

following Nietzsche's thinking of perspectivism, might have, as a consequence, a "planetary movement"—the flip side of a globalization thought only or primarily in thanatopolitical terms.

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## 1 DIVISIONS OF THE PROPER

*Heidegger, Technology, and the Biopolitical*

THAT THIS CHAPTER should open with the thought of Martin Heidegger in a context of the thanatopolitical is perhaps surprising. Yes, it's certainly true that Heidegger's thought continues to generate enormous attention—one need only consider the titles that appear every year dedicated to him<sup>1</sup>—but my impression is that few have attempted to set out the profound connections that join his thought to a larger drift of contemporary thought toward the thanatopolitical.<sup>2</sup> In the following pages, I want to sketch the path of that drift by examining two terms that appear across Heidegger's thought. The first is immediately recognizable, occupying, as it does, a central place in four texts—in the series of lectures Heidegger gave in 1942–43 that are collected in *Parmenides*, especially those sections dedicated to the (im)propriety of the hand: Heidegger's reading of "Homecoming/To Kindred Ones" from 1942, published in *Elucidations on Hölderlin's Poetry*; 1954's "The Question Concerning Technology"; and finally, his "Letter on Humanism" from 1947. The term in question is *technē* and its derivative technology.<sup>3</sup> The second term is nearly as familiar to contemporary readers, though it is rarely, if ever, named in connection with Heidegger's thought. I'm speaking of *biopolitics*, the seemingly never-ending inscription of biology in politics as well as the reverse: of politics read in a biological key.<sup>4</sup> As I consider the intersection of technology and biopolitics in Heidegger's later thought, one of my principal arguments will be precisely that to the degree we speak about biopolitics today, lurking beneath is a conception of technology deeply indebted to Heidegger's ontological elaboration of it. Moreover, this intersection provides the ground for the marked thanatopolitical inflection of biopolitics that characterizes so much of contemporary political philosophy. I will have much more to say about this in

Chapter 2, when I discuss the thought of Giorgio Agamben, especially his reflections on the function of *dispositif* in *oikonomia*. I also take it up in a somewhat different fashion in my reading of Roberto Esposito's understanding of *dispositif* and personhood, while in the third chapter, dedicated to Peter Sloterdijk, the figure (or, depending on one's point of view, the phantasm) of Heidegger dramatically reappears in Sloterdijk's immunological walls, the technology of the household, and most forcefully, the distinction between humanizing and bestializing media. As I argue there as well, how Heidegger takes up the question of technology, in the distinction between proper and improper writing, allows an implicit thanatopolitics to become available for contemporary political thought. In these four texts, Heidegger elaborates a distinction between proper and improper writing that has ontological effects such that a division in life is constructed between one *Art*, or species of man, associated with proper writing and another with improper writing.

One final observation on the theme of thanatopolitics, technology, and contemporary Italian thought. It's true that the object of thanatopolitical reflection in Agamben's work is chiefly Nazism. Indeed, Agamben refers in most cases to the presumed biological need (and practice) of making some live by killing others because the presence of these others can no longer be tolerated. This is how he will read modernity as populated entirely by *homo sacer*. Yet the ultimate premise for these readings can be found in the relation of technology to Being in Heidegger's thought, that is, in an ontological tear brought on by the distinction between proper and improper forms of writing. That Agamben deploys the state of exception as the mechanism by which biopolitics is always already a thanatopolitics doesn't alter, however, the fundamental authorization that Heidegger's thought provides Agamben because proper and improper writing frequently appear to be the basis for his distinction between forms of life. Agamben himself suggests just such a reading in his "Notes on Politics" from *Means without End*, in which he extends *proper* and *improper* into a global critique of industrial democracy.<sup>5</sup> In Agamben's positing of a relation between technology and sacrifice that is embodied in the figure of the *homo sacer*, he implicitly gestures to a Heideggerian ontology that would have technology determining what is proper or not proper to man. Similarly, Roberto Esposito has made Heidegger's thinking of technology the object of a reflection on the origin of politics (and the impolitical) both in *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* and *L'origine della politica: Simone Weil o Hannah*

*Arendt?*, both of which might appear to the reader to be on the way to the thanatopolitical. Admittedly, this is much less the case with *Bíos* and *Third Person*, in which his more recent considerations on Nietzsche are intended to provide a counterweight to the thanatopolitical valence that the encounter with Heidegger seems inevitably to produce.<sup>6</sup> My own reflections here are intended more as symptomology of the tragic possibilities technology provides the thanatopolitical.<sup>7</sup> In other words, I don't want to circumscribe thanatopolitics simply to Nazism but rather to see it as implicit whenever Being, language, or life is divided against itself into proper or improper.

### Technology and the Propriety of the Hand

In no text more so than *Parmenides*, Heidegger's lecture from the winter semester of 1942–43, does one find the parameters of life and technology so intimately bound together. Of particular importance are those sections dedicated to the typewriter, in which Heidegger posits a fundamental ontological distinction between a proper writing, a *Festschrift* or "handwriting," and another thought against (and through) the example of the typewriter. These pages are well known in the field of media studies and informed much of late 1990s work originating in Germany that attempted to develop a systems approach to media.<sup>8</sup> Clearly a closer look at this text is necessary if we are to get at the lurking category of the thanatopolitical.

Heidegger begins by asking what distinguishes the hand that writes from the hand that types. His answer is that man acts "for the hand is, together with the word, the essential distinction of man."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the hand, for Heidegger, provides the essential difference between man and animal: "No animal has a hand, and a hand never originates from a paw or a claw or talon."<sup>10</sup> This biotechnical distinction between hand and paw cannot be thought apart from the word: the hand is coterminus with the word as well because "the hand sprang forth only out of the word and together with the word," as he will go on to say.<sup>11</sup> This simultaneous move of precedence and superimposition is typical of Heidegger's thought, especially later in "The Question Concerning Technology," in which he posits the origin of politics in a form of technology that precedes and is the cause of the political.<sup>12</sup> In *Parmenides*, too, the question of technology is joined to the hand that writes—handwriting—in another related figure that cannot be thought apart from it: inscription. It is inscription

that will form such an important part of the discourse of authenticity that characterizes Heidegger's thought (as well as Adorno's well-known critique of it).<sup>13</sup>

Yet a contrasting figure quickly emerges in Heidegger's defense of inscription. Heidegger, writing by hand, calls it *dictation*:

It is not accidental that modern man writes "with" the typewriter and "dictates" (the same word as "poetize" [*Dichten*]) "into" a machine. This "history" of the kinds of writing is one of the main reasons for the increasing destruction of the word. The latter no longer comes and goes by means of the writing hand, the properly acting hand, but by means of the mechanical forces it releases. The typewriter tears writing from the essential realm of the hand, i.e. the realm of the word. The word itself turns into something "typed." Where typewriting, on the contrary, is only a transcription and serves to preserve the writing, or turns into print something already written, there it has a proper, though limited significance. . . . Mechanical writing deprives the hand of its rank in the realm of the written word and degrades the word to a means of communication. In addition, mechanical writing provides "this advantage," that it conceals the handwriting and thereby the character. The typewriter makes everyone look the same.<sup>14</sup>

The passage is dense in its medialogical implications as well as in what it portends for the relation of thanatopolitics and technology. I want to consider, in particular, three questions Heidegger raises.

First, note that Heidegger distinguishes between the hand that writes and the hand that types, and then sees the latter as having emerged out of the hand through its mechanical imprinting. His objective, as he will go on to argue, is to disclose a former, more originating relation of Being to handwriting: "In handwriting the relation of Being [*des Seins*] to man, namely the word, is inscribed [*eingezeichnet*] in beings themselves."<sup>15</sup> Consider how Heidegger lines up the word with man—man doesn't simply embody the word but *is* the word to the degree he writes with his hand. This assumption allows Heidegger to argue that the hand modern man has is no longer "the properly acting hand" when the hand types and does not write. The effect of this transformation is violent: proper writing is torn away from the hand by the very same forces released in fact by the hand. This suggests that Heidegger wants to mark a proper action for the hand and an improper one associated with the typewriter. The proper one is precisely the one that inscribes Being in man, whereas the improper relation between the hand and the typewriter concerns

"something typed," something "that is only a transcription and serves to preserve writing." This distinction between proper and improper writing will soon be extended from handwriting–typewriting to the practice of hermeneutics itself. It's with this in mind that Heidegger's final directive must be understood, namely, that his collected works not appear in a critical edition but as writings *aus letzter Hand*, which is to say, "the volumes in the series come 'straight from his hand' and contain a minimum of scholarly apparatus."<sup>16</sup>

Next, consider that the context for Heidegger's entire discussion of proper and improper writing is anchored to the appearance of typewriting as a form of technology and a mode of dictation in *modernity*. Indeed, that the ultimate context of Heidegger's reflections concerns modernity is never in doubt. He refers to modern man as he who writes "with" the typewriter, and he will say soon after that the object of his analysis is "modern man." If we consider other forms of technology contemporary with the typewriter, the implicit connections with the improper writing enacted by the typewriter will be confirmed as well. The gramophone, as Friedrich Kittler observes (but also the telephone and, as I have argued elsewhere, wireless telegraphy, with its headsets, writing hands, and signed communiqués), also makes dramatic use of a writing liberated from the ontological norms of handwriting.<sup>17</sup> In other words, it is in the modern period that improper writing becomes the norm, with all the attendant normalizing consequences on Being.

These normalizing effects are decisive for elaborating a biopolitical perspective on Heidegger's thought. The profound affiliation he sees between modern forms of technology and their capacity to occlude handwriting, and with it, the character of the individual who writes by hand, alters the relation of being to Being. This becomes clear in the closing line of the preceding passage, when Heidegger inscribes proper and improper writing within the political horizon in which all men are made the same. Or better, the condition for communication in the modern period will be precisely this move from proper to improper, where proper connotes not simply a hand that writes but what belongs to man as properly his own.<sup>18</sup>

Implicit, therefore, in the distinction Heidegger draws in *Parmenides* between proper and improper forms of writing is a relation of man to his writing mechanisms (and "not really machines," as Heidegger notes in the strict sense of machine technology). He is arguing that with these changes, political consequences naturally follow in that all men are made

he same when the typewriter dominates Being. It is this tension between a proper relation with Being that man enjoys when he writes by hand and another, degraded form of improper writing that moves Heidegger's discourse toward another question, toward what destabilizes that which belongs most properly to man, namely, his relation to Being as expressed in an action that is his own (the writing hand). In other words, Heidegger places the identity of the properly acting hand in opposition to another form that not only puts at risk identity as such but, more dramatically, endangers a proper relation to Being.

The third question follows quickly on these and concerns the name we will want to give this other form of improper writing. For Heidegger, the term will be *communication*. Here, though, *communication* must be read in conjunction with its etymological roots in *community*, the *co-munus* or shared *munus*, a form of gift giving that, as Roberto Esposito demonstrates, cannot be thought apart from the demands the *co-munus* makes on individual identity itself.<sup>19</sup> This is not the place to map all the deep connections running between Heidegger's thinking of community and technology; rather, I want to observe that in the stark difference Heidegger posits between a writing that preserves a relation of Being to man and another that puts it at risk, we find ourselves witness to one of the most important political and idolatrous figures of Heidegger's thought of technology. In this difference between writing in the modern period, we find an implicit alliance between improper writing born of technology and a political form in which the identity of the one who writes is put at risk. The idolatrous nature of improper writing is that it awards a power to the collective: capable of persuading men and women that they more properly belong to a collective.<sup>20</sup>

We can see this alliance more clearly in the discussion Heidegger offers soon after his reading of the typewriter when he turns to Leninism and its metaphysics:

The bourgeois world has not seen and in part still does not want to see today that in "Leninism," as Stalin calls this metaphysics, a metaphysical projection has been performed, on the basis of which in a certain way the metaphysical passion of today's Russians for technology first becomes intelligible, and out of which the technical world is brought into power.<sup>21</sup>

What goes unexplained in Heidegger's account, however, is precisely what accounts for this complete technical organization of the world

in Bolshevism. Lurking beneath Heidegger's analysis of this technical world is an unspoken connection between Leninist metaphysics and the improper act of writing. And although he doesn't explain why Bolshevism more than other forms of metaphysics experiences technology so "unconditionally and radically," we may assume that the answer will be found in the greater communal pressure that is exerted on individual identity in Leninism—that the degradation of the relation of Being to man is greater where all are made the same.<sup>22</sup> Heidegger's anticommunism thus goes hand in hand with his wide-ranging critique of improper writing, both founded on a perceived anxiety related to threats to man's proper relation to Being.

It's here that a tear in Being emerges, forcing Heidegger's ontology to drift toward the tragic and thanatopolitical. We see it if we focus on the nature of the subject of technology, which is to say, on what kind of human being is it who masters technology and, relatedly, what price he pays for such mastery. In answer to the first, Heidegger writes,

Perhaps the much discussed question of whether technology makes man its slave or whether man will be able to be the master of technology is already a superficial question, because no one remembers to ask what kind of man [*welche Art Mensch*] is alone capable of carrying out the "mastery" of technology. The "philosophies" of technology pretend as if "technology" and "man" were two "masses" [*Größen*] and things simply on hand.<sup>23</sup>

What kind of man masters technology?<sup>24</sup> The change in the species of man that attempts to extend his domination over technology—and we note that Heidegger rarely, if ever, employs the word *use* (*Gebrauch*) in this context—is in fact what is most dangerous about technology. A dramatic change in the nature of humanity itself arises from this encounter of man and technology, one that Donna Haraway, in a heroic moment of postmodernism, will call the cyborg, or what Hal Foster, glossing Freud, will call "prosthetic gods."<sup>25</sup> Less present in these conscious postmodern appropriations of Heidegger, though, is Heidegger's full-blown anxiety about the change in species that man undergoes in the attempt to dominate technology. Furthermore, for Haraway and Foster, clearly there is no ideological animus toward communism as there is in Heidegger, where, in a context in which technology threatens to change humanity, it is in Bolshevik Russia that a radical world of technology appears to have emerged almost fully formed. The threat of technology, for Heidegger,

apparently cannot be thought apart from its affiliation with attacks on what distinguishes one man from another, which is to say that the ultimate aim of Heidegger's reading is to defend a certain *Art* of man from the encounter with technology. This is the orientation that we ought to give his bringing down to size the "masses" of mankind as literally a thing that is hermetically sealed from the outside, that merely acts on (improperly) objects with the aid of technology.

In the distinction between mankind as a mass and mankind as species, it is technology that creates a tear in Being. Or differently, in man's attempt to master technology, it becomes possible to see on what basis a certain view of mankind as a bounded and protected entity depends on denying any sort of movement between the one who masters technology and the masses bounded on all sides from the untoward effects of technology. It becomes possible to distinguish between kinds of men and women, depending on the relation they enjoy with technology. On one side are those who continue to maintain a proper relation to Being, that is, to their own proper action when writing, and on the other, those others who, in mastering technology, have been altered such that they become a "kind of man" [*welche Art Mensche*].

Furthermore, in this distinction, an implicit value is already given to one kind of man over another because of the context in which Heidegger elaborates it: on one side are those who are all made equal, and on the other is the individual who, by writing properly, enjoys a relation to Being that the former do not. Much remains to be said about this caesura that Heidegger posits. It is a moment that also figures prominently in so many contemporary discussions of thanatopolitics, especially of the kind that Agamben offers in *The Open* as well as his more recent *What Is an Apparatus?* Yet it is also important to observe how Heidegger identifies the nature of the man who still may enjoy a relation to Being through a proper writing. Attempting to determine the features of technology, he writes, "Insight into the 'metaphysical' essence of technology is for us historically necessary if the essence of Western historical man is to be saved [*gerettet bleiben soll*]." <sup>26</sup> A number of points need to be made straightaway. First, for Heidegger, the other kind of man, one who exists in opposition to the standardized subject and object of technology, is Western, historical man. The descriptor *Western* here takes on more weight when we note that its clear contrary in the "Third Directive" of *Parmenides* is the technologized Leninist metaphysician; again

Heidegger's anticommunism bubbles along the surface of his reflections. Second, consider that Western man's relation to technology is one related to Western man's essence. It recalls, of course, Heidegger's later "Letter on Humanism," in which he asks, "But in what does the humanity of man consist?," which precedes a brief description of Marx's views on man's humanity as "recognized and acknowledged in society."<sup>27</sup> Here, though, the essence in question is one limited to Western man.

Finally, Heidegger endangers the essence of this man who is in need of being saved. Technology not only operates by creating a tear in Being and so in positing kinds of men, one who attempts to master and is made the same as everyone else and another (which is precisely why the typewriter works so elegantly as a stand-in for all forms of improper writing). In so doing, Heidegger places Western man, that is, the one who continues to write properly, in danger. The danger to Western man is intensified, as well, by the other descriptor here used as a marker, namely, *historical*. Indeed, in the same paragraph, Heidegger connotes history in metaphysical terms as presenting a danger: "He who has ears to hear, i.e. to grasp the metaphysical foundations and abysses of history and to take them seriously *as* metaphysical, could already hear two decades ago the word of Lenin: Bolshevism is Soviet power + electrification."<sup>28</sup> Heidegger's Western man constantly teeters over the abysses of history, given that "technology is entrenched in our history [*Die Technik ist in unserer Geschichte*]." <sup>29</sup> Implied is the threat of falling out of Being into a merely "technical world" of the Leninist sort. It is only with the elaboration of improper writing mechanisms that we recognize the monumental stakes involved in obtaining insight into "the metaphysical essence of technology."

Where do we see the drift toward thanatopolitics in Heidegger? We see it in his positing of Western man as requiring saving from the pernicious effects of technology on man's proper relation to Being. Said somewhat differently, Heidegger has essentially created a new grouping where before only mankind or humanity existed, configuring two forms of life where before there was only one who acted (and wrote) properly; the first is given over entirely to the social, technical world of metaphysical passion, whereas the other, Western man, is he who must be saved. This will be a crucial reflection for contemporary philosophy since Heidegger's distinction between proper and improper already puts Western man at risk. To use technology means already to be dominated by it in

such a way that one loses what is most proper to mankind, namely, a relation to Being. The sense here is that when one is made the subject of improper writing, then a life is created by division whose value is lessened given that it is made the equal of everyone else. A divide comes to separate Western historical man, who sits astride the precipices of history—and therefore who must be saved, given the imminent danger—and those others who, in attempting to master technology, become its subject. Heidegger will use the term *modern* to name these subjects of technology (*der moderne Mensch*) who can still be saved as well as those completely mastered by technology. It is important to observe, however, that depending on their relation to technology, the points where these figures meet can in fact be moved, for instance, by political parties. Just such a possibility is implicit in Heidegger's reading of Bolshevism as "the 'organic,' i.e., organized, calculating (and as +) conclusion of the unconditional power of the party along with complete technicization."<sup>30</sup> This suggests that technology isn't simply immanent to itself but rather that institutions, a political party, or even a state can promote it.

It is this moment of configuring Western man as an essence that requires saving that will inform Giorgio Agamben's own reading of *homo sacer* and technology and about which I have much to say in the following chapter. At this point, I simply want to observe how Agamben's own reading of technology radicalizes the consequences of the moment when "Being [*das Sein*] has withdrawn itself from man and modern man has been plunged into an eminent oblivion of Being [*eine ausgezeichnete Seinsvergessenheit*];" Agamben actualizes oblivion of Being in his reading as the creation of a life that can be taken with impunity.<sup>31</sup> Again, Heidegger authorizes this kind of reading to the degree that he sees the question of technology as one involving Western man's very essence. So, too, does Agamben's dehistoricization of *homo sacer* as emerging out of an infinite state of exception parallel Heidegger's view that "technology understood as modern, i.e. as the technology of power machines, is itself already a *consequence* and not the *foundation* of a transformation of the relation of Being to man [*des Bezugs des Seins zum Menschen*]."<sup>32</sup> I'll leave these other resemblances between Heidegger and Agamben for the next chapter, but I do want to suggest that one of the most important tributaries of contemporary political philosophy, namely, the eruption of life within the political, may be traced to these pages written in 1942–43. It is the eruption of death in saving

life that comes to mark a form of life that has lost or has forgotten how a relation to Being through proper writing can be acted (on). Thanatos and the willful sacrifice of those who no longer enjoy a proper relation to the hand, who indeed no longer have a hand but instead merely manipulate (and in turn are manipulated)—are gestured to as well as authorized by Heidegger's discussion of the typewriter in *Parmenides*.

Note, as well, something else that Heidegger doesn't state explicitly, namely, that the greater or lesser use of technology can in fact be used by states or political parties to create a situation in which it becomes easier to take the lives of those from whom Being has withdrawn. The question to be posed at this juncture is precisely what forms of technology more successfully put in play the withdrawal of Being, or in the words of Friedrich Kittler, what forms of technology help to short-circuit the defenses of the human being from agreeing to be killed.<sup>33</sup> This impolitical question is implicit again in Heidegger's reading of Bolshevism, in which electrification and "Bolshevik power" account both for the completely technicized world and, with it, the sheer numbers of those who can be killed.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, Heidegger's reading of proper and improper writing provides us with a paradigm with which to understand how improper writing deanchors Being, creating a form of life enthralled to technology to such a degree that it loses its "individual" features. These become clearer in those important pages dedicated to revelation and writing in "The Question Concerning Technology." It is to that text that I now want to turn.

### Life and the Protocols of Writing

In "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger returns to the metaphysics of technology when he attempts to think *technē* again through a relation to proper and improper writing. Here, too, technology is profoundly inflected toward the thanatopolitical, especially toward another life inscribed in the register of those from whom Being has withdrawn. Yet, rather than choosing the typewriter as an example of impropriety, Heidegger instead moves toward a broader examination of technology, the general features of which have grown more intense in the succeeding years. The reasons we know well enough: the destruction of World War II as well as the birth of atomic terror. The most salient part of Heidegger's analysis concerns those sections in which he links the notion of revelation to that of *Stellen* and, with it, "a challenging-forth."

What results is a superimposition of improper writing with a revealing that moves through a series of challengings [*Herausfordern*]. Heidegger writes,

The revealing that rules throughout modern technology has the character of a setting-upon [*Stellen*], in the sense of a challenging-forth. That challenging happens in that the energy concealed in nature is unlocked, what is unlocked is transformed, what is transformed is stored up, what is stored up is, in turn, distributed, and what is distributed is switched about ever anew. Unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing, and switching about are ways of revealing. But the revealing never simply comes to an end. Neither does it run off into the indeterminate. The revealing reveals to itself its own manifoldly interlocking paths, through regulating their course.<sup>35</sup>

Heidegger makes homologous the improper nature of technology with that of revelation, choosing to focus on the series of steps that technology employs for energy to be “challenged” into appearing. In a sense, Heidegger moves away from the question of the hand in *Parmenides*. He is still concerned with impropriety, but in “The Question Concerning Technology,” it is improper writing that is shown to involve no simple mode of disclosing but, in fact, a number of moments that appear to be successive but are not. These steps—unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing, and switching—Heidegger explicitly calls ways of revealing. Thus he alters the framework of his earlier “meditation on unconcealedness” in the modern period to a more impolitical reflection on the means by which revelation and modern technology work together. On the one side, in *Parmenides*, we find a recapitulation of how modern technology may be thought through its relation to the unconcealedness of Being. In “The Question Concerning Technology,” a modern technological regime emerges that is so powerful that no one-dimensional notion of revelation can be localized; rather, we find modes of revelation that build on earlier moments of disclosure.

Much has been made, of course, of these various moments of disclosing. Indeed, an entire field of media studies based around the notion of media as ecology is deeply indebted to the implicit reading of media as homologous to modes of revealing.<sup>36</sup> But I want to put forward another, perhaps complementary reading of revealing in Heidegger that shifts the register of these reflections toward the thanatopolitical. In this perspective, the unconcealment of technology, which enjoys its own particular form of revealing, never fully arrives, which is to say that implicit in the

difference between the unconcealedness of writing that is proper to man and revelation that doesn't properly belong to him, we find the idea that the modes by which revelation are enacted never come to an end. In “The Question Concerning Technology,” so-called modern man is made over into the subject of these modes of revealing, which is to say that modern man becomes the subject of a infinite loop of disclosing. He becomes so when placed in the position of a technological object; the telephone operator, the wireless operator, the secretary who takes dictation, the manager who dictates: each of them is a subject of modern technology that puts them in the position of those who need to be saved. Given that the human component is deeply involved at every level of revelation in modern technology, the subject of never-ending revelation continually appears.

In the preceding passage, Heidegger emphasizes modern technology rather than simply modern man, as he does in *Parmenides*. The change in focus does not mean, however, that modern man has simply been replaced by the tremendous power of modern technology. Modern man will be found if we look closely at those sections in which he introduces another term to mark the modern mode of revealing, namely, *Bestand* or “standing reserve”:

What kind of unconcealment is it, then, that is peculiar to that which comes to stand forth through this setting-upon that challenges? Everywhere, everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for further ordering [*Bestellung*]. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing [*Stand*]. We call it standing-reserve [*Bestand*]. The word expresses here something more, and something more essential, than mere “stock.” The name “standing-reserve” assumes the rank of an inclusive rubric. It designates nothing less than the way in which everything presences that is wrought upon by the challenging revealing. Whatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve no longer stands over against us as object.<sup>37</sup>

Heidegger doesn't simply limit the question of technology to objects but rather suggests that the question of technology is one intimately linked to man. Furthermore, the possibility that everything everywhere is ordered to stand by also includes modern man. Western man is placed in the position of those who require saving, given the improper relation of the hand to transcription. The process by which man is threatened, or better, the process whereby Being is no longer inscribed, takes place through an

unconcealment, a notion of revelation that repeats itself endlessly, not just in the act of writing down but also in what improper writing allows us to see for the first time: writing broken into five protocols—unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing, and switching—that remain unrevealed in a proper writing of inscription.

The question of mankind, and of the kind of life he leads and lives, is posed directly in this improper and impolitical act of writing that encompasses Being. The question is one of being at hand—a hand that waits in the ready for a future ordering and a future revelation. Furthermore, it is this being at hand that characterizes the metaphysical underpinning of technology. Of course, Heidegger doesn't simply leave it there; instead, he turns again to the relation he had already drawn between modern man and technology in *Parmenides*. Standing reserve [*Bestand*] will now name the mode by which everything is brought into relation with revelation, and there can be no doubt that the reference also encompasses man himself. In different words, Heidegger's critique of technology in "The Question of Technology" doubles back to his earlier critique of Western man, now shorn of the descriptor *Western*, to offer a representation of the subject of technology as homologous to a subject of revelation. To be subject of this disclosing means to remain in place, to be at hand, in a "challenging claim which gathers man thither to order the self-revealing as standing reserve: 'Ge-stell' [Enframing]," as Heidegger will go on to say.<sup>38</sup> The crucial point arrives soon after, when Heidegger once again pushes up against another abyss—not of history but destining and the danger it represents for man.

Note, too, how in the passage, man is placed in a certain position vis-à-vis technology by technology itself. The effects are deleterious. Two possibilities for revelation are allowed. The first is characterized by an "ordering," which Heidegger previously had associated with "standing reserve" [*Bestand*]. The second possibility involves a more ordinary relation of revelation to man's own proper essence. Between these two possibilities, Heidegger anticipates a danger for man as "he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall."<sup>39</sup> In this condition, man "is endangered from out of destining. The destining of revealing is as such, in every one of its modes, and therefore, necessarily, *danger*."<sup>40</sup> The problem concerns rightly the nature of what is disclosed by technology as not concerning man at all, not even as object, but rather—and this is the crucial point for a genealogy of thanatopolitics and technology in contemporary philosophy—as standing reserve. If that is the case, then "man in the midst

of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve."<sup>41</sup>

We can express this somewhat differently. Technology exposes us to the danger that we are no longer the subject of our own proper unconcealing (that we are a mere object or slave of technology, hence the "objectlessness" of the position). Rather man is destined to wait as standing reserve, as one "ordered" by technology. This Heidegger confirms immediately after: "But Enframing does not simply endanger man in his relationship to himself and to everything that is. As a destining, it banishes man into that kind of revealing which is an ordering."<sup>42</sup> This "ordering" places man in the position of being at hand, in a position vis-à-vis technology, in which what is most proper to him, namely, "to enter into a more original revealing":<sup>43</sup>

The essence of technology lies in Enframing. Its holding sway belongs within destining. Since destining at any given time starts man on a way of revealing, man, thus under way, is continually approaching the brink of the possibility of pursuing and pushing forward nothing but what is revealed in ordering, and of deriving all his standards on this basis. Through this the other possibility is blocked, that man might be admitted more and sooner and ever more primally to the essence of that which is unconcealed and to its unconcealment, in order that he might experience as his essence his needed [*gebrauchte*] belonging to revealing. Enframing belongs within the destining of revealing.<sup>44</sup>

Much can be said about this moment when man is exposed to the danger of revealing induced by technology. Consider, first, the importance of the distinction between proper and improper, which, though less manifest than in *Parmenides*, becomes the axis around which the danger of technology is to be understood in "The Question Concerning Technology." The revealing associated with technology is improper to the degree that it puts man at risk in his essence. In *Parmenides*, the essence in question belonged to Western, historical man, whereas here it is man in general, reflecting a dramatic extension of modern technology's capacity to hijack Being.<sup>45</sup> Technology imposes itself on man but also positions him in relation to it so as to transform him into standing reserve, into an object of revelation. Put in this position, man is enframed (*gestellt*) but also endangered, for the same reasons that an improper writing endangered him in *Parmenides*: what is proper, namely, the relation to a unconcealing of truth, has now been made more distant. Distancing marks man as the subject of improper revelation and is therefore what endangers him.

What does this danger consist of? Heidegger never articulates the threat outside the terms *essence*, *ordering*, and fostering the *saving power*, the latter of which, of course, evokes the earlier figure of Western, historical man.<sup>46</sup> There the threat was posed by the typewriter, which threatened mankind with the loss of identity. Here the threat is more abstract, filtered through the essential relation to a more originary relation to revelation. Yet the key terms in both instances are saving as well as being destined for (*Ge-schick* and *schicksal*). This is where so much of contemporary Continental philosophy will be found, which is to say that technology places mankind in a position in which it is destined to be “ordered” for the future needs of technology. What some will do, Agamben principally, is to find in this moment of being a ceaseless command to be on call for technology: life itself has somehow been diminished such that it becomes easier to take the lives of those who have been “ordered” by technology. The text presents a number of opportunities for such a reading: from Heidegger’s repeated references to “human willing” when speaking of freedom and, in conjunction with that, the suggested inhumanity of a technological standing reserve [*Bestand*].<sup>47</sup> We find as well the sense of man as somehow banished from the realm of proper writing and revelation into another in phrases such as “as a destining, it banishes man into that kind of revealing which is an ordering.”<sup>48</sup> This suggests, in turn, that those who look like everyone else from the point of view of standing reserve and improper revelation are the ones most endangered by technological ordering. Agamben’s great insight among many—and these others I’ll turn to in the following chapter—is to have seen in this endangering not simply the need, should we choose to call it that, for saving those who are ordered but, more profoundly, the possibility for taking their lives on a scale that few had previously grasped. In Heidegger’s breakup of revelation into “unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing, and switching,” the power of technology’s “ordering” has been expanded to such a degree that man himself can be killed more easily. It is both a small and monumental step from there to Agamben’s reading, in which the object of technology’s “ordering” can be enrolled among *homines sacri*.

At this juncture, Heidegger introduces another possibility near the end of “The Question Concerning Technology” through the well-known quote of Hölderlin’s: “*Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das Rettende auch*” (“But where danger is, grows / The saving power also”). The possibility of a saving power that grows with danger is one that Agamben will read

impolitically as proof of the power of thanatopolitics in the contemporary period. If we want, it is the Heidegger of *Parmenides* who, in a certain sense, comes to dominate the Heidegger of “The Question Concerning Technology.” The saving power that Heidegger posits in the latter becomes, in Agamben’s notion of the remnant, an enormous multiplier of the danger that modern technology represents for mankind given the reciprocal inscription of being saved and being marked for death thanks to the operation of the state of exception. I’ll have much more to say in the following chapter, but in the meantime, let me suggest as a way of pivoting to another of Heidegger’s texts that figures so prominently in contemporary theorizations of the thanatopolitical that this saving power is one that also informs Roberto Esposito’s own reflections on the impersonal; indeed, when Esposito speaks of reversing a Nazi thanatopolitics into a biopolitics of life through a philosophy of the impersonal in *Bíos* and *Third Person*, he, too, works out of a Heideggerian conception of the thanatopolitical. Yet Esposito, for his part, does not radicalize this saving power as negative; instead, he will note the idolatrous critique of technology that is implicit throughout “The Question Concerning Technology.” In short, Esposito will read the saving power not as one *over* life (as Agamben does) but as one *of* life that encompasses all forms of life.

### Mystery, Technology, Proximity

Over the previous pages, I’ve surveyed some of the most important moments of drift in Heidegger’s thought toward the thanatopolitical, instances that emerge out of Heidegger’s deep association of improper writing in *Parmenides* and a technologically rendered revelation that places mankind at risk. In the following section, I want to turn to two other texts that together provide more detail on the thanatopolitical effects of technology while confirming the divisions the technology creates between those who enjoy a proper and improper relation to revelation and writing. The first comes from Heidegger’s “Homecoming,” an essay from 1941–42, collected in *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*. Here Heidegger writes at length both of the notion of homeland, a theme to which he returns in “Letter on Humanism,” and the nature of poetic speech. What interests me is how Heidegger thinks the poet’s vocation to “homecoming” as a form of technology, not as an act of writing but rather through the compression of distance, or better, as the oscillation between distance and “nearness” that comes to characterize those who

have a homeland. Heidegger lays out the details by noting how “nearness” to the homeland described in Hölderlin’s poem “Heimkunft” operates through the maternal voice:

Suevien dwells near the origin. This nearness is mentioned twice. The homeland itself dwells near. It is the place of nearness to the hearth and to the origin. Suevien, the mother’s voice, points toward the essence of the fatherland. It is in this nearness to the origin that the neighborhood to the most joyful is grounded. What is most characteristic of the homeland, what is best in it, consists solely in its being this nearness to the origin—and nothing else besides it.<sup>49</sup>

We note again how the hand appears as the mode by which the maternal voice indicates what is most essential and innermost in the homeland. In pointing to this more essential fatherland, the maternal voice suspends man in “nearness” to the homeland. The poetic word, availing itself of the maternal voice, becomes the means by which “a nearness which still holds something back in reserve” is constructed.<sup>50</sup> This notion of “nearness,” which has informed so much of media theory over the last twenty years, gestures both to what brings the near nearer and at the same time what makes it distant, since what is sought after cannot be near in Heidegger’s judgment.<sup>51</sup> The result is an understanding of distance as both compression and extension:

The nearness that now prevails lets what is near be near, and yet at the same time lets it remain what is sought, and thus not near. We usually understand nearness as the smallest possible measurement of the distance between two places. Now, on the contrary, the essence of nearness appears to be that it brings that which is near, yet keeping it at a distance.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, Heidegger broadens (or circumscribes, depending on one’s point of view) the definition of *nearness* to the degree it is seen not simply as distance or nearness but as the continual movement between them. The result? “This nearness to the origin is a mystery.”<sup>53</sup>

The introduction of mystery as an effect of the movement between distance and nearness allows us to inscribe Heidegger’s reading of the poetic word in a larger context of technology and thanatopolitics.<sup>54</sup> The poet, by appropriating the maternal voice, inhabits what Heidegger calls “a nearness which still holds something back in reserve.”<sup>55</sup> So doing, the poet draws listeners toward the homeland. Quoting Hölderlin’s “Heimkunft”—“Cares like these, whether he likes them or not, a singer / Must bear in his

soul, and often, but the others not”—Heidegger distinguishes negatively between those who hear and those who do not: “the others.”<sup>56</sup> These others are not yet enrolled as belonging to the homeland, though given the nature of the mystery of the nearness, “which still holds something back in reserve,” the possibility exists that these others, too, may be made to draw closer.

The seemingly different terminology that Heidegger adapts here doesn’t prevent us from seeing the overlap between a kind of word that creates “nearness” and another term that he will later use to describe the workings of technology, namely, *unconcealedness*. The word will appear in the closing paragraphs of “The Question Concerning Technology,” in which Heidegger again employs mystery in naming another oscillation that structures so much of his thinking on technology. There he writes,

The irresistibility of ordering and the restraint of the saving power draw past each other like the paths of two stars in the course of the heavens. But precisely this, their passing by, is the hidden side [*das Verborgene*] of their nearness. When we look into the ambiguous essence of technology, we behold the constellation, the stellar course of the mystery.<sup>57</sup>

When read together with the earlier passage, in which Heidegger thinks of nearness as a mystery, we can see how Heidegger superimposes technology and the poetic word over nearness; whether the operator of that nearness is the poetic word or technology as its improper form, they both traffic in mystery. In other words, the mystery of the poetic word in its “nearness which still holds something back in reserve” is superimposed over the mystery of technology to the degree that in the nearness between “ordering” and “the restraint of the saving power,” there, too, its mystery is charted.

In chapter 3, I argue that this superimposition of technology and the mystery of the poetic word is the not-so-hidden center of Peter Sloterdijk’s essay “Rules for the Human Zoo: A Response to the *Letter on Humanism*,” for there the poetic word becomes the source of “proper” or humanizing nearness with technology as its spectral and improper other.<sup>58</sup> But as long as we inscribe the poetic word and technology in the horizon of media, as most media theoreticians and Sloterdijk do, we will fail to appreciate the originality of much of recent Italian thought, which poses the question of life through a reading of “The Question Concerning Technology” and indirectly in *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*. By invoking the movement between “the restraint of the saving power” and

"ordering," we see that life is once again at stake. Indeed, in "The Question Concerning Technology" primarily, it is the life of the one "ordered" that is present in the "revealing that in the technological age rather conceals than shows itself," which is to say, she who is ordered to wait for an ultimate disclosing that never fully arrives.<sup>59</sup> The same holds true for *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, except that here Heidegger lodges the saving power, never directly named as such, within the heart of a proper "nearness which still holds something in reserve." This saving power is never distant from the homeland for Heidegger, and yet the position of the hearer vis-à-vis the source still entails a mystery. The only difference would appear to be that this listener who draws nearer to homeland is not governed by the saving power of technology.

The consequences of such a reading are clear. The potential thanatopolitical drift of how Heidegger considers technology cannot be thought outside a mystery that is seen as more proper or, if we want, as one that doesn't call forth this saving power. There is no moment in *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry* in which the poetic word orders life in ways that make it necessary for a saving power to function thanatopolitically. The poetic word, by drawing the listener closer to the homeland, isn't seen as endangering her (and hence requiring safekeeping); rather, the implicit suggestion is that those who hear and draw near thanks to the poetic word are in a different relation to the truth. With that said, a subterranean biopolitical moment also lurks precisely in the difference between those who draw near and those who cannot. Such a moment fundamentally concerns the thought of the community in Heidegger. Esposito's exposition of this moment merits our attention:

The community is therefore recognized according to its originary essence, its originary "having been." This is the terrible syllogism that captures Heidegger from within his own discourse . . . that transforms the "in-common" of everyone into a particular community intent on conquering a proper future through a rediscovery of the purest origin. This—and nothing else—was Heidegger's Nazism: the attempt to turn himself directly towards the proper, to separate it from the improper, to make it speak in the affirmative, originary voice.<sup>60</sup>

What Esposito sees as operating fundamentally in the thought of Heidegger is precisely the distinction between the in-common of everyone and the in-common of a particular community, which then is manifested across other areas of Heidegger's thought, most decisively in the German

community as opposed to the one that includes all of mankind, or for that matter, Western historical man as opposed to another nonhistorical, "Eastern" man. In other words, the biopolitics of Heidegger's thinking doesn't reside merely in the arising of a saving power in conjunction with technology's ordering but rather will be found earlier, in a distinction between one's own and what is not, whether it be a proper community or not, or pace Agamben's later, thanatopolitical reading of People as a "whole and integral body politic" and people as a "fragmentary multiplicity of needy and excluded bodies."<sup>61</sup>

Another consequence emerges from this genealogy of technology and biopolitics, one that concerns more generally the superimposition between the poetic word and technology. Where the poetic word offered the possibility of transforming "the others" into proper listeners or readers (and so enrolling them as those who "know" the essence of the homeland), so, too, does technology draw them closer to the mystery. This capacity to draw near entails a biopolitical component. My own work in the history of wireless telegraphy and, later, voice transmission confirms as much. Indeed, one of the principal effects of radio will be to dramatically increase the numbers of listeners who are drawn closer to the "mystery" of the homeland. The point, of course, of this biopolitical practice was to increase biopower by turning directly to what was considered to belong properly to the nation or state, namely, listeners. Thus the Nazis literally addressed what they saw as the proper Being of Germany to promote biopolitical effects. Radio not only intensified biopower to the degree that the numbers of listeners grew but also helped bring about a technologically inflected people, a people of listeners seduced by the mystery of "nearness which still holds something back in reserve." Given this initiation into wireless hearing, a more intense biopolitical entity was formed, a technologized *Volk* who could be addressed as one in an instant—a more strident body politic to the degree that this body politic was brought ever closer to the source of the mystery. Obviously, the effect of this drawing closer, this impolitical knowledge of the homeland, is to make their sacrifice all the easier.<sup>62</sup>

Note that not only the Nazis and Italian fascists put this impolitical knowledge, with its breaking apart, in the modern era of the protocols of proper writing and their emerging biopolitical effects into practice. Liberal democracies, who were intent on stopping them and protecting themselves from aggression, also did. In the case of radio transmissions, for instance, the classic image is, of course, Hitler speaking in front of a

cluster of microphones and then a cut to a large number of people listening raptly to his words, only to break into thunderous applause soon after. It is also true, however, that Franklin Roosevelt had his fireside chats, and then, of course, the radio offered Winston Churchill a medium by which those who listened to his words could be transformed into a form of life that could be more easily sacrificed. Churchill's repeated references, for instance, in his speech of June 4, 1940, to "island" and "empire" signaled fundamentally to his listeners what was properly British.<sup>63</sup> In this case, too, a technologically inflected people was constructed in a hurry to meet the emergency at hand. In each case, however, the biopolitical effects of technology are felt decisively in short-circuiting the proper defenses of the individual vis-à-vis the larger body politic. Subjects are created who are willing to die, in the first instance, to protect the German *ghènos*, and in the second, to defend against aggression by deploying one of the most powerful modes for increasing the biopower at the "liberal" state's disposal.

With that said, in no way do I want to level the political or, for that matter, ethical differences between the Nazi use of the radio and British or American use. With the Nazis (though it is equally true for Mussolini), whenever the radio is spoken of, one finds obvious Nietzschean overtones—what Ernst Nolte in a not-so-different context refers to as a "metaphysics of the glorification of life," which is then translated into a metaphysics of the technological voice or, better, a glorification of a certain form of life that is valued "spiritually" to the degree that it speaks over the radio.<sup>64</sup> In the case of the Nazis, only those forms of life that speak and move accordingly are spiritualized; anyone else is banished into nonexistence: it is a small step from the spiritualization of those who speak because they move to the spiritualization of race in Nazi biopolitics. The role that radio played in furthering the spiritualization of these forms of life ready to be sacrificed is one that deserves much more attention than has been given to it up to now. In any case, a corollary spiritualization of the British or American listener cannot be said to have taken place.

More work is needed on the thanatopolitical features of the radio-phonetic transmission, just as one would want to distinguish between these forms of heightened biopower during the war and those associated with liberal democracies after the war. Here the thanatopolitical effects will be less marked not only because the war is over (and another, the cold war, had just begun, which would require only intermittent biopolitical use of technology, given that the ultimate thanatopolitical moment

resides in nuclear war) but also because technology will now be co-opted for a (bio)politics of the individual, so as merely to meet, or so it would seem, his material needs. What doesn't change, however, is that in both instances, power is deployed on bodies in what we will want to describe, along with Foucault, as a power over life, or what Heidegger might call the acceleration of the two stars passing each other in the heavens: "ordering" and "that which saves."

#### "Letter on Humanism": Biopolitics

The biopolitics of the individual in liberal democracies: is it inevitably thanatopolitical? That is one of the principal questions I want to ask in the pages that remain by looking at one of Heidegger's most important statements on the subject: "Letter on Humanism." The text is a familiar one, and so there's no need to linger over the specific details that gave rise to it; rather, I want to focus on three moments—let's call them *threats*—that appear in the letter.<sup>65</sup> The first occurs after Heidegger has unambiguously inscribed his earlier discussions of technology within a larger horizon of philosophy such that philosophy emerges as a slipping out of thinking into technology. The result is that "philosophy becomes a technique for explaining from highest causes."<sup>66</sup> This happens for the same reason that proper writing breaks up into different modes of writing and revealing: where Being has withdrawn from man in *Parmenides*, here, too, Being withdraws, or to paraphrase Heidegger, comes less to preside over thinking. It is this withdrawal of Being never directly recounted as such in the letter that provides the ground for Heidegger's relentless critique of humanism. He writes,

In competition with one another, such occupations publicly offer themselves as "isms" and try to offer more than the others. The dominance of such terms is not accidental. It rests above all in the modern age upon the peculiar dictatorship of the public realm. However, so-called "private existence" is not really essential, that is to say free, human being. It simply insists on negating the public realm. It remains an offshoot that depends upon the public and nourishes itself by mere withdrawal from it. Hence it testifies, against its own will, to its subservience to the public realm. But because it stems from the dominance of subjectivity the public realm itself is the metaphysically conditioned establishment and authorization of the openness of individual beings in their unconditional objectification.<sup>67</sup>

Distinguishing between private "existence" and "the peculiar dictatorship of the public realm," Heidegger superimposes earlier historical Western man over "private existence" and "the technical organization of the world" of Bolshevism over "dictatorship of the public realm," which will include both the Soviet Union and Western liberal democracies (authorized by the grouping of all *-isms* under the banner of philosophy and its "occupations," where the echo with the former "ordering" can still be heard). Whereas before, Western historical man could still be saved from the onslaught of another dictatorship of the public realm (Leninism), here no distinction is made between Leninism and, let's call it for the time being, liberalism; instead, from Heidegger's impolitical perspective, both *-isms* are mere "occupations" that cover over a larger orientation "of the modern age," in which individual beings without distinction are forced to open to their "objectification." The threat that put Western, historical man in the position of requiring saving has apparently reached such an extreme that with the withdrawal of Being, a new being emerges, whose "openness" is no longer conditioned by the respective *-ism* in question.

Obviously, the withdrawal of private existence and its homonym *individual being* from the dictatorship of the public realm deserves scrutiny. For instance, the distinction Heidegger draws between the "free, human being" and the "individual being" gives pause because it would appear to create two "beings," one a spectral version of the other, given that mere "private existence" has meaning only thanks to its withdrawal from the public realm (whereas a "free, human being" would not in fact withdraw because its relation to Being has in no way been transformed). It is, of course, a classic moment of the exclusionary inclusion or the including exclusion that we have come to know so well from Agamben. It also accounts for one of the central understandings of the impolitical as well as immunity, as put forward by Esposito, in which a certain form of life attempts to immunize itself from a communal dominance of subjectivity.<sup>68</sup> Yet what stands out most is the reference to openness, which the reciprocal inscription of individual being in public dictatorship brings about.

What does *openness* refer to then? Heidegger doesn't answer directly, but perhaps the question is badly put. Openness for Heidegger isn't followed by an objective phrase, as in "openness to," but rather functions genitively: "in their unconditional objectification." To be open is to be unconditionally objectified. Why we discover in the following sentences: "Language thereby falls into the service of expediting communication

along routes where objectification—the uniform accessibility of everything to everyone—branches out and disregards all limits. In this way language comes under the dictatorship of the public realm which decides in advance what is intelligible and what must be rejected as unintelligible."<sup>69</sup> The point of being open is to create conditions for accessibility so that communication may be expedited. Once again, one will hear echoes between "uniform accessibility" and the foregrounded anxiety that Heidegger felt in *Parmenides* toward the uniformity that the typewriter instituted, which is as it should be given the similar contexts between communication here and improper writing there. The threat is expressed similarly, as well, on the next page: "The widely and rapidly spreading devastation of language not only undermines aesthetic and moral responsibility in every use of language; it arises from a threat to the essence of humanity."<sup>70</sup>

The nature of the threat, not surprisingly, is both biological and political, which is to say that those individual beings who are open to communication become both the subjects and objects of a power over life at the moment when "language surrenders itself to our mere willing and trafficking as an instrument of domination over beings. Beings themselves appear as actualities in the interaction of cause and effect."<sup>71</sup> Unlike in previous texts, the threat to humanity arises at the same moment when beings can be dominated thanks to a transformation in language and its relation to Being. The specific nature of the threat in *Parmenides* and "The Question Concerning Technology" wasn't framed, though, in terms of language but instead in terms of writing and revelation. In "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger folds those concerns into a more global question of language to come to terms with the monumental theme of humanism. In other words, communication goes hand in hand with the greater possibility of domination over beings.

The second moment follows directly from these reflections and concerns the division that will mark the remainder of Heidegger's discussion. Turning to the context of care for man, Heidegger sees a gap between man and humanity: "Where else does 'care' tend but in the direction of bringing man back to his essence? What else does that in turn betoken but that man (*homo*) becomes human (*humanus*)? Thus *humanitas* really does remain the concern of such thinking. For this is humanism: meditating and caring, that man be human and not inhumane, 'inhuman,' that is outside his essence."<sup>72</sup> Note the division between man and human here. By distinguishing between them, Heidegger essentially has made

the human, man's proper form, while man himself becomes essentially an improper form—improper in the sense that the man who remains merely man remains distant from Being and from the litany of associations that Being has for Heidegger, truth, in particular.<sup>73</sup> Here in all its glory, then, is the thanatopolitical division between *homo* and *humanus*. Why thanatopolitical? Because Heidegger has created a fissure between those who are properly human and those who are not. Once the tear has been made complete, man cannot be thought except within and outside his own missing or supplemental humanity.

Clearly, for Heidegger, the reason for such a division is to be able to institute the notion of care as a possible response to the "nearness which still holds something back in reserve" that he spoke of in *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*.<sup>74</sup> This "nearness which still holds something back in reserve," as we recall, left man enthralled to an improper revelation that never created increasing proximity to Being. Care, instead, will mark the path that the properly human will set out for the merely man. Much of the remainder of the "Letter on Humanism" turns precisely around the figure of this in-human, or, perhaps better, un-human figure and how he may draw near Being and so become *humanus*. But the question arises, if this figure isn't *humanus*, then how are we to go about describing him? For Heidegger, this not yet fully human figure can only be thought through the problematic metaphysical category of *animalitas*:

We can proceed in that way; we can in such fashion locate man within Being as one being among others. We will thereby always be able to state something correct about man. But we must be clear on this point, that when we do this we abandon man to the essential realm of *animalitas* even if we do not equate him with beasts but attribute a specific difference to him. In principle we are still thinking of *homo animalis*—even when *anima* [soul] is posited as *animus sive mens* [spirit or mind], and this in turn is later posited as subject, person, or spirit (*Geist*). Such positing is the manner of metaphysics. But then the essence of man is too little heeded and not thought in its origin, the essential provenance that is always the essential future for historical mankind. Metaphysics thinks of man on the basis of *animalitas* and does not think in the direction of *humanitas*.<sup>75</sup>

Heidegger's argument doubles back to an earlier moment when he posited a difference between a free, human being and an individual being, made so by a devastation of language. Here, though, Heidegger doesn't deny that man as an individual being is made to appear next to other

beings without distinction. Such a consideration does have the advantage of being correct, but in saying so, an abyss opens up underneath the as yet not fully human figure. Heidegger appears to be arguing that in no way can one award *animalitas* to man without discounting any future difference that one might want to find that will distinguish man from a beast. Once an animal, always an animal, despite any later designations that grow out of soul that would include person or subject. We note that Heidegger, in observing this difference (that makes no difference), does not disown his earlier reflections on man and humanity. What he has done instead is to provide further ammunition in his salvo against a *humanitas* that continues to be inscribed in a metaphysical horizon of *animalitas*.

The thanatopolitical emerges from the folds of these reflections when Heidegger does not reject the basic distinction between *animalitas* and *humanitas*. It is clear why he does not because his own discourse is intent on working out from the inside of metaphysics to a firmer foundation for deconstructing *humanitas*. But the point is that by agreeing that man can continue to be distinguished from *humanus*, Heidegger still assumes a metaphysical distinction as the basis for moving toward an essential *humanitas*.<sup>76</sup> Despite these gyrations between animal and human, there remains a stark division between the human and another, potentially human, if provided with sufficient care. Inscribing "historical mankind" in some "essential future" does not in any way save mankind from the consequences of marking some or most as animals and others as more properly human.

The essential distinction between *animalitas* and *humanitas* adds an important element to our reflections. Implicitly raised is the possibility that technology contributes to this underlying and essential distinction between man as *animalitas* and man in some future as *humanitas*. To the degree that technology functions to bring about "a nearness which still holds something back in reserve" and not an essential nearness to Being, it holds man in place vis-à-vis an essential future that never arrives. So, too, do Heidegger's reflections on the improper writing of the typewriter as creating a uniformity allow us to see more deeply what it is that characterizes the *animalitas* of "Letter on Humanism." For Heidegger, a communication that makes everyone the same is to be thought now through the optic of *animalitas*, which in turn suggests not only a movement toward the essentially human but equally a movement toward an essential *animalitas*. Indeed "The Question Concerning Technology" as well as *Parmenides* may be read exactly in this way, as reflections on

how *humanus* degrades into an improper form of the human thanks to technology. In "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger will then attribute to this other form of man the label of *animalitas*, despite the vacillation that characterizes so much of the middle section of the letter. When taken together, the previous texts under examination provide us with a fuller picture of how technology might be linked to man's dehumanization, while in "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger shows how this dehumanization is to be thought through the category of *animalitas*. And here it bears repeating that for Heidegger, the full title of person or subject in no way signals any true move in the direction of a future *humanus*.

For Heidegger, man is endangered if he remains on either side of the divide between *humanitas* and *animalitas*. It is true that Heidegger never directly describes the nature of the danger—in these texts, it is always spoken of in terms of essence, or the withdrawal of Being, or the oblivion of concealing. Nor does Heidegger explicitly pronounce that the inhuman man may be killed with impunity, nor, of course, that the properly human is premised on the death of these animal men, as Nazism assumes. Yet we can say that the Heideggerian ontology of Being presupposes the lesser form of the human, in a division that today, thanks to Agamben, we refer to as *zoē* and *bíos*. If today the thanatopolitical seems to dominate contemporary perspectives on biopolitics as well as our understanding of neoliberalism and globalization, it is because of this deep ambiguity concerning man and technology and the dehumanizing effects the latter has for man (whether we locate it, as Agamben does, in some transhistorical past or, as in Esposito's case, as emerging with the dawn of modern immunization in Hobbes).

### The Nearness of Thanatos: Improper Writing Today

By way of conclusion, let me set out what I see, then, as some of the most important features of the drift toward the thanatopolitical in Heidegger's thought. The most important concern the effects of technology on the possibility of mankind achieving some sort of essential relation with Being, which then leads to a fundamental distinction between those, on one side, who are mere subjects of communication; those who later will be enrolled among the ranks of an *animalitas*; and others who, thanks to a proper writing, are seen as free, individual human beings, capable of "care," and never as mere subjects or persons. What results is an implicit discounting the former as less than human.

Equally, the distinction Heidegger draws on more than one occasion between individual being and a free, human being becomes a paradigm for a number of philosophers writing in a biopolitical key today. Agamben will often substitute singularity for the human; Sloterdijk will argue that power has shifted inextricably to individual as opposed to communal forms of life. For Sloterdijk, in fact, the care of which Heidegger speaks in "Letter on Humanism" has given way to nothing less than securing the individual through collective and noncommunal entities. This securing is directly at odds with the kind of securing that Heidegger speaks of in *Parmenides*, one that occurs thanks to the hand: "Where the essential is secured in an essential way, we therefore say it is 'in good hands,' even if handles and manipulations are not exactly necessary."<sup>77</sup> It also accounts for the wide-ranging critique Sloterdijk will launch against "insurance" in *Sphären* and elsewhere. Then we find Esposito, who attempts to meet the challenges of Heidegger's thought, which is to say, to address the implicit thanatopolitics of the individual being subjected to improper writing and revelation, by proposing a possible alternative through the impersonal. All, as I will have occasion to show, if not directly working out of Heidegger's own categories, do assume a sort of thanatopolitical tonality there.

I would add a final point as a way of bridging to the following chapter, and that concerns another distinction which I perhaps haven't foregrounded enough here, one that concerns the proper and improper distance that results from the two forms of writing and revelation that Heidegger speaks of in *Parmenides*, but especially in *Elucidations on Hölderlin's Poetry*. There we remember that Heidegger makes a distinction between nearness to Being and another, the technologically inflected "nearness which still holds something back in reserve." In contemporary readings of biopolitics, that "nearness which still holds something back in reserve" will be declined frequently as the principal definition of communication, that is, as enacting both a profound linguistic alienation of man and, perhaps even more important, as installing via technology a separation among men and women in which proper care cannot emerge. In communication, as in Enframing, "man stands so decisively in attendance on the challenging-forth of Enframing that he does not apprehend Enframing as a claim, that he fails to see himself as the one spoken to."<sup>78</sup> What emerges, therefore, is the decisive role technology plays in creating a scenario of danger and threat through separation—a tragic reading of technology providing the material necessary for contemporary perspectives on thanatopolitics to take form.

And yet this separation of man from himself equally entails a separation of man from man, depending on the order of observation adopted. What appears to be man's separation from himself when shifted to the perspective of his relation to others becomes "one final delusion: It seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself. . . . *In truth, however, precisely nowhere does man today any longer encounter himself, i.e. his essence.*"<sup>79</sup> In other words, thanks to technology, man remains separated from the possibility of meeting himself in others (or another) because man cannot make out any figure other than himself (which is precisely how technology works impolitically to block an opening to man himself through others). This separation of man is enacted through separation with others, a technological proximity that installs separation with man's own proper essence thought through the difficulty of man distinguishing himself from others. Separation makes domination over Being and beings possible, when the proximity that separates is associated with language.

This final reading of the notion of separation in Heidegger's thought that makes domination over Being possible leads us to the notion of *dispositif* in Giorgio Agamben's and Roberto Esposito's thought. What this chapter's itinerary through Heidegger's critique of technology demonstrates, however, is how the extension of improper writing tools makes mankind resemble others (and the other). In the move toward equality enacted through separation (and technology as primarily a mode for separating and not a practice), care for oneself and others is made difficult such that mankind is endangered. Heidegger's thanatopolitics will be found here, in the knowledge that where technology is augmented, (human) beings can be dominated. The conclusion can only be that separation is deeply connected to domination. Yet this raises almost more questions than it answers. How, for instance, can care be strengthened in a milieu of greater separation brought on by the expansion of improper writing machines? What accounts for the greater thanatopolitical effects of contemporary technology in Agamben's reading? Some of the answers will be found in the superimposition of Heidegger's improper writing machines over Foucault's notion of *dispositif*. It's to that deeply thanatopolitical move that I now turn.

## 2 THE DISPOSITIFS OF THANATOPOLITICS

### *Improper Writing and Life*

IN THE PRECEDING CHAPTER, I took up the question of the relation between thanatopolitics and technology in the thought of Martin Heidegger by focusing on the distinction between proper and improper writing. In this chapter, I want to turn to two of the most important Italian philosophers writing today in an ostensibly thanatopolitical key: Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito. To say that Agamben's thought is deeply indebted to Heidegger is, of course, to state nothing new. From the 1977 *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* to his most recent *The Kingdom and the Glory* as well as *The Signature of All Things: On Method* and *The Sacrament of Language: Archaeology of the Oath*, Agamben's thinking of everything from infancy to the notion of paradigm grows out of a profound knowledge and abiding synthesis of Heidegger's work.<sup>1</sup> This is made explicit in a text like *The Open* even (or especially when) Agamben reads against Heidegger in those pages dedicated to the animal, the human, and boredom.<sup>2</sup> The following discussion, however, is not motivated by a possible anxiety of influence of Heidegger operating in Agamben's work because such a reading would limit the purview of Agamben's thought and its importance today for political reflection, turning our discussion toward the intertextual references with Heidegger that dot almost all the texts under examination here. As intriguing as that project might be, it would leave Agamben's thought inscribed solely within Heidegger's ontology.<sup>3</sup> Roberto Esposito, for his part, avoids many of the pitfalls of incorporating Heidegger's critique of technology into his own reading of the immunization paradigm, though that, too, comes with a price to be paid in resignation to what Heidegger calls "everydayness."

Therefore two questions will guide this chapter: first, what are the