied in the existential analytic begun in *Being and Time*. The necessity of a place for gods in the world is the key point that separates religion and ideology in the ontologically-based, critical interpretation of the difference between religion and ideology that is being proposed.

If the necessity of a place for gods is simply inferred from phenomena and argued in those terms, the kind of god that emerges can only be a contingent one that lets itself be determined by human explanations of ontical phenomena. Inference from ontical phenomena must lead to "god-of-the-gaps" religion and theology. In this mode of thinking, the ontological problematic remains untouched and is, in fact, concealed by a wall of excuses designed to satisfy curiosity, in the sense that curiosity has been associated with falling in *Being and Time*. This satisfaction of curiosity operates contrary to the interests of religion even when phenomena that are associated with religion, such as the institutional church, appear to be strengthened as people are impressed by stories of the gods. In fact, such stories are destined to be pretexts for iconoclasm.

To get at the ontological problematic, it is necessary to look away from the explanation of phenomena and toward the interpretation of the world. In doing this, the thought of both early and later Heidegger is involved. Incidentally, the importance of the existential analytic of *Being and Time* for Heidegger's later work shows up with particular clarity in taking up the ontology of divinities. This regional ontology ultimately presupposes the kind of preliminary understanding of Dasein developed in *Being and Time*. We do not begin with that analysis, however, since a different thematic focus promises a larger view of the Being of divinities.

In "The Thing," Heidegger avers that the thing is dened in four essential aspects: Barth, sky, mortals, and divinities. For a while, says Heidegger (playing on the German words *Weile* and *weilen*), the Being of the thing is the gathering of these four in unconcealedness. In the lexicon Heidegger develops, unconcealedness is never total exposure, it should be recalled. The now-classic example of the thing Heidegger chooses is the jug. He observes that the jug may contain a drink for mortals to quench their thirst or for the gods, as a libation which is an "authentic gift"¹ that lifts a celebration or ceremony into the realm of the divine. In this essay, Heidegger not only raises the possibility of the divine, a comparatively rare occurrence in modern philosophical writing, he specifies what he is speaking about as "the immortal gods."² He gives no other, familiarizing indication of the identities of these beings he associates so integrally with things, and when he speaks of God, as in "The Onto-theological Constitution of Metaphysics,"³ it is not with regard to things.

It could be speculated that he does not know how to name the gods or speak of them in any more specific way, but that turns out not to be the case for reasons that are more ontological than mystical. In another age, it would have been a matter of course for Heidegger to name the gods of which he spoke. In this time, however, it not only passes without causing a sensation, it would appear inappropriate for him to involve himself with (or commit himself to) the content of specific mythologies in discourse focused at a more general, anthropological level. In any event, naming names would add nothing substantially useful to his account if his intention was formally ontological; as Heidegger conceives onto-logy, it cannot be dependent upon the truth-value of non-universal arguments or ontical propositions of empirical import.

Heidegger's taciturnity concerning the divinities cannot be as-