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Art and the Earth

It is not the opinion with which a thinker ends up that is
decisive, nor is it the framework within which he gives this
opinion. It is rather the movement of questioning, through
which alone truth comes into the open [S 128/106].

Part I of this book examined the manner in which fundamental ontology
appropriates and delimits Aristotle's ontology. It undertook this in the
second, third and fourth chapters according to the guiding thread of the
three aspects of the 'ancient', Aristotelian conception of being delineated
in the sixth paragraph of Being and Time, a paragraph that sketches the
task of ‘destroying the history of ontology’: being as being-produced,
being as presence and being as truth. It is on the basis of having examined
fundamental ontology in this way that it is possible to turn to Heidegger's
reflection on the work of art in the 1930s and to the reading or rereading
of Aristotle that this reflection both articulates and implies. Such is the
concern of part II of this book. The present chapter seeks to trace the
movement of Heidegger's thinking in 1935–6, a movement that achieves
a turn from fundamental ontology to ‘another thinking’, a different form
of thought and questioning. The chapter does this, as noted in the intro­
duction to the book, in paying particular attention to the different versions
of ‘The Origin’ that have been published. Although the final version of
‘The Origin’ has itself been published in several editions, three distinct
versions of the essay are available, which are referred to as follows:

1 UK3 The final version of the essay is based on the text of three
lectures given in November and December of 1936 at the Freie Deutsche
Hochstift in Frankfurt am Main. In the Gesamtausgabe edition of Holzwege
(G5) the text appears according to the modified version first published in
1960 by Reclam, which included an appendix that Heidegger added in 1956. The Gesamtausgabe edition also includes Heidegger's own annotations to the text, which were written between 1960 and 1976.

2 UK2 A lecture that was delivered in November 1935 and repeated in January 1936 under the title Vom Ursprung des Kunstwerkes, 'On the Origin of the Work of Art', which was published with a French translation by Emmanuel Martineau, without the agreement of the German copyright holders and thus 'privately' by Authentica, Paris in 1987.


The present chapter focuses on the genesis of Heidegger's thinking in these three texts concerning the idea of earth (Erde), which is the fundamental philosophical discovery of his reflection on art. The discovery of earth occurs according to what one can term a second hylo-morphic repetition, a second repetition of the concepts of matter and form. As a birth certificate of the technical horizon constitutive of the Greek, Aristotelian inception of metaphysics, the first repetition sought to interpret the truth of matter and form in terms of the Zuhandenheit of equipment. The second seeks not only to make manifest a horizon of world, but also to advance beyond the idea of matter as such with a thinking of earth. Heidegger's argument is that the artwork makes manifest a more profound origin of both the concepts of matter and form, namely earth and world.

In advancing this argument 'The Origin' attempts to establish a decisive ontological distinction between the artwork and the mere product, which implies a differentiation of creation, the creation of the work, from prosaic production, the making of the mere product. Concomitantly, Heidegger seeks to bring to light a ‘remarkable fatality (merkwürdiges Verhängnis)’ constitutive of the history of philosophical reflection on art. This ‘came into being with the Greeks (Plato and Aristotle) with the characterisation of the artwork as a finished thing (angefertigtes Ding), that is, as a product (Zeugwerk)’ [UK2 52–3]. Greek ontology would thus interpret what is 'higher', the artwork, from the perspective of what is 'lower' [UK2 52–3], the mere product, insofar as it interprets the former according to the concepts of matter and form. The fact that Aristotle includes the examples of brass or wooden statues within his accounts of poiesis or technical production would only be the confirmation of an ontological levelling that would find its origin in Plato. For Heidegger,