

Plato Exits the Pharmacy: An Answer to the Derridean Critique of the *Phaedrus* and
Timaeus

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ABSTRACT

By framing his deconstruction of Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus* as a response to Platonism, Jacques Derrida overlooks the possibility of a Platonic philosophy beyond dogma and doctrine. This thesis argues that Derrida's deconstructions target a particularly Platonist abstraction of the dialogues, and thus, his critique relies on the underlying assumption that Plato defends the metaphysics of presence. Derrida attempts to show how the thesis that Being is presence undermines itself in both dialogues through hints of *différance* like *pharmakon* and *khôra*. To answer the Derridean critique, I analyze the hermeneutics of Derrida's deconstruction of Plato and identify what in the dialogues lies beyond the limits Derrida's reading, for example Derrida's notable exclusion of ἔρος.

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CHAPTER ONE: Platonism, Derrida, and the Metaphysics of Presence

This thesis critically examines the relationship between Jacques Derrida, Plato, and Platonism through an analysis of Derrida's reading of Plato in "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Dissemination* and "Khôra" in *On the Name*. By analyzing Derrida's deconstruction of Platonism and relating it to the two dialogues in question, *viz.* Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*, this thesis argues that Derrida produces a thorough and credible critique of Platonism as the metaphysics of presence, but not a satisfactory deconstruction of Plato. This answer to the Derridean critique is not a rebuttal or a counter-argument; it is a careful analysis of Derrida's critique of Platonism that brings to light its strengths and weaknesses as a deconstruction of a Platonic philosophy. Derrida's assumptions about Platonic philosophy, and in particular, how it defines the relationship between the soul and Being put narrow limits on his deconstructive reading of the dialogues. It is clear that Derrida operates with a particular agenda when reading Plato, that is, to deconstruct the foundations of the metaphysics of presence, and as a result of this agenda he overlooks parts of the dialogues that do not support this limited reading. This thesis concludes by exploring one of Derrida's most significant omissions, philosophical ἔρως. For Plato, ἔρως operates in a way that exceeds the logic of the metaphysics of presence by overturning the presence/absence binary. By attending to the role that ἔρως plays in both the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*, we reveal how both dialogues can be read to corrupt the metaphysics of presence and therefore exceed Derrida's deconstructions.

I. What is Platonism?

Platonism is a philosophical system that historically emerged from the works of Plato, but does not encompass all Platonic philosophy or interpretive traditions. One of its defining features

is the doctrine of idealist metaphysics or the metaphysics of presence.¹ This metaphysics is grounded by the theory of Ideas, which accounts for the different epistemological and ontological statuses of intelligible beings and the sensible world.² The theory of Ideas alleges that every particular X shares in a common essence, X-ness. This common essence is called an Idea (ιδέα) or Form (εἶδος). The Idea is the only existing thing that truly and completely *is* X. For example, there can be an infinite variety of particular circles in the world but the purely intelligible idea of a circle is the only being that is (a) circle. Thus the Ideas exist to a greater degree than particulars and they bestow essence and existence onto particulars through a relationship of participation. The Ideas are the first principles of Plato's universe and chief among them is the Good (τὸ ἀγαθόν), which bestows being on all the others.³ Platonist ontology conceives of reality through a bifurcated lens wherein two separate but intrinsically related kinds of beings interact. Inhabiting the spatiotemporal, physical world of sense-experience are material beings that are subject to change and are in a state of becoming. According to Platonism, a being of this kind is only "half-real [but] suggests a further reality which lies beyond itself."⁴ This further reality is the realm of immaterial and unchanging beings, i.e. the Ideas. The Ideas are eternal, ideal, and universal and serve as paradigms for the world of phenomena.

The precise nature of the Ideas varies depending on the kind of Platonism adhered to. Differences between interpretations arise largely because scholars have pieced their theory of Ideas together from disparate references and descriptions in Plato's dialogues. For instance, they

¹ Platonism has a long and diverse history and this thesis project cannot address its entirety. The goal of this section is to summarize a particular kind of Platonism, one that focuses on metaphysics, which could be considered the predecessor of contemporary English-language Plato studies. For instance, the works of H. Cherniss, G. Vlastos, R.E. Allen, M. Isnardi Parente, I.M. Crombie and their followers.

² Cf. Socrates' in *Phaedo* 99d-102a. All translations of Plato are from G.M.A. Grube unless otherwise indicated.

³ *Republic* 508b8-9.

⁴ Taylor, *Our Debt to Greece and Rome: Platonism and its Influence*, 41.

are ideal objects of knowledge,⁵ real in contrast to sensible particulars,⁶ ideal standards that particulars only approximate,⁷ universals,⁸ and they are in some sense causes of all particular things.⁹ Interestingly, Plato's *Parmenides* appears to attack all of these descriptions. It questions the Ideas' inherent goodness and nobility, their function as causes of particulars, their function as universals and as paradigms, and the tenability of the Ideas as objects of knowledge for man. In forming their theory of Ideas, Platonists often question how these many references can co-exist to form a coherent theory. Regardless of the precise principles of the theory, the Idea's paramount significance for interpreting all of Plato's philosophy has only been very recently questioned.

Platonism has other sacrosanct doctrines that are undoubtedly familiar to even the casual reader of Plato, such as the theory of recollection (*ἀνάμνησις*), the immortality of the tripartite soul, and the claim that virtue is knowledge. The theory of Ideas is the primary doctrine because it provides the basis for Platonist metaphysics, ontology, and epistemology, and its implications are felt in Platonist aesthetics, ethics, and politics. Many Platonists assert that the Ideas are needed to comprehend Plato's epistemology and ethics.¹⁰ This was apparently by design because Plato "considered it necessary to find a single hypothesis which would [...] create a rationally

⁵ Cf. *Republic*, V.

⁶ *Republic*, V, 476e-477a.

⁷ *Phaedo* 74-75.

⁸ *Republic*, X, 596a; *Meno* 72a.

⁹ *Phaedo* 100c-d.

¹⁰ H.F. Cherniss argues for the 'indirect' necessity of the theory of ideas via Plato's ethics and epistemology. The ideas are necessary because a consistent ethical theory in the dialogues, which equates virtue with knowledge, must rely on an epistemology that allows for true knowledge to be opposed with opinion. Such an epistemology must be grounded by an ontology and metaphysics wherein unchanging, purely present beings are the ultimate objects of knowledge for man. ("The Philosophical Economy of the Theory of Ideas," 18-23, 27).

Similarly, R. Cross and A.D. Woozley argue that Plato divides knowledge from opinion by distinguishing their objects and thus without the Forms, knowledge could not be said to have a stable, unchanging object that could justify its superiority over opinion. Naturally, the Forms are given characteristics that make them the only candidates for true knowledge. They are stable, unchanging, present, beings, and truly real. ("Knowledge, Belief, and the Forms," 86-93).

unified cosmos.”¹¹ For instance, Platonist epistemology claims there can only be true knowledge of stable, intelligible beings and that knowledge is grasped through recollection.¹² If this is the case, then one must posit the existence of separate, unchanging beings as the objects of knowledge. If the objects of knowledge were nothing other than the same sensible particulars that give rise to opinion and false accounts, then it would be difficult to rank and distinguish different types of cognition. Similarly, there must be eternal Ideas if we are to believe the theory of recollection and in order to destroy any relativist theories of knowledge. The most prominent Platonist ethical thesis, that virtue is knowledge, also requires the Ideas. If virtue is knowledge and knowledge can only be had of separate, stable, and eternal beings, then virtue is only possible if the Ideas exist. In order for knowledge of the Ideas to be virtuous, we must also argue that they are ideal and perfect. Thus although Plato did not provide posterity with any clearly stated theories or theses, Platonism has been able to develop and defend particular doctrines by appealing to the central importance of the theory of Ideas. As a result, Platonism encompasses an entire systematic interpretation of Plato’s philosophy. This is important to note because when scholars like Jacques Derrida attack Platonist metaphysics, epistemology, or ontology, they simultaneously critique an entire interrelated system of Platonist doctrines.

Platonism has had a substantial impact on the Western project of philosophy. It espouses a number of normative practices for philosophical thinking, writing, and interpretation and operates within a logical economy of opposing concepts meant to delimit coherent thought. For

¹¹ Cherniss, 2.

¹² These two epistemological theses are drawn from the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Theaetetus*, and the *Republic* Books V – VII. There are a large number of books and articles advancing the Platonist theory of recollection and its connection to the ideas as ideal objects of knowledge. See for instance, *Plato’s Theory of Knowledge* by Norman Gulley for a thorough review of Platonism’s main epistemological theses. Also useful are volume II of I.M. Crombie’s *An Examination of Plato’s Doctrines*, part II of G. Vlastos’ *Platonic Studies*, and “Knowledge and Forms in Plato’s *Theaetetus*” by W.F. Hicken in *Studies in Plato’s Metaphysics* (185-198).

instance, the concept ‘becoming’ is limited on either side by ‘being’ and ‘not-being’ and any ontological references outside of this schema are considered incomprehensible. Platonism dictates that one must read Plato, and by extension all philosophy, as a system of truth-functioning statements obeying this logic. Good philosophy renders its truths clear and easy to ascertain by the learned reader. This belief privileges the objective authorial voice and considers assertion the primary philosophical mode of communication.¹³ These privileges promote the written treatise as the most suitable medium for distributing philosophical assertions. Given that Platonism conceives of a “rationally unified cosmos”, all rigorous philosophy should work to uncover a definitive metaphysical system that orders all existence.¹⁴ Reading and interpreting philosophy should therefore begin by comprehending a text’s assertions, and then fitting each assertion into the philosopher’s system as whole. The scholar may then critique the philosopher by finding internal logical errors, inconsistencies, or comparing his assertions with alternative ideas. Thus Platonism is an organized system of philosophy grounded by idealist metaphysics and held up as a paradigm for all philosophical practice.

II. Plato, not Platonism

While Platonism purportedly emerged from Plato, this is not immediately evident from the dialogues alone. This section questions whether Platonism could unequivocally apply to Plato’s philosophy. As a whole, this thesis project explores how Derrida’s deconstruction of the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus* can help Plato scholars locate ways in which the dialogues resist Platonist

¹³ Assertion is opposed to dialogue or conjecture. Plato’s dialogues use all three modes. Cf. Hyland *Questioning Platonism: Continental Interpretations of Plato*, 6.

¹⁴ Cherniss, 16-17.

doctrine. Subsequent chapters read the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus* with a three-pronged focus on Derrida's critique, its connection to Platonist interpretations, and that which resists both readings.

Plato's philosophical practice immediately raises doubt that Platonism's preferences could have derived from him. Plato wrote dialogues, not philosophical treatises. He eschewed the objective, authorial voice and wrote his philosophy through characters placed in fictional situations interspersed with historical and mythical references. Plato frequently used myth, humour, irony, hyperbole, and many other literary devices. He never explicitly outlined his hermeneutics, he neither provided an order to his dialogues nor did he date them, and in terms of sheer volume and variety he favoured ethical and political topics over and above setting out first principles. Plato's choices make it very difficult to claim that he shared Platonism's convictions about the best way to perform, record, and interpret philosophy.

Historically, Platonism has held a hermeneutic paradigm driven by the conviction that philosophers build rationally unified systems starting from first principles. Although Plato's dialogues do not conform to this view of philosophy in their form, scholars have nevertheless adopted these hermeneutics.¹⁵ Since Plato only left posterity with dialogues, those searching for a doctrinal system must try to abstract theories from his texts by effectively converting them into treatises. Unlike a dialogue, a treatise usually has one authoritative voice. Many scholars, therefore, operate under the assumption that Socrates or the dominant speaker in a dialogue represents the authorial voice of Plato. This principle is highly problematic because it ignores the potential philosophical value in the interplay between interlocutors. Platonism also assumes that

¹⁵ Some scholars insist that Plato shared the Platonist ideal of philosophy. For example, A.E. Taylor writes the following about Plato's view of metaphysics. "The ideal is something like such a reduction of the exact sciences to the status of deductions from a few ultimate principles as is attempted in the *Principia Mathematica* of Whitehead and Russell [...] with the difference that Plato expects the ultimate principles, when reached, to exhibit direct self-evidence" (Taylor, 39).

Plato's philosophy can be understood in abstraction from the peculiar details of the dialogues. Details such as the dramatic date, the cast of characters, the situation during which the dialogue occurs, and the references to local events, myths, and politics, are seen as nonessential for understanding Plato's arguments. To ease the extraction of philosophical theories from these details, some claim that each dialogue has a philosophically significant core and a less important literary periphery. Scholars may then avoid locating significance in things like the layers of narrative distance in the *Timaeus* and the *Republic* or the odd placement of Socrates outside the city walls in the *Phaedrus* and skip right to the allegedly more philosophical parts. Unfortunately, this approach devalues Plato's narration and character development. It also implies that Plato's choice to use myth and metaphor is a problem to be overcome. Myths are logically inferior to assertions, but that does not mean they are philosophically unimportant.¹⁶ Converting the dialogues into a doctrinal system therefore requires adopting and justifying a particularly problematic hermeneutics.¹⁷

The dialogues also pose significant challenges to Platonism's privileging of Idealist metaphysics. Gregory Fried point out that "Plato nowhere presents a theory of forms or ideas, only various hypotheses offered by Socrates that serve as tentative responses to an array of

¹⁶ Jean-Francois Mattei makes this point in his essay "The Theatre of Myth in Plato" found in *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings* (66-83). He argues that Plato's myths are indispensable elements of his philosophy and if all one gains by comparing *mythos* and *logos* is the insight that *logos* is logically superior to *mythos*, then one has not revealed very much about Plato's use of myth.

¹⁷ Many, if not most, contemporary Plato scholars read the dialogues with a more holistic hermeneutics and interpretations are increasingly influenced by the dramatic form. It still must be noted that scholars feel the need to defend this hermeneutical strategy and it is often called out as something new and different. The greater problem, however, is the lasting influence of Platonist doctrine whose content was derived using an outdated hermeneutical paradigm. Currently, Plato studies needs to reexamine all Platonist doctrine by reinterpreting the dialogues holistically. In many cases, the results may be the same, for instance most contemporary Plato scholars do not dispute that the Forms or Ideas hold a prominent place in Plato's philosophy, but it is important to arrive at these conclusions through updated means.

inescapable problems.”¹⁸ If a theory of Ideas is required for understanding Platonic philosophy, then why did Plato not make that plainly obvious and why did he express the theory in discrete arguments spread out among multiple dialogues? Plato scholars have taken a variety of positions to make sense of the disparate references to the Ideas.¹⁹ I briefly look at two strategies adopted by Platonists to solve this problem. It is important to keep in mind that for the purposes of this project both strategies fall within the realm of Platonism. Even if they diametrically disagree on particular details, they still place Idealist metaphysics at the centre of Plato’s philosophy.

In an attempt to solve the interpretive difficulties presented by the dialogues some scholars support the Esoteric theory. This theory believes Plato’s dialogues hint at the truth but never reveal it directly to the uninitiated. Plato only told the truth directly in oral teachings at his Academy where he spoke about the ultimate ontological principles of his philosophy, which are Unity, identified with the Good, and indefinite Plurality. These oral teachings are needed to extract a systematic philosophy from the dialogues, which are disjointed and confused on their own.²⁰ Esotericists point to Plato’s *Seventh Letter* as proof of their beliefs because in it Plato claims that he has never committed his most important truths to writing and that these can only be learned through the direct interaction of teacher and pupil.²¹ Adherents of this theory also use Aristotle for support. Aristotle attributes metaphysical claims to Plato that are not directly supported by evidence in the dialogues.²² He mentions the “unwritten doctrines” [ἄγραφα

¹⁸ Fried, “Back to the Cave: A Platonic Rejoinder to Heideggerian Postmodernism,” 167.

¹⁹ Especially those in Plato’s *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *Parmenides*.

²⁰ Gaiser, “Plato’s Enigmatic Lecture ‘On the Good’,” 7-8.

²¹ *Seventh Letter* 341c4-e5. Trans. Glenn R. Morrow.

²² In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle repeatedly remarks that Plato shared similar first principles with the Pythagoreans, yet there is little evidence for this in the dialogues. For example, *Metaphysics* 987b15-35 claims that the Forms are characterized by the One and the Dyad, which is believed to be one of the central truths of the unwritten teachings. (Trans. W.D. Ross).

δόγματα] in his *Physics*²³ and Aristotle's pupil Aristoxenus infamously claims that Plato gave an ill-received lecture 'On the Good' that taught the foundational principle that the Good is One.²⁴ The Esoteric theory lies behind the variety of Neoplatonist interpretations of Plato's metaphysics as well as those held by Tübingen School scholars.²⁵ Although it has enjoyed impressive support and popularity in the history of Plato scholarship, not all Platonists adhere to the Esoteric theory. This is perhaps because it makes the meaning of Plato's dialogues, the only direct access to his philosophy available, dependent on second-hand and unreliable reports of 'unwritten teachings'.

Alternatively, the Developmental theory argues that Plato's inconsistencies are effects of his development over time. Many scholars directly opposed to the Esotericists, such as H. Cherniss and his followers, adopted this competing theory. It so dominated late nineteenth and twentieth century Platonism that it can be considered the 'standard view'.²⁶ Developmentalists believe Plato continued to develop his philosophical principles and this explains his inconsistent thoughts on the Ideas. Plato's development is progressive and is often described as moving from a more Socratic philosophy based on ethical discussions to a more genuinely Platonic philosophy concerned with metaphysics and ontology. Developmentalists arrange the dialogues into a chronology to support these assumptions. Traditionally, the dialogues fall into three groups;

²³ At *Physics* 209b11f Aristotle writes in brackets referring to the *Timaeus*, "τὸ γὰρ μεταληπτικὸν καὶ τὴν χώραν ἐν καὶ ταυτόν. Ἄλλον δὲ τρόπον ἐκεῖ τε λέγων τὸ μεταληπτικὸν καὶ ἐν τοῖς λεγομένοις ἀγράφοις δόγμασιν, ὅμως τὸν τρόπον καὶ τὴν χώραν τὸ αὐτὸ ἀπεφίνατο. "It is true, indeed, that the account he [Plato] gives there of the 'participant' is different from what he says in his so-called 'unwritten teaching'. Nevertheless, he did identify place and space." (Trans. P.H. Wicksteed and F.M. Cornford).

²⁴ Aristoxenus, *Elementa Harmonica*, II, 30-31. The curious case of the lecture 'On the Good' has caused controversy within the Esoteric school as well. The Esoteric theory claims that Plato only passed on his oral teachings to the initiated, and yet, the lecture 'On the Good' was apparently given to an unprepared popular audience. Both Esoterics (especially the Tübingen School) and Anti-Esoterics (such as H. Cherniss, G. Vlastos, R.E. Allen, M. Isnardi Parente, E.N. Tigerstedt) have written extensively on whether or not Aristoxenus' story could be factual.

²⁵ Some English language scholars also accept the Esoteric theory. Most notably, A.E. Taylor and John Burnet. Léon Robin, whose French translations of the dialogues Derrida used, accepted a less radical version of the theory that placed emphasis on Plato's teaching in the Academy. (Cf. Tigerstedt, *Interpreting Plato*, 74-75).

²⁶ The Unitarians were a notable exception. For example, Paul Shorey's *The Unity of Plato's Thought*.

early, middle, and late, and this schema organizes all interpretations of Platonic philosophy.²⁷ The early dialogues are also referred to as the Socratic or *elenchic* dialogues.²⁸ They concern ethics and epistemology and almost always end in ἀπορία. The middle dialogues demonstrate Plato's move beyond Socratic philosophy and show him exploring complex topics and elaborating the first version of his theory of Ideas.²⁹ The late dialogues are the most philosophically sophisticated and thus the most metaphysically significant.³⁰ In these dialogues Plato supposedly works out the problems that arose with the first expression of the theory of Ideas. The late dialogues are the most uniquely Platonic, which is evidenced by Socrates' less prominent place. The developmental chronology has so influenced Plato scholarship that it is difficult to locate even a contemporary study of Plato that does not make some reference to it.

In recent years, the Developmental theory has come under attack.³¹ In a landmark article, Jacob Howland definitively proved that its foundational assumptions are not fitting rigorous scholarship, beginning with the claim that an accurate chronology is relevant for understanding Plato. Howland conjectures that scholars think Plato's thought progresses over time because they assume Plato is the paradigmatic philosopher according to modern, not ancient ideas.³² Yet, as Howland points out, there is no need to assume that Plato worked in the same way that, for

²⁷ We are following W.K.C Guthrie's chronology from *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. IV and V.

²⁸ The early dialogues are the *Apology*, *Crito*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, and *Ion*.

²⁹ The middle dialogues are the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Euthydemus*, *Menexenus*, and *Cratylus*.

³⁰ The late dialogues are the *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Timaeus*, *Critias*, *Philebus*, and *Laws*.

³¹ See especially Howland "Re-Reading Plato: The Problem of Platonic Chronology"; Thesleff, "Platonic Chronology"; Nails, *Agora, Academy, and the Conduct of Philosophy*; and Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form*.

³² Howland, 198-200. Prejudices about the proper way to think and write philosophy have influenced Platonist interpretations of the dialogues to a great degree. As a result, developmentalists, assert claims like, "since no young writer is likely to have made his first prentice experiments in dialogue with so difficult a form, the popular view that the *Protagoras* is one of the earliest of the Platonic dialogues must be erroneous." (Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work*, 20).

example, Immanuel Kant did. It could have been the case that Plato wrote and revised his dialogues over many years. Furthermore, if an accurate chronology were needed to understand the dialogues, why would Plato have left his readers without one? Howland counters that Plato wrote a rich internal chronology for many of his dialogues as well as multiple “internal ligatures” that connect the ideas and meanings of all the dialogues, thus by comparison an external chronology has little interpretive significance.³³

Moreover, Howland argues that such a chronology plainly cannot be established. There are only three known ancient references used to establish an external timeline. Aristotle’s *Politics* 1264b26 mentions that the *Laws* was written later than the *Republic*. Diogenes Laertius mentions that Phillip of Opus transcribed the *Laws*, which Plato had left in wax at the time of his death. He also claims that the beginning of the *Republic* was revised many times. Finally, Dionysius of Halicarnassus in *On Literary Composition* claims that Plato habitually reworked his dialogues. These three references are regarded as the best evidence for dating the dialogues. Howland points out that none of them definitively supports the Developmental theory and they actually could be taken as evidence against such a theory since they claim that Plato habitually revised his work.³⁴ A dependable chronology obviously cannot be based on these ancient sources alone.

Modern chronologies also use stylometric analysis, which gained prominence when its tools progressed in the digital age. Stylometry analyzes the stylistic elements of a written text to locate unique aspects of an author’s writing style that could establish authorship of an anonymous work or construct a chronology. In order for stylometric analysis to effectively establish a

³³ Howland, 204.

³⁴ Ibid. 200-204. From this evidence, Guthrie admits that the possibility that Plato habitually reworked his dialogues throws any chronology into question. Yet, he still claims that “the stylometric method has undoubtedly proved itself” if only by the “large measure of agreement” that it introduced among Plato scholars (Guthrie, *vol. IV*, 51).

chronology two things are required, an independently verifiable chronological reference point, and the ability to isolate context-independent elements of Plato's style. Howland swiftly demonstrates that Developmental theorists have failed to meet both requirements and yet have continued to rely on faulty stylometry as validation.³⁵ The ancient evidence presented above meets the first requirement, Developmentalists argue, because it establishes the *Laws* as the last work Plato wrote. Unfortunately, the evidence given in these three short ancient references cannot possibly be considered sufficient to establish that as fact. Without an independent date for the *Republic*, Aristotle's claim does not prove the *Laws* was written last among all the dialogues. That Plato left the *Laws* in wax upon his death is actually better evidence of his continuous revisions than it is definitive proof the dialogue was written last. Howland also argues that any attempts to isolate context-independent elements of Plato's style are inevitably circular because scholars usually first assume the chronological order in their attempt to isolate such elements.³⁶ With only the *Laws* as a reference point, and a dubious one at that, it is no surprise that no one has successfully isolated stylistic elements that can stand up to rigorous critique. Nonetheless, with this scant evidence, generations of Platonists have relied on chronological distinctions to support their interpretations. Howland rightly conjectures that the reason the Developmental theory has reigned for so long is not that its science is indubitable, but because attacking it "would force us to rethink the great bulk of orthodox Plato scholarship from the ground up".³⁷ Precisely the task that Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence helps contemporary Plato scholars accomplish.

³⁵ Howland, 206.

³⁶ Ibid. 206-210.

³⁷ Ibid. 214.

III. The Platonic New Wave

Encouragingly, a New Wave of Plato scholarship characterized as a rethinking and return to the dialogues themselves has begun addressing perennial problems in Platonism.³⁸ The most significant problems are the unreliable Platonic chronology, the limits of analytic methods of interpretation, the apparent lack of a dogmatic system in Plato's thought, and the difficulty of interpreting Plato's metaphysics. The Platonic New Wave hopes to find new and different solutions to these problems in part because they are not encumbered by Platonist hermeneutics. For instance, scholars have recently written on the importance of adopting a holistic interpretation of Plato's philosophy that combines philosophical and philological methods.³⁹ It is no longer sufficient to treat Plato's work as if it was a doctrinal system of truth assertions.⁴⁰ Recent Platonic New Wave portrays a new freedom of interpretation that promises great things for the future of Plato studies.

What gains have been made with this new freedom? Looking at two recent collections of essays, *The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies* edited by Dr. Francisco J. Gonzalez and *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings* edited by Dr. Charles L. Griswold Jr.,⁴¹ one of the most

³⁸ The 'Platonic New Wave' is a term I invented to refer to recent trends in Plato scholarship, thus none of the scholars I refer to as part of this movement self-identify as such. New Wave Plato scholars favour 'literary' and philological methods of interpretation over analytic ones. They deny the claim that Plato's thought was dogmatic and that his philosophy was intended to be expressed as a doctrinal system. They reject, or at least strongly question, the Developmental theory and its chronology. They see the dialogue form and style as philosophically significant for Plato's thought. Finally, they raise doubts about equating Platonic metaphysics with Idealist metaphysics or the metaphysics of presence (some rejecting a Platonic metaphysics outright).

³⁹ See articles in Press (ed.), *Plato's Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations* and Gonzalez (ed.), *The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies* for examples.

⁴⁰ This need was already recognized by Tigerstedt in *Interpreting Plato*, a book that could easily sit beside any contemporary New Wave texts. He quotes a passage from Leo Strauss about the need for multiple interpretive strategies when approaching Plato. "This does not mean that the interpretation of Plato is essentially arbitrary. It means, on the contrary, that the rules of exactness governing the interpretation of Plato's books are much stricter than those governing the interpretation of most books" (107).

⁴¹ Also of note are the above noted volume edited by Press and his article "The State of the Question in the Study of Plato" in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*.

dominant themes in both collections is a call to return to the dialogue form as a philosophically significant genre of writing.⁴² This directly opposes Platonism by arguing that dialogues are the most adequate vehicles for Plato's philosophy. There is no logical error in asserting that dialogues are both philosophically important and have inconsistent and ambiguous language.⁴³ Moreover, many scholars argue we can better understand the practice and goal of Plato's philosophy by giving due attention to the dialogue form. For instance, Griswold Jr. argues that Plato wrote dialogues because of his metaphilosophical allegiances. He believes Plato chose to write dialogues particularly because they are not a series of dogmatic assertions. Instead, they allow Plato to portray Socrates in dialogue with critics of philosophy or philosophical neophytes as a way of defending the philosophical way of life.⁴⁴ A defense of philosophy through dogmatic declarations of principles is less successful because these can never be completely incorrigible. Plato's dialogues seek to portray the philosophical way of life, where questions about the beginnings and foundations of philosophy are unavoidable although they may never be solvable. The dialogues nevertheless demonstrate that the unexamined life is not worth living. This interpretation of Plato's valuation of philosophy is shared among many New Wave scholars.

The idea that the dialogues are meant to portray a way of living has recently become prominent.⁴⁵ For Kenneth M. Sayre, they show how philosophic instruction brings about a state of mind in the student that allows him to recapture truths that lie incipient within his own mind,⁴⁶

⁴² See Arieti, Gonzalez, and Press in *The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies* and Brumbaugh, Desjardins, Griswold, and Sayre in *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings*. Each provides a take on why Plato wrote dialogues, why we cannot separate Plato's philosophy from the dialogue, and how the dialogue form may reveal significant philosophical truths.

⁴³ Cf. Arieti, "How to Read a Platonic Dialogue."

⁴⁴ Griswold Jr., "Plato's Metaphilosophy: Why Plato Wrote Dialogues."

⁴⁵ See for example, Press, "Plato's Dialogues as Enactments."

⁴⁶ Sayre, "Plato's Dialogues in Light of the Seventh Letter."

whereas Rosemary Desjardins believes that the dialogue form allows Plato to demonstrate how a philosopher is tasked with interpreting his own tradition.⁴⁷ Francisco J. Gonzalez argues that in light of the dialogue form, we can understand Plato's philosophy as "reflexive".⁴⁸ Reflexive philosophy does not aim at an objective result that can be arbitrarily distributed to others instead it seeks the knowledge contained in the search itself. Dialogue is an inherently reflexive form of writing because it shows the philosopher actively engaged in the act of seeking. John Sallis' book *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues* explicitly moves away from any claim to discover Plato's philosophical theses. His project emphasizes the need to get beyond or behind the tradition of Platonism in order to investigate the dialogues as such. These scholars do not completely agree in their interpretations, but they do share a desire to stop reading Plato as if his philosophy was forced into an inadequate shell from which the careful scholar must release it.

IV. Derrida, Plato, and the Metaphysics of Presence

There is an aspect, perhaps an integral one, of Derrida's work concerned with questions about Plato and his legacy. In two essays, "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Dissemination* and "Khôra" in *On the Name*, Derrida traces what he sees as the originary play of *différance* in Plato's texts. His deconstructions examine how elements such as *pharmakon* and *khôra* corrupt the Platonist rules governing the metalinguistic and metainterpretive structures of the dialogues. To accomplish this, Derrida draws out a particularly dogmatic Platonist abstraction of the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus* to critique. By analyzing what lies beyond the limits of these deconstructions, such as Derrida's notable exclusion of ἔργον, we can see how the dialogues point to something quite apart from Platonism.

⁴⁷ Desjardins, "Why Dialogues? Plato's Serious Play."

⁴⁸ Gonzalez, "Self-Knowledge, Practical Knowledge, and Insight: Plato's Dialectic and the Dialogue Form."

While Derrida does not unequivocally equate Plato with Platonism in his critique, his focus is on overturning the hegemonic tradition of Platonism and not on recovering a more authentic Platonic philosophy. This is because Derrida seeks a new kind of philosophy, which can only be accomplished by a radical re-reading of philosophy's foundations.⁴⁹ Derrida critiques Platonism and its legacy as the paradigmatic philosophical tradition that has systematically marginalized and excluded the other from its history. As argued above, underlying Platonism is Idealist metaphysics, or what Derrida names the metaphysics of presence. Derrida deconstructs Plato in order to attack the very foundations of the western tradition of metaphysics and its privileging of presence. Nonetheless, Derrida had an ambiguous relationship with Plato and the Greeks. The large span of time between his two close studies of Plato's dialogues, and his frequent references to Plato elsewhere in writings and interviews, demonstrate that Derrida saw Plato as a constant foil.⁵⁰

Derrida sheds light on his complex relationship with Greek antiquity in his essay "We Other Greeks" only very recently translated into English.⁵¹ In this essay, Derrida reveals how French postmodernism rethinks and returns to Greek antiquity in order to think modernity. In a more general sense, Derrida believes that all questions of philosophy must be caught up with questions about the legacy of thought on truth and on being, and this legacy is at least partially Greek. At the same time, Derrida is preoccupied with alterity and the Other and this extends into his relationship with antiquity. He pays careful attention to the Greek other, the non-Greek, i.e.

⁴⁹ Leonard, *Derrida and Antiquity*, 2.

⁵⁰ Miriam Leonard points out in the Introduction to *Derrida and Antiquity* that Derrida was still reflecting on Plato at the end of his life (4). In one of his final interviews he said, "Learning to live ought to mean learning to die - to acknowledge, to accept, an absolute mortality - without positive outcome, or resurrection, or redemption, for oneself or for anyone else. That has been the old philosophical injunction since Plato: to be a philosopher is to learn how to die." ("I am at war with myself." in: *Le Monde. Interview*. August 19, 2004.)

⁵¹ Leonard commissioned the first English translation of Derrida's "Nous Autres Grecs" by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas for *Derrida and Antiquity*.

the Barbarian or the Egyptian. The non-Greek is the other *of the* Greeks, whom Derrida calls *his* (the Greek's) other. According to Derrida, the non-Greek is recognized within the Greek conception of reality because he is opposed to the Greek and therefore is in a sense assimilated into his worldview.⁵²

Derrida is more interested in *le tout autre*, the other that is wholly foreign to the Greek. *Le tout autre* disturbs the very self-identity of the Greek and his philosophy because it falls completely outside his system.⁵³ Derrida focuses on finding hints of *le tout autre* within Greek philosophy itself, hence he often narrows in on a particular concept, word, or phrase, which when deconstructed, opens up the system to its own negation. He believes there are moments within Platonic philosophy that exceed it, hints of *le tout autre* such as *pharmakon* in the *Phaedrus* or *khôra* in the *Timaeus*. These are concepts that, although included in the texts of Greek philosophy, turn out to be inconceivable according to its philosophical economy. Derrida writes:

Consider, for example, the resistance of the *pharmakon* and its semantic oscillation [...] This resistance interested me in particular at the point where it limits the possibility of the system or of the corpus, of the complete, controllable, and formalizable self-identity of a set or a whole, be it that of a system, of Plato's oeuvre (which would be governed by a unifiable meaning-to-say), of the Greek language, of Greek society (and very concretely it is also a matter of the place – *exclusion included*, so to speak – of the *pharmakos* in it), thus of the identity of the Greek in general.⁵⁴

Derrida's deconstructive readings of the *Phaedrus* and the *Timaeus* show how these problematic concepts resist assimilation and he defines some of the consequences this brings to bear on Platonism and its legacy. Chapters Two and Three of this thesis explore *pharmakon* and *khôra* in Derrida's readings and the respective dialogues.

⁵² Derrida describes this as being "excluded-included, posed as opposable" ("We Other Greeks", 25).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 26-27.

Derrida claims that he “cannot avoid taking up, whether directly or not, the ‘Greek question’.”⁵⁵ What is truly at stake in “Plato’s Pharmacy” and “*Khôra*” is determining if *pharmakon* and *khôra* “are (1) ‘in’ (2) ‘Plato’ (3) ‘Greek words’ (4) that designate ‘Greek things’ (significations or realities).”⁵⁶ Derrida is preoccupied with the very same question raised in this study, to what degree and in what sense can the texts of Plato be separated from Platonism. We are interested in this question in order to further Plato studies itself while Derrida’s interest lies in his desire to better understand the relationship between the dominant meaning of a text (which he reads as Platonism) and the other of that meaning, both *its* other and *le tout autre*. Derrida wants to reveal that *pharmakon* and *khôra* hint at *le tout autre* because even as they are forcibly assimilated into Platonist logic, there is always a remainder that resists this determination. Moreover, this struggle is captured within the text and history of Platonism even if it has been largely covered over and forgotten. Therefore, Derrida’s deconstruction of the *Phaedrus* and the *Timaeus* is his attempt to answer the questions above by drawing out the struggle between the Greek, *his* other, and *le tout autre*.

Derrida’s reading of Plato is just one aspect of his deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence. For Derrida, the entire history of philosophy is a history of the determination of being as presence.⁵⁷ Derrida does not always focus on metaphysics, he may deconstruct what he calls logocentrism, the privileging of *logos*, phallogocentrism, the privileging of paternal power and the patriarchy, or phonocentrism, the privileging of the voice, because he believes all of these

⁵⁵ Ibid. 19.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Take for example this phrase: “the history of (the) philosophy (of presence)”. The use of brackets indicates that the history of philosophy implies the history of the metaphysics of presence (*Of Grammatology*, 14).

doctrines derive from the thesis that to be is to be present.⁵⁸ According to the metaphysics of presence beings are present *in* the now moment, whether that is the fleeting now moment of the individual soul or the eternal now of the divine. M. C. Dillon explains that the metaphysics of presence is “conceived as the coincidence of two theses: the thesis of the privilege of the present moment in time, and the thesis of the privilege of the presence of consciousness to the world and itself.”⁵⁹ Derrida tries to demonstrate how these theses are untenable because the concept of presence can be deconstructed. He does not want to destroy metaphysics and philosophy altogether, however, he wants to point beyond the limits of the metaphysics of presence to openness to the Other in *différance*.

According to this metaphysics the presence of Being is epistemological, the now moment in which Being reveals itself to be known, and ontological, the essence of Being-itself. Presence is “the coalescence of revelation and reality” where reality is understood as the totality of eternal Being.⁶⁰ Truth is therefore the coincidence of cognition with what really *is*. Cognition presupposes identification, i.e. I know that I see a chair because I can identify the particular object in front of me as one of a type, chair. Identification presupposes ideality or it assumes that things have essences. These essences must be eternal and static if cognitions are to be true for all time and people. These eternal essences are referred to in Platonism as the Ideas. Ideality, then, is a necessary condition for intelligibility according to this view, and true cognition occurs when the Ideas are present in the soul. Man knows the truth through a coincidence of temporal cognition

⁵⁸ In *Of Grammatology* Derrida lists “all of the subdeterminations which depend on this general form [that the meaning of being is presence] and which organize within it their system and their historical sequence.” They are: phonocentrism, logocentrism, “presence of the thing to the sight as eidos, presence as substance/ essence/ existence [ousia], temporal presence as point [stigmè] of the now or of the moment [nun], the self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity, the co-presence of the other and of the self, intersubjectivity as the intentional phenomenon of the ego, and so forth.” (12).

⁵⁹ Dillon, *Semiological Reductionism: A Critique of the Deconstructionist Movement in Postmodern Thought*, 35.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 19.

and eternal presence. This can be contrasted with divine cognition, or absolute knowledge, wherein the coincidence of what *is* with what is known is achieved through absolute self-presence. Absolute self-presence is not possible for finite man, at least while his soul is housed in the body, but it is his final end toward which all of his cognitions aim.

When he deconstructs presence itself, Derrida critiques its temporal and spatial aspects. His critique, found primarily in “*Ousia and Gramme: Note on a Note from Being and Time*”, rests on his claim that the now (*vñv*) is an aporetic concept. Dillon describes the *aporia* thus, “the problem: presence is conceived by means of the now, but the now is conceived both as the evanescent passage which *is not* and the unchanging presence which eternally *is*.” The now moment, in its very essence, both is and is not. Interestingly, Derrida accuses the history of Western philosophy “from Aristotle to Hegel” of evading this *aporia*, notably excluding Plato.⁶¹ This exclusion may not be the result of sympathies for Platonic metaphysics and may instead be because Derrida views Platonic metaphysics the same way that Martin Heidegger did, as a confused system that Aristotle corrected and perfected. In attacking Aristotelean metaphysics one is implicitly attacking Platonic metaphysics. There is no doubt that Derrida saw Platonic philosophy as intrinsically related to the metaphysics of presence and that he viewed Plato as one of the founders of this tradition, whether intentionally or not. When Derrida deconstructs Plato’s dialogues, as we will see in the chapters to come, he is critiquing Plato *as father of the metaphysics of presence*. Derrida’s intention is to deconstruct the foundations of Western philosophy and Plato is certainly one of those foundations.

The *aporia* produced by the temporalization of presence, that the now both is and is not, is compounded by the spatialization of presence. In order to solve the former *aporia* about the

⁶¹ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 52.

temporal aspect of presence, one must think both the temporal and spatial aspects of the now at once, and this can be represented by the *gramme* or circular line. The *gramme* signifies both infinite divisibility and unchanging unity, or in other words, the circular line “converts successive now moments to co-presence or simultaneity.”⁶² Derrida argues that this pseudo-solution only opens up another *aporia*, and the fundamental instability of the metaphysics of presence remains. In other words, to solve the problem of the temporality of presence, philosophers have appealed to the coincidence of the temporal succession of now moments and the static simultaneity of space. The *gramme*, as a representation of presence in time, is *at the same time* changing, i.e. infinite succession, and unchanging, i.e. eternally circular. This, therefore, brings about the same *aporia* in a slightly different guise. As Dillon explains it, in order to think presence “the metaphysics of presence must define time (succession) and space (simultaneity) as mutually exclusive (i.e., as a binary opposition), yet must think them together as the condition for presence or appearing of Being.”⁶³ If presence is conceived as the self-presentation of beings in the present moment, and if time and space are both defined in relation to absolute divine self-presence, then the metaphysics of presence cannot conceive of being as presence without contradiction. Dillon summarizes the problematic:

Again, phenomenal presencing or the self-manifestation of beings, which Derrida regards as the foundation of Western ontology (‘beingness,’ *ousia*), itself rests upon a spatialization of time which Derrida contends is unthinkable because it embodies a double contradiction: (1) it must conceive time as both unreal and passing and as real and eternal; and (2) it must conceive space (composed of simultaneous now-points) and time (composed of successive now-points) as together (*hama*) despite the fact that their essences are defined as mutually exclusive (succession is the impossibility of simultaneity).⁶⁴

⁶² Dillon, 23.

⁶³ Ibid. 23-4.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 24.

Derrida believes that this inherently contradictory conception of time, space, and presence has defined the entire history of Western metaphysics.

John Sallis in his article “Heidegger/Derrida – Presence” explains why it is that the metaphysics of presence is available for deconstruction and why both Heidegger and Derrida take it as a common enemy. Sallis highlights Derrida’s critique of Husserlian phenomenology in *Speech and Phenomena* wherein Derrida deconstructs the presence of the now moment. Sallis’ reading of the deconstruction of the present now moment focuses on Derrida’s argument about repetition. For Derrida, the present now moment involves repetition in two senses. First, the present now includes the repetition of all previous now moments in terms of retention of the past. Second, the present now, being the ideal now moment, or the *form* of presence, is itself infinitely repeatable. Thus, Sallis concludes, “the present ‘now’ essentially involves the possibility, structure, movement of repetition both *of previous ‘nows’* in itself and *of itself* as the ideal form of presence.”⁶⁵ Derrida claims that all philosophy leading up to and including phenomenology has not given this adequate notice. In fact, philosophy has operated on the opposite assumption, that the presence of the now moment constitutes the past and future and is thus the origin of all repetition. Derrida’s deconstruction of presence insists that, “the presence of the present [should be] thought of as arising from the bending back of a return, from the movement of repetition, and not the reverse.”⁶⁶ Presence, like any concept, emerges from repetition in the two senses described above because, for Derrida, a being-present (*ousia*, presence) is constituted by a movement of self-differentiation. Presence is not original and the presence of beings is not self-

⁶⁵ Sallis, “Heidegger/Derrida – Presence,” 598-599.

⁶⁶ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: and other essays on Husserl’s theory of signs*, 68.

sufficient, it emerges from out of a primordial absence.⁶⁷ Derrida refers to the figure of repetition as a trace and the operation of the trace “by which the presence of the present is constituted,” is also called *différance* or alternatively the operation of signification.⁶⁸ Signification is another way of understanding the repetitive operation of the trace because signs derive meaning from their iterability. For Derrida, then, presence is made possible by the play of *différance* or the operation of signification.

More often than not Derrida deconstructs what could be called the symptoms of the metaphysics of presence, such as logocentrism and phonocentrism. He believes the logic of metaphysics is inherently oppressive and hegemonic and this is expressed as both logo- and phonocentrism. The metaphysics of presence organizes being into a system of hierarchical, binary concepts used to understand the world. Derrida writes in *Limited Inc.*,

[Metaphysics is] the enterprise of returning ‘strategically’, ideally, to an origin or to a ‘priority’ thought to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order *then* to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just *one* metaphysical gesture among others, it is *the* metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent.⁶⁹

Thus metaphysics not only privileges presence, but it prioritizes sameness and ideality over difference, accident, and complication. Derridean deconstruction seeks to not only *deconstruct* the structural laws of the binary oppositions of the metaphysics of presence but also to *construct* a

⁶⁷ This brief explanation is expanded below when I describe *différance*.

⁶⁸ Sallis, 599. It is typical of Derrida to use multiple terms to describe the same (non)concept. He purposely uses different signifiers such as *différance*, arche-writing, the trace, or the operation of signification interchangeably in order to disrupt the typical signifier/signified relationship because what he is describing should be thought of as producing that relationship. These (non)concepts are described in detail below.

⁶⁹ Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, 93.

link to what exceeds them, to the originary *différance* that precedes the presence of beings and truth. This occurs within the texts of metaphysics themselves when they are submitted to a deconstructionist reading. To put it simply, Derrida believes that the metaphysics of presence has not been absolutely successful in its hegemony over thought and truth and traces of what exceeds metaphysics can still be found in the texts that define it. Hence Derrida locates points of ambiguity in the texts of these metaphysicians that betray the instability of their own binary oppositions. These undecidable concepts, which are not properly speaking concepts at all, are unable to conform to either side of the opposition. *Pharmakon* is one such ambiguous concept in the *Phaedrus* just as *khôra* is in the *Timaeus*. This is why Derrida focuses so much attention on language and the logic of signification because it is one of the most accessible and obvious places to find the influence of the metaphysics of presence on thought. The binary oppositions of metaphysics are played out in language and so is, as a result, their corruption.

Derrida points toward what exceeds/precedes presence, and since philosophical language is defined by the metaphysics of presence, he uses neologisms to suit his purpose. For this study, it is only necessary to focus on three of Derrida's (non-)concepts, *différance*, the trace (*la trace*), and the supplement (*le supplément*). Derrida argues that presence is an effect that emerges from out of the play of *différance*. Yet, *différance* is not an origin if what is meant is a kind of original presence, otherwise, as Irene E. Harvey points out, there would be little difference between deconstruction and metaphysics.⁷⁰ In the metaphysics of presence the origin is the thing-in-itself. If a sign is secondary because it is a supplement, then the thing signified in its full presence to itself is primary. The origin of origins is the source of all being and meaning, and is often articulated as God or as a first principle like the Good. The origin of origins is ultimate self-

⁷⁰ Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Différance*, 76.

presence and absolute knowledge. By contrast, *différance* is an anti-origin or a (non)origin that is nonetheless more originary than the God-Sun-Good-Father origin of metaphysics. In Derrida's thought, the movement of *différance* has a complicated relationship with the metaphysics of presence. It undermines the metaphysics of presence because it cannot be comprehended or mastered through its logic. At the same time *différance* enables the metaphysics of presence because presence is one of its effects.

Différance is not a concept because it has no unity or essence and there is no satisfactory answer to *the* metaphysical question "what is it?". Derrida remarks, "if *différance* is what makes possible the presentation of the being-present, it is never presented as such [...] it derives from no category of being, whether present or absent."⁷¹ It is equally impossible to define *différance* using something like negative theology, which always points to a superessentiality beyond finite categories. *Différance* is irreducible to any onto-theological categories, even the category of the ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας, but it is at the same time the opening through which onto-theology emerges.⁷² How can we characterize *différance*? Firstly, it cannot be delineated by obeying any kind of logical discourse, which always aims at mastery, and instead must be thought as and through *play*. Play, for Derrida, is "the unity of chance and necessity in calculations without end."⁷³ *Différance* can be delineated indefinitely, even leading to its own replacement. Nonetheless, we must temporarily halt this indefinite play in order to produce a provisional understanding of *différance*. This is, after all, what Derrida has done in coining the term. *Différance*, then, comes from the French verb *différer*, which means to defer and to differ. To defer is to temporize, to put something off until later. To differ is to be other, to be not identical.

⁷¹ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 6.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid. 7.

Differing is associated with spacing because a space must exist between the thing and its other in order for them to differ from one another.⁷⁴ *Différance* announces both of these actions at once because it is “immediately and irreducibly polysemic.”⁷⁵ To understand *différance* we must defer to a particular context of its use and yet we are also, in so doing, deferring its meaning and demonstrating how it differs from itself. Similarly, whatever is said about *différance* is always, in an essential way, different from *différance* (and so also defers its meaning). Differing and deferring, or temporization and spacing, are enacted in and through *différance*.

In choosing the sign ‘*différance*’, Derrida captures its corruption of the metaphysics of presence in its form. He invented the term precisely because it disrupts the privileging of presence by housing its meaning solely in its written form. In French, there is no audible difference between *différence* and *différance*. The additional *a* can only be seen not heard, and so to identify the difference between Derrida’s neologism and *différence* one must look at the written inscription. *Différance* is meant to counter phonocentrism or the idea that speech is more original, more internal, and more present than its mere supplement, writing. In speaking about *différance* one is forced to say “difference with an a”, which means that the speech necessarily refers to the written inscription in order to convey its meaning, a complete reversal of phonocentrism, and a reminder that “contrary to a very widespread prejudice, there is no phonetic writing.”⁷⁶ This is in direct contrast to the view put forth by the metaphysics of presence.

Those that privilege presence claim that difference and deferral are provisional and secondary and this is evident in their definition of signification. Both the origin and the final goal of philosophy is the absolute rational unity of the One/Same/Being. If an immediate and full

⁷⁴ Ibid. 8.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 5.

intuition of Being were possible, then there would be no need for the signifier/signified relationship. The signifier is a deferred presence, it is present as that which points to the currently absent thing-itself. The signifier is also secondary to the thing-itself and only has meaning in reference to it; the signifier derives meaning by differing from its signified as well as from other signifiers. The use of signifiers is also provisional, it makes up for a lack and absence, but always aims at ending this mediation. With *différance*, Derrida radically rethinks the sign, and in a more general way, the acts of differing and deferring. For Derrida, the totality of the sign, both signifier and signified, derives its meaning from the play of *différance*. The signifier must necessarily differ from the signified, just as it must necessarily differ from other signifiers and other signifieds. In its function the signifier also necessarily defers the presence of its signified. If it were simply identical to the present presence of the signified, it would not be a signifier. Thus Derrida believes the essence and function of the signifier are defined by *différance*, or in other words, the signifier actually takes on meaning through the play of difference and deferral.

Différance also bestows meaning on the signified. Derrida writes, “the signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself.”⁷⁷ Just like one signifier alone would have no meaning, a signified concept only derives its meaning by differing from other signified concepts. Derrida believes that the things-themselves have a “primordial self-deficiency” that the play of *différance* supplements or stands in for.⁷⁸ The things-themselves are deficient (they literally *are deficiently*) because they cannot be simply present in-themselves. By present Derrida means “an adequate presence that would refer only to itself.”⁷⁹ The things-themselves are made present through supplementation, or in other words, through the

⁷⁷ Ibid. 11.

⁷⁸ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 88.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 140.

play of *différance*, with its twin actions of differing and deferring. The truth inherent in the thing-itself, therefore, derives from *différance* because the presence of the thing-itself in its meaning is produced by this play of temporization and spacing.

Différance is temporizing because the present is always constituted through a relation to the past and the future. We constitute what is called the present by contrasting it with what it is not, the not-present in the sense of the not present anymore, the past, or the not yet present, the future. Similarly, the differing of the present from its other opens up an interval or a space. This interval, between it and its other must:

by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly substance or the subject.⁸⁰

The present constitutes itself by dividing or differing and deferring itself, or to use Derrida's technical language, through the movement of temporization and spacing, which is *différance*.

Hence Derrida writes,

[It] is this constitution of the present, as an 'originary' and irreducibly nonsimple synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions and protentions, that I propose to call archi-writing, archi-trace, or *différance*. Which (is) (simultaneously) spacing (and) temporization.⁸¹

The things-themselves, or the signifieds in the operation of the sign, are therefore given meaning through the play of *différance*, which can no longer be considered provisional or secondary.

With an understanding of how *différance* acts as (non)origin of meaning and presence, we can now try to grasp what Derrida means by the trace (*la trace*). Derrida first mentions the trace

⁸⁰ Ibid. 13. Why the interval must divide the present "in and of itself" is outlined above in my explanation of Derrida's deconstruction of the time and space of presence. He does not repeat the argument here but it can be assumed that this is what he has in mind when he connects the spacing of the present moment with the indefinite self-division of presence.

⁸¹ Ibid.

in his trio of works published in 1967, *Of Grammatology*, *Speech and Phenomena*, and *Writing and Difference*, although it continued to pervade his work under different names such as arche-writing, *pharmakon*, or specter. However we attempt to approach the trace we are met with the same difficulties that pervade attempts to define *différance*. Derrida does not give a standard definition of trace because definitions belong to the order of the metaphysics of presence and the trace, not a concept or word, exceeds/precedes this order. Perhaps the best way to begin approaching the trace is to look at its relationship with *différance*. The trace is the trace of *différance*, which can also be stated as the trace (is) *différance*. The trace is, as its name suggests, a presence that denotes an absence or a sort of pseudo-presence, something that is not quite there. It is the trace of the always already absent origin that is *différance*. Derrida articulates this in what is probably the most illuminating mention of the trace in his entire corpus. In the essay “Différance”⁸² in *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida writes about the “trace of whatever goes beyond the truth of Being” as a “trace of something that can never present itself; it is itself a trace that can never be presented, that is, can never appear and manifest itself as such in its phenomenon.”⁸³ The trace is that of what goes beyond the metaphysics of presence, *viz.* *différance*. But *différance* is *also* a trace because it too will never be purely and simply present. Hence, “like *différance*, the trace is never presented as such. In presenting itself it becomes effaced.”⁸⁴ A trace ceases to be a trace if it is fully present. It is between absence and presence, which necessarily disqualifies it from inclusion in the logic underlying the metaphysics of presence.

⁸² Derrida converts this essay into a chapter of *Margins of Philosophy*.

⁸³ Ibid. 154.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Yet we can perceive the trace if our perception is tuned to it, which is integral for the movement of deconstruction. The trace can be perceived – not, of course, as simply present – but as the “simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself.”⁸⁵

Effacement, Derrida continues, belongs to the structure of the trace. Effacement, both the possibility of complete effacement and the constituting of the trace through effacement, separates the trace from a fully present substance. In this way, Derrida’s trace shares a similar structure to the more innocuous, non-philosophical trace. Think of a picture drawn in pencil on a piece of paper that has been almost completely erased but for a trace of the image left on the paper. The act of erasing the original picture constituted the trace. The trace left on the page is a sort of imitation of the presence of the original picture that points to the full presence of the picture and also hints at the full absence, or the blank page. Derrida’s trace operates in the same way with the important exception that it is not the trace of a full presence, his trace has no essence, but is instead the trace of a trace. In other words, there is no original picture that the trace is a trace of.

Moreover, the trace is the trace of the *effacement* of a trace.⁸⁶ Let us breakdown this statement. The trace that can be perceived by deconstruction – that (is) in the text of metaphysics, that Derrida will call *pharmakon* in his analysis of the *Phaedrus* and *khôra* in his reading of the *Timaeus* – that trace points to something beyond itself, *viz. différance*. *Différance* is itself a trace (the trace of a trace) because it too is neither absent nor present and is constituted through effacement. The effacement of *différance* (the effacement of a trace) occurs with the production of the metaphysics of presence. So, the trace perceived in the text of metaphysics is the trace of

⁸⁵ Ibid. 156.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

that originary effacement of the trace that is *différance* (the trace of the effacement of a trace).

Derrida adds one more layer to this formula by stating,

the effacing of this early trace of difference is therefore ‘the same’ as its tracing within the text of metaphysics [...] In the language of metaphysics the paradox of such a structure [that is, the structure of the trace] is the inversion of the metaphysical concept which produces the following effect: the present becomes the sign of signs, the trace of traces.⁸⁷

Because the metaphysics of presence effaces *différance*, it also constitutes the trace of *différance* since the trace is formed through effacement. By tuning our perception onto this trace, we can produce a deconstructive reading of the texts of metaphysics and thereby draw out the implications of the paradox of the trace abiding *within* but ultimately pointing *without* a metaphysics that cannot master it. What we discover is that presence itself, the being-present of beings in the now moment, can no longer be understood as substantial and essential. The present-itself becomes a trace of the effacement of *différance*. In Chapter Three, we see how Derrida’s deconstruction of *khôra* in the *Timaeus* makes an analogous point.

The final germane (non)concept that both exceeds and precedes the determination of Being as presence in Derridean philosophy is the supplement (*le supplément*).⁸⁸ Derrida’s earliest discussion of the supplement is found in *Of Grammatology* in his investigation into Rousseau’s logo- and phonocentrism.⁸⁹ The supplement is connected to *différance* and the trace because it too cannot be thought by the metaphysics of presence. Derrida writes, “the supplement is

⁸⁷ Ibid. Brackets are my addition.

⁸⁸ In “Plato’s Pharmacy” Derrida refers his readers to his discussion of Rousseau’s supplement in *Of Grammatology* because it is an analogous study to the one on *pharmakon* in Plato. Much of Derrida’s analysis of the *Phaedrus* centres on the phonocentric classification of writing as a dangerous supplement to speech.

⁸⁹ When Derrida deconstructs phonocentrism in “Plato’s Pharmacy”, he uses the conjoined term Plato-Rousseau-Saussure to explicitly call attention to their shared metaphysics. What Derrida writes about the supplement in *Of Grammatology* can be applied to his reading of the *Phaedrus*.

maddening, because it is neither presence nor absence.”⁹⁰ The supplement has a double nature that is incomprehensible by the logic of presence. It is at once something added on from the outside, a mere extra joined to a present plenitude, and also something taking the place of an absence, an addendum that increases and enhances by filling in for some lack.⁹¹ Thus the supplement obeys a kind of “mad” logic that governs these two opposing significations. It is always external but is at the same time, by its essential function, also internal. Therefore it *is* nothing because it does not have a unified essence; it also obviously *is not* nothing judging by its numerous effects and pervasive use. The supplement, therefore, occupies the same position in Derrida’s thinking as the trace. These terms are not simply distinct from one another because they are not concepts traditionally understood. *Différance*, the trace, and the supplement are not three different signifiers signifying three different meanings. They all point to the same (non)origin of differing and deferring.

The supplement is also considered dangerous. Specifically, it is dangerous to metaphysics, even though it is metaphysics that has historically made it necessary. It is dangerous because it encourages the neglect, and ultimately, the supplanting of the things-themselves by the order of the supplement. When the supplement supplants, it cuts off access to the true presence of things, which is utterly disastrous for metaphysics because it cuts us off from being and truth. Derrida argues that this danger is inherent to the very nature of the supplement and its relationship to the things-themselves. It functions by adding itself in order to replace. A supplement can only function well if it can adequately take the place, or re-present, the thing it supplements. Perfect representation, or perfect supplementing, should not only restore the

⁹⁰ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 154.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 144-5.

presence of the absent thing-itself but it should efface the supplement.⁹² In other words, perfect supplementing ceases to be supplementing at all, it becomes supplanting. The move from supplementing to supplanting is the (il)logical end to the “mad” logic of the supplement (as both internal and external, other and yet almost the same).

The supplement’s danger results from the deficiency of the things-themselves. There is no need to supplement something that is always capable of being fully present in its own plenitude; on the contrary, a supplement’s role is to fill an absence. The things-themselves require supplementation because *repetition produces ideality*.⁹³ Yet, the inherent danger is that the supplement will cease to merely *stand in for* the thing-itself and will come *to be the presence* of the thing-itself, a presence that cannot be accomplished without it. Derrida writes, “[s]omewhere, something can be filled up *of itself*, can accomplish itself, only by allowing itself to be filled through sign and proxy.”⁹⁴ Derrida argues that the metaphysics of presence fears the supplement because it fails to consider what designates the spacing between presentation and re-presentation. It assumes that representation somehow follows from an original presentation of the thing-itself by itself and at the same time points to the restoration of that original presentation. Yet, Derrida asks, how is representation a (dangerous but necessary) supplement for presentation? If the sovereignty of the thing-itself is defined by its “inalienable immediacy of self-possession” wherein it is present to itself in a “moment of impossible representation”, then in order for sovereignty to become ideality (or in order for sovereignty to become sovereignty *over something other than itself*), the thing-itself must persist beyond the immediacy of its self-presence by having recourse to supplemental representation. In other words, the self-presentation of the thing-

⁹² Ibid. 298.

⁹³ Ibid. 289.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 145.

itself is not enough to secure ideality, and therefore, the thing-itself must be re-presented in order for it to be fully realized. By Derrida's analysis, the relationship between the thing-itself and its supplement is inherently dangerous and yet necessary for the metaphysics of presence.

Moreover Derrida argues that the thing-itself *is always already* a supplement. What the metaphysicians fear the most – that the supplement will come to not just represent but to replace the thing-itself – has come to fruition, except that it has *always already* been the case.⁹⁵

Motivated by a fear of the supplement, “one wishes to go back *from the supplement to the source*: [but] one must recognize that there is *a supplement at the source*.”⁹⁶ Just as the process of deconstruction reveals that the being-present of the now moment conforms to the structure of the trace, Derrida writes that, “the indefinite process of supplementarity has always already *infiltrated* presence.”⁹⁷ He continues that the desire for presence is born out of the abyss of indefinite supplementarity, once again reversing the typical metaphysical view that representation, differing, and supplementarity derive from and ultimately point back to the original pure presence of things-themselves. What does it mean for Derrida to say that there is always, already a supplement at the source? Simply what we have already established above, that in Derridean philosophy the source is *différance*.

This fear of the supplement becomes acute in phonocentrism. Phonetic or alphabetic writing, according to phonocentrism, is a supplement for present speech. Written words are merely representations of spoken words that can be repeated without requiring their originator's presence. Writing is inherently dangerous, however, because it threatens to supplant speech

⁹⁵ Derrida remarks later in the text that “absence and the sign always seem to make an apparent, provisional, and derivative notch in the system of first and last presence. They are thought as accidents and not as conditions of the desired presence.” (Ibid. 283).

⁹⁶ Ibid. 304.

⁹⁷ Ibid. 163.

altogether. The very same characteristics that allow writing to act as supplement for living speech – its iterability, repeatability, universality, and independence from its source – also make it the enemy of living speech. The problem for phonocentrists is not just that living speech will no longer be valued or deemed necessary in the wake of writing, but that writing is in fact *inferior* despite its appearance. Writing may have a larger and longer reach than speech, but it is twice removed from the truth of the things-themselves because it is merely the supplement of a supplement (living speech).

V. Conclusion

These three (non)concepts, *différance*, the trace, and the supplement, play a crucial role in Derrida's deconstruction of Platonism. In "Plato's Pharmacy" and "*Khôra*" Derrida is primarily concerned with the irruptive or liminal moments in the dialogues that exceed the logic of the metaphysics of presence. Thus, "Plato's Pharmacy" focuses on how the *pharmakon* as a supplement corrupts the signifier/signified relationship and "*Khôra*" explores how *khôra*, like the trace or *différance*, defies definition and eludes traditional ontology. The presence of these strange concepts in Plato's texts shows the complicated relationship between Plato and postmodernism.⁹⁸ Derrida explicitly reads Plato as the father of the metaphysics of presence and his deconstructions draw on these concepts to critique a Platonist reading of the dialogues. Scholars who write on Plato and Derrida generally split into two groups: either they defend Plato by attacking Derrida's critique and/or by reaffirming the tenets of dogmatic Platonism, or they argue that Plato was a proto-deconstructionist who has been systematically misunderstood by his

⁹⁸ This relationship has become the topic of recent scholarship. Cf. *Postmodern Platos* (Zuckert 1996), *Platonic Legacies* (Sallis 2004), *Questioning Platonism: Continental Interpretations of Plato* (Hyland 2004), *Rhapsody of Philosophy: Dialogues with Plato in Contemporary Thought* (Statkiewicz 2009), *Taking on the Tradition: Jacques Derrida and the Legacies of Deconstruction* (Naas 2003), *Derrida and Antiquity* (ed. Leonard 2010), and *Plato and Postmodernism* (ed. Shankman 2009).

own interpreters. There is perhaps truth in both groups. It can be argued that Plato shares some significant ideas about philosophy with Derrida; yet it is also clear that Plato's dialogues, including the *Timaeus* and *Phaedrus*, do assert something positive about being and knowledge. It is therefore difficult to make the case that Plato was a proto-Derridean. To contribute to this fledgling field, this thesis explores what lies beyond the limits of Derrida's deconstructions. As Chapter Four will argue, there is a significant sense in which Plato's philosophy exceeds both alternatives and can be interpreted as neither Platonist nor Derridean.

CHAPTER TWO: A Critical Reading of “Plato’s Pharmacy” and the *Phaedrus*

I. Deconstruction and the Platonic Text

Derrida’s deconstruction of the *Phaedrus* is controversial within Plato studies and some scholars believe that his reading does not warrant serious attention. This is partly spurred on by the prevalence of the “Derrida myth” which propagates a gross misunderstanding of the Derridean project.⁹⁹ On the other side of the spectrum are scholars like Miriam Leonard who believes that Derrida “has produced some of the most powerful readings of ancient texts in the last fifty years [...] his readings of Plato, Aristotle, and Sophocles again and again bring to light insights ignored by professional scholars in the field.”¹⁰⁰ It is not the purpose of this thesis to defend Derrida against his critics or to promote his work as exceptional, although I do believe that his Platonic deconstructions are worthy of serious attention. I intend to explain the deconstruction in “Plato’s Pharmacy” in order to understand its relationship to the *Phaedrus* and to examine how the text exceeds Derrida’s reading. Derrida demonstrates how the metaphysics of presence undermines itself in the dialogue via a deconstructive critique of the devaluation of writing and praise of dialectical speech. This chapter traces that demonstration by closely following Derrida’s reading and relating it to other scholarly interpretations of the dialogue.

⁹⁹ See Smith, *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory*, for a concise explanation of the need to demythologize Derrida. Smith claims “almost all of the popular appropriations of the lexicon of deconstruction are mis-appropriations” (1).

¹⁰⁰ She continues, “So while Derrida has found himself at the receiving end of the polemics of contemporary ancient philosophers hostile to what they see as the project of deconstruction per se, as a reader of classical texts, paradoxically, Derrida has much in common with the classical scholar. Derrida’s practice of subjecting whole works and especially individual words to obsessive scrutiny is perhaps especially suited to the study of an antiquity whose legacy is so incontrovertibly textual. As he himself has argued, far from wanting to dethrone classical philosophy, Derrida has shown an excessive reverence for its writings [...] Moreover, Derrida’s conviction that reading Plato and Aristotle still matters marks a powerful resistance to the relentlessly presentist preoccupation of most disciplines in the humanities today”. (Leonard, 8-9).

Understanding “Plato’s Pharmacy” is difficult for the uninitiated because Derrida is infamously hard to read. This is largely due to his preference for deconstructing the metaphysics of presence by unraveling the signifier/signified relationship. He writes,

[T]he ‘formal essence’ of the sign can only be determined in terms of presence. One cannot get around that response, except by challenging the very form of the question and beginning to think that the sign is that ill-named ~~thing~~, the only one, that escapes the instituting question of philosophy: ‘what is...?’¹⁰¹

Gayatri Spivak explains that Derrida uses writing *sous rature* (under erasure) when the words or concepts employed are “inaccurate but necessary” and so he includes both the word and its deletion in his text.¹⁰² This method of conveying a meaning that cannot be captured in the repetition of conventional signs was also used by Heidegger and prefigured by Friedrich Nietzsche. While Derrida does not use writing *sous rature* in “Plato’s Pharmacy” the essay is a similar exercise in language straining against itself. Derrida wants to show that although a signifier, like *pharmakon*, is thought to mark the place of an absent signified, it really marks the place of *différance*.

It is important to begin by dispelling a few misconceptions about Derridean deconstruction. Deconstruction is not a method for interpreting philosophy, if this means a set of rules that are followed in a particular order to achieve a particular result. Deconstruction attends to a text’s play of meanings or ‘textuality’, regardless of authorial intention, and brings out the different structures that connect them. It critically examines what governs these structures, which for Derrida is always the logic of the metaphysics of presence, and demonstrates how this logic undermines itself by ultimately indicating that *différance*, not presence and unity, is originary. Derrida remarks that deconstruction happens in the middle voice because texts deconstruct

¹⁰¹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 18-19.

¹⁰² Spivak, “Translator’s Preface”, xiv.

themselves.¹⁰³ The interpreter does not add something to the text when he deconstructs, he is more like a midwife who helps to reveal something already there.¹⁰⁴ Deconstruction is also not merely negative or critical and thus it is not nihilistic or carried out in the name of anarchy. It is destruction with a view towards construction. It destructs dogmatic systems of meaning in order to initiate openness to the other of that system, and to the origin of all system and structure in *différance*, because this will allow for the construction of more ethical systems and institutions.¹⁰⁵ Thus, deconstruction is fundamentally ethico-political because it is a way of engaging texts, practices, and institutions in order to combat the tendency toward totalitarianism, both political and metaphysical. Deconstruction is also fundamentally philosophical. Derrida is not an anti-philosopher and he is not opposed to the practice of philosophy *qua* philosophy. He is opposed to tyranny in philosophy and to the pretense behind the dominant frameworks for meaning it has constructed. His goal is not to do away with meaning and system altogether, that would be chaos, but like a gadfly, to bring to attention again and again the way that meaning is constructed out of difference and deferral. His interpretation of the *Phaedrus* produced in “Plato’s Pharmacy” operates with this spirit.

“Plato’s Pharmacy” begins with a short preface explaining Derrida’s reading strategy. If he is able to produce a deconstructive reading of the *Phaedrus*, and beyond that, of the metaphysics of presence in Plato, then the Preface tells us this is because the nature of a text allows for it. Derrida likens a text to a living being and to a woven tapestry, two images culled

¹⁰³ Smith, 10.

¹⁰⁴ “The deconstructive reader exposes the grammatological structure of the text [i.e. its textuality, its hidden thread, its arche-writing], that its ‘origin’ and its ‘end’ are given over to language in general, by locating the moment in the text which harbors the unbalancing of the equation, the sleight of hand at the limit of a text which cannot be dismissed simply as a contradiction [...] In *La pharmacie de Platon*, it is the double-edged word ‘pharmakon’ as well as the absence of the word ‘pharmakos.’” (Spivak, xlix).

¹⁰⁵ Smith, 10-12.

from Plato's imagination. Reading and interpretation are violent, he claims, because the body of a text is slashed open and engraved into by each "cutting trace, the decision of each reading."¹⁰⁶ Each reading marks out its own boundaries of meaning in the text and these incisions are always *decisions* that exclude part of its textuality. Derrida takes issue with those who believe they can read a text objectively with a passive adherence to its rules. They want "to look at the text without touching it, without laying a hand on the 'object', without risking [...] the addition of some new thread."¹⁰⁷ He argues that no one can master a text – and certainly not prior to reading it – for a text "remains [...] forever imperceptible."¹⁰⁸ Its textuality can never be simply uncovered and made present at once. Nonetheless each reading or interpretation must make incisions in order to reveal some of its hidden threads. In the body of his essay Derrida attempts to read the *Phaedrus* in this way. Hence Derrida claims that the Preface has "already said all we *meant to say*."¹⁰⁹ The rest of "Plato's Pharmacy" is detail work.

II. A Critical Reading of "Plato's Pharmacy" and the *Phaedrus*

Derrida has two major goals in "Plato's Pharmacy". First, he argues that the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus* is grounded by "all the conceptual oppositions of 'Platonism' – here considered the dominant structure of the history of metaphysics."¹¹⁰ He shows that the *Phaedrus* connects writing to the outside, sophistry, patricide, bastard sons, absence, and non-truth, while it connects speech to the inside, philosophy, the king-father, legitimate sons, self-knowledge, presence, and truth. These oppositions inform the dialogue's alleged phonocentrist diatribe

¹⁰⁶ Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 63.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 65.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 149.

against writing. The second goal of “Plato’s Pharmacy” is to show how the critique of writing, and its underlying metaphysical structure, is undermined in the dialogue. Its structure takes form in foundational binary concepts such as inside/outside, presence/absence, and εἶδος/μίμησις, which produce further conceptual pairs like signified/signifier, λόγος/μῦθος, speaking/writing, philosophy/sophistry, and μνήμη/ὑπόμνησις. Derrida’s deconstructive reading of the *Phaedrus* breaks down these oppositional pairs by showing how the logic that held them as opposed is corrupted. The inside becomes indistinguishable from the outside, the signified is just a signifier, philosophy inches ever closer to sophistry, and the eidetic repetition supplements the origin no less than the mimetic one.

“Plato’s Pharmacy” does not have a linear or deductive argument and so this chapter is organized according to three roughly marked themes found in Derrida’s text; myths and the trial of writing, the Socratic critique of writing, and the consequences of Derrida’s deconstruction for Platonist epistemology and metaphysics in the *Phaedrus*.

A. Myths and the Trial of Writing

(i) The Oreithuia Myth and the Khairein

In the first chapter of “Plato’s Pharmacy” Derrida interprets the Oreithuia myth as well as the *khairein* (χαίρειν),¹¹¹ the short dismissal Socrates gives of mythologemes in favour of the pursuit of self-knowledge.¹¹² With the *khairein*, Derrida argues, Socrates accepts “the customary belief about [myths]”, but he recognizes that they cannot help in his quest for self-knowledge.¹¹³ Yet, Socrates spends a large portion of the *Phaedrus* reciting mythical stories. Derrida highlights

¹¹¹ I use Anglicized Greek terms to indicate that they are Derridean concepts such as *khairein*, *pharmakon*, or *khôra*. All other Greek terms are not Anglicized in this text.

¹¹² *Phaedrus* 229c-230a (Trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff).

¹¹³ 230a2.

that Socrates transgresses the *khairain* to tell the myths of the Cicadas and of Theuth both arising in the opening of a question about the status of writing. By contrast, the “*khairain* takes place *in the name of truth*: that is, in the name of knowledge of truth, and, more precisely, of truth in the knowledge of the self.”¹¹⁴ Derrida argues the *khairain* sets up an opposition between myth and truth, and when the question of writing is introduced, Socrates transgresses the *khairain* and turns to myth. This connects writing, μῦθος, and nontruth, which are opposed to self-knowledge, λόγος, and truth. Through the *khairain* and its transgression, Derrida writes, “the link between writing and myth becomes clearer, as does its opposition to knowledge, notably the knowledge one seeks in oneself, by oneself.”¹¹⁵

Nonetheless this opposition is also problematic. How is it, Derrida asks, that the *truth* about writing must be left up to myth? If writing and myth are useless for self-knowledge, then why does Socrates bother discussing them at all? Stranger still, Socrates’ imperative to pursue self-knowledge itself derives from written tradition, τό Δελφικός γράμμα. Likewise, the definition of writing produced later in the *Phaedrus*, that writing is to repeat without knowing, is formulated out of traditional sayings. Derrida summarizes the problematic thusly,

[H]aving just repeated without knowing that writing consists of repeating without knowing [“I can tell you what I have heard of the ancients, though they alone know the truth”], Socrates goes on to base the demonstration of his indictment, of his *logos*, upon the premises of the *akoe*, upon structures that are readable through a fabulous genealogy of writing.¹¹⁶

Socrates connects writing with one side of a series of opposing concepts, like inside/outside, μνήμη/ὑπόμνησις, εἶδος/μίμησις, and legitimate son/bastard son, on the basis of structures that derive from the ‘bad’ side of these oppositions, i.e. from myths and traditional sayings that are

¹¹⁴ Derrida, 67-69.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 74.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 75. Brackets are my addition from *Phaedrus* 274c1-3.

repeated without knowledge of their truth. Derrida thus explores the complicity between the mythemes and philosophemes that operate in the *Phaedrus* in order to demonstrate how the philosophical critique of writing cannot do without the very things it criticizes.

That the *khairain* occurs in conjunction with the Oreithuia myth is no coincidence. For Derrida, the myth illustrates the opposition between writing and self-knowledge. In the myth Pharmakeia plays with Oreithuia who then dies and is carried off by Boreas.¹¹⁷ Derrida interprets this as, Pharmakeia, “a common noun signifying the administration of the *pharmakon*, the drug” who through her games “has dragged down to death a virginal purity and an unpenetrated interior.”¹¹⁸ Read this way, this short myth illustrates the danger of using a *pharmakon* like writing. Death, externality, and the *pharmakon* are also linked elsewhere in the *Phaedrus*. King Thamus states that the *pharmakon*, writing, will damage internal living memory and instead promote mere reminding or a dead repetition. When writing supplements living memory (μνήμη) by seducing the student with “dead and rigid knowledge shut up in *biblia*”, it threatens the possibilities for dialectics and philosophy, i.e. for self-knowledge.¹¹⁹ Derrida believes this is prefigured by the Oreithuia myth where Socrates warns Phaedrus that those seduced into play with Pharmakeia are doomed to Oreithuia’s fate.¹²⁰

Derrida’s reading of the myth responds to a particular tradition of Platonism that demands a strict distinction between μῦθος and λόγος. W. Nestle describes the distinction as “[μῦθος] is imagistic and involuntary, and creates and forms on the basis of the unconscious, while [λόγος] is

¹¹⁷ *Phaedrus* 229c4f.

¹¹⁸ Derrida, 70.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* 73.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* Hence Derrida reads Socrates’ addition of Pharmakeia as an “hors d’oeuvre”. It is a little taste of the argument against writing, made explicit in the Theuth myth and subsequent conversation.

conceptual and intentional, and analyses and synthesizes by means of consciousness.”¹²¹ Myths are also often associated with a particular culture, whereas λόγος is considered objective, timeless, and placeless. Scores of books and articles like Nestle’s exist about the intellectual turn of 5th century Athens, the move from μῦθος to λόγος, or from irrationality to rationality.¹²² While the precise relationship between μῦθος and λόγος can be debated, many Platonists agree that μῦθος is subsumed within λόγος as an inferior form of thought. This assumes that the meaning derived from myths and the meaning derived from reasoned accounts is the same in essence, there is only one kind of truth, but different in form: myth is confused and elementary and λόγος is clear and fully developed. As learning progresses, the need to defer to myths lessens. Thus, Plato defers to myth only out of pedagogical necessity.¹²³ This idea finds purchase in the dialogues. In the *Republic* μῦθος is defined as a type of false λόγος that “contains some truth” and is useful for teaching children.¹²⁴ It is this view of the relationship between μῦθος and λόγος that Derrida deconstructs. For here myth has a puzzling truth status; it is untrue, as compared to the truth of a λόγος, but it is not an outright falsehood. Moreover, it is difficult to seamlessly import this view into Platonic philosophy. Take, for example, this explanation from W.K.C. Guthrie,

As dialectic progresses, the field of mythical expression is reduced, and the philosopher’s aim is to reduce it as far as possible; but unlike his greatest pupil he [Plato] would never deny that there are some truths, and those the greatest, which can never be demonstrated by the methods of dialectical reasoning.¹²⁵

¹²¹ Qtd in Most, “From Logos to Mythos,” 27.

¹²² This polemic has been challenged recently. See especially Buxton *From Myth to Reason?: Studies in the Development of Greek Thought* and Morgan *Myth & Philosophy: From the Presocratics to Plato*.

¹²³ Consider this excerpt from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*’s entry on Plato’s Myths, “But since others may sometimes not follow his arguments, Plato is ready to provide whatever it takes – an image, a simile, or a myth – that will help them grasp what the argument failed to tell them.” (Partenie 2011).

¹²⁴ *Republic*, II, 376ef.

¹²⁵ Guthrie, *vol IV*, 365.

Guthrie seems to hold at once the conviction that a philosopher's goal is to convert μῦθος to λόγος by practicing dialectics and that Plato believed the greatest truths cannot be demonstrated through reason. This tension exists for Platonism because many central Platonist doctrines derive from Platonic myths, not dialectical conversations. At the same time, scholars do not want to abandon the idea that one moves from μῦθος to λόγος as the capacity for philosophical reasoning progresses. How then can μῦθος house truths, the *greatest* truths, that λόγος cannot? More importantly, if this is true *for Plato*, then what does this say about the highest goals of Platonic philosophy?

Keeping this short excursus in mind, we turn back to “Plato’s Pharmacy” and ask if Derrida is justified in his claim that Socrates dismisses all μῦθος from his pursuit of self-knowledge. Derrida assumes that Socrates privileges λόγος over μῦθος. Yet the *Phaedrus* makes it clear that this cannot be the case. Through the Oreithuia/*khairein* episode Socrates expresses his disdain for rational explanations of traditional myths, the kind that would explain mythic stories in materialist terms. He certainly does not dismiss all myths from his vocation, and uses them frequently in the remaining dialogue. This passage is very important for understanding the complex relationship between myths and philosophy in the *Phaedrus*. Platonists, however, have not given it much notice.¹²⁶ Guthrie’s commentary gives only a short summary of the *khairein*

¹²⁶ Of the many Platonic myths, the Phaedrean myths and in particular the prologue’s treatment of myth, have been given precious little attention [Cf. The absence of any discussion in Partenie *Plato’s Myths* and Stewart *The Myths of Plato*]. Those that do offer commentary do not connect this episode with the greater themes of the dialogue or draw out its implications for the place of myth in Platonic philosophy. See for example, Zaslavsky *Platonic Myth and Platonic Writing*; Thompson *The Phaedrus of Plato*; Guthrie *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vols IV and V; Nicholson *Plato’s Phaedrus: The Philosophy of Love*; De Vries *A Commentary on the Phaedrus of Plato*; and Pepin *Mythe et Allégorie: les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes*.

and the myth of Oreithuia accompanied by no interpretation.¹²⁷ Similarly, Hackforth offers: “If the Boreas myth episode has any organic significance, I would suggest that it is inserted in order to preclude any questions that might arise later on about the local divinities who inspire Socrates.”¹²⁸ Given the description of Platonist hermeneutics in Chapter One it is understandably difficult to locate readings that find philosophical significance in the dialogue’s opening scene.

In more contemporary Plato scholarship, and especially those scholars who uphold the tenants of New Wave interpretation, there is some discussion of the *khairain* and Socrates’ retelling of the Oreithuia myth. The general consensus, as above, is that in the *khairain* Socrates dismisses those fashionable intellectuals who give materialistic explanations of traditional myths, and that Socrates’ retelling of the Oreithuia myth is an example of one. Instead of Oreithuia, the nymph who is raped by Boreas, she is simply a young virgin, frolicking with her friend Pharmakeia, when she is blown off of the rocks by the Boreas wind and dies.¹²⁹ Unlike Derrida, however, no one sees significance in Socrates’ inclusion of Pharmakeia or connects the myth to the critique of writing as *pharmakon*.¹³⁰ Regardless of these omissions, I believe that this interpretation of the *khairain* is more true to the spirit of the text than Derrida’s. Socrates is not claiming that he has no time for all μῦθος, he claims that he has no time for overly rationalistic materialism, the kind that Phaedrus seems drawn to both here and in the *Symposium*. More importantly, it is clear that μῦθος is not alien to Socrates’ peculiar brand of philosophy, expressed

127 Guthrie’s summary: “As they walk along by the Ilissus Ph. remembers that the rape of Oreithyia by Boreas is supposed to have occurred in the neighbourhood, and ask S. if he believes the story. S. replies that he has no time for the fashionable pursuit of allegorizing myths away. He prefers to accept them, and get on with the more immediate business of learning to know himself.” (Guthrie, 399).

¹²⁸ Hackforth, *Plato’s Phaedrus*, 26.

¹²⁹ *Phaedrus* 229c4-d5.

¹³⁰ Farness in *Missing Socrates: Problems of Plato’s Writing* mentions Derrida’s analysis of Pharmakeia but does not expand on it. Yunis, merely remarks “Φαρμακεία: otherwise unknown, Pharmaceia must have belonged to the story in Plato’s day as a playmate of Oreithyia” (*Phaedrus*, 23). Zuckert mentions the inclusion of Pharmakeia but does not analyze it (*Plato’s Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues*, 2009).

here as knowledge of one's own soul. In fact, Socrates formulates his quest to know himself through a reference to another mythic character, Typhon.¹³¹ For Socrates, philosophy is very much caught up with myth, just not with determining whether myths are factually or historically true. "Plato's Pharmacy" only reveals a dogmatic Platonist reading of this scene that can be deconstructed. Derrida might be aware that Socrates did not dismiss all μῦθος with the *khairain*, but he is more interested in the fact that the metaphysics of presence should demand that Socrates do so because of the Platonist understanding of the λόγος/μῦθος binary.

Socrates clearly does not abide by this binary; he rarely gives rational accounts of philosophical truths and yet frequently employs myths. Plato in the *Phaedrus* does not rigorously uphold a distinction between λόγος and μῦθος either.¹³² C. Griswold Jr. makes a point of referencing each line in the *Phaedrus* where "the distinction logos/mythos is not absolute either substantively or terminologically."¹³³ The result is a clear picture of the extraordinary lack of rigour with which Plato uses these two supposedly opposed concepts. Socrates' first speech and the Palinode are interchangeably referred to as μῦθος or λόγος whereas Lysias' speech is always

¹³¹ *Phaedrus* 230a1-4.

¹³² This slippage also occurs elsewhere in the corpus. P. Murray highlights the discrepancy between the 'true story' of the afterlife in the *Gorgias* and the 'myth' of the afterlife in the *Phaedo*. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates says, "Listen, then... to a very fine story, which will, I suppose seem to be myth [μῦθον] to you, but is fact [λόγον] to me; what I'm going to tell you I tell you as the truth" (523a). Socrates seems here to define myth as a false story, which is explicitly contrasted with a true story. Yet, the subsequent λόγον is about the afterlife, which he attributes to an unnamed source (524a8-b1), and its truth is obviously unverifiable. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates changes his tune. In reference to his story of the afterlife, which he heard from another unnamed source (108c7-8), he says, "Of course, no reasonable man ought to insist that things are exactly as I have described them. But that either this or something very like it is true of our souls [...] is both a reasonable contention and a belief worth risking [...] that is why I have already drawn out my tale [μῦθον] for so long" (114d). Here the truth of the story does not require that it be defined as a λόγον, it is still a myth. Murray asks, "What, after all, is the difference between the *logos* of the *Gorgias* and the *muthos* of the *Phaedo*? It is as if Plato sets up a distinction between *muthos* and *logos* only to confound it [...] the fact that an eschatological myth can be labeled as *logos* in one dialogue and *muthos* in another suggests that the meanings attached to these words depend to a large extent on context." ("What is a Muthos for Plato?," 256-7).

¹³³ Griswold Jr., *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, 139.

referred to as a λόγος.¹³⁴ The Theuth myth is introduced as a λόγος (275b4) even though “it bears all the traditional markings of a myth” and the Cicadas myth is not referred to as a λόγος or a μῦθος but is simply introduced by “λέγεται” (259b6). It is no wonder that Murray writes, “[i]f we look in Plato’s work for a consistent distinction between *muthos* (myth) and *logos* (reason), let alone a development from one to the other, we look in vain.”¹³⁵ Derrida ignores this textual evidence when he constructs his interpretation of Socrates as a philosopher who opposes μῦθος and λόγος, in order that he may deconstruct a dogmatically Platonist interpretation of the dialogue.

One could argue the *khairain* carries great significance especially because the *Phaedrus* does not operate with these binaries. Since Socrates does not dismiss all μῦθος in favour of λόγος, because he continues to use myths in his conversation with Phaedrus, and because Plato vacillates between the two terms, Socrates’ disdain for rational, materialistic explanations of traditional myths gives us insight into his complicated relationship to both myth and truth. This is vastly more interesting than a Socrates who would not bother with μῦθος at all. Many readings of the *Phaedrus* draw great significance from the *khairain* especially because it distinguishes between a kind of thinking that is not helpful for philosophy, alternatively described as mechanistic, materialist, or rationalist, and the kind of thinking that is helpful, *viz.* thinking about what kind of being one is. The differences in scholars’ readings turn on the way in which they conceive of the Socratic pursuit of truth. Zuckert claims that Socrates dismisses natural history and the study of physical phenomena in his youth, and in the *Phaedrus* focuses on more fruitful

¹³⁴ Ibid. Socrates’ first speech: referred to as a μῦθος at 237a9, 241e8, 243a4, and referred to as λόγος at 241d3, 242e3, 243c2, 244a1, 264e7, 265c6, 265d7, 265e3, 266a3. Socrates refers to his Palinode as a μῦθος at 253c7 and 265c1 and as a λόγος at 252b2, 265b8, c6, d7, 33, 264e7, and 266a3.

¹³⁵ Murray, 261.

topics for self-knowledge like other human beings.¹³⁶ Griswold Jr.'s *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus* reads the entire dialogue through this passage. He argues that the *khairain* is instructional in that it helps us understand what kinds of accounts are not useful for self-knowledge. Socrates' demythologization of the Oreithuia story renders it useless for self-knowledge, as would any other reduction of myth to causal explanations of natural phenomena, because it removes the human element. Socrates accepts the common understanding of myths precisely because they give a glimpse into the self-understanding of a people, which he can learn from.¹³⁷ Nussbaum remarks on the difference between Socrates' attitude toward myth and mania in the *Phaedrus* and in the *Republic*. She concludes that the *khairain* introduces a significant change in how philosophy is viewed in the dialogues, it is no longer simply hostile to myth and poetry, instead philosophy "is now permitted to be an inspired, manic, Muse-loving activity". This does not, however, dampen Plato's hostility to non-philosophic poets.¹³⁸ Nicholson follows Griswold and claims that Socrates does not find rationalizations of myths helpful for the pursuit of self-knowledge because they do not give him any insight into the soul. He adds, along with Nussbaum, that the *khairain's* permissiveness marks a departure from the Socrates of the *Republic* and the *Euthyphro* and concludes that this shows a less stringent standard of purity on Plato's part.¹³⁹ The plentitude of philosophically significant interpretations that can be wrought from the *khairain* and the Oreithuia myth when it is not read as a simple dismissal of μῦθος in

¹³⁶ Zuckert, 305-7.

¹³⁷ Griswold, 36-9.

¹³⁸ Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 224-25. Nussbaum also remarks that "it is truly entertaining to observe the strategies devised by commentators to accommodate this passage to the views of the Republic" and references the debate between Thomson and Tate over whether the Oreithuia myth was "offensive" or not.

¹³⁹ Nicholson, 23-4.

favour of λόγος, demonstrate the scope of potential meaning lost when Platonist logic is read too deeply into the dialogue.

Nevertheless, there is something to be learned from Derrida's deconstruction. To the best of my knowledge Derrida is alone in his belief that Socrates' retelling of the Oreithuia myth is more than a mere example. For Derrida, Socrates' myth warns of the dangers of writing before they are made explicit. Derrida sees prefigured in the Oreithuia myth the conceptual connection Platonism draws between the *pharmakon* and writing, untruth, outside, death, and μῦθος which are opposed to speaking, truth, inside, life, and λόγος. Interestingly, the injection of Pharmakeia into the myth is not the only time that Socrates has referenced the administering of the *pharmakon* in a discussion about the problematic truth status of myth.¹⁴⁰ In Book II of the *Republic*, Socrates and Adeimantus are determining what kind of myths they should let into their ideal city. Socrates has just explained that mythic stories are powerful pedagogical tools for children and can help to shape their moral character, whether or not they are factually true. Socrates asks when "falsehood in words" (ἐν τοῖς λόγοις ψεῦδος) becomes "useful" (χρήσιμον)? Is it not, "when any of those whom we call friends owing to madness or folly attempts to do some wrong, does it not then become useful to avert the evil – as a medicine [φάρμακον]?"¹⁴¹ Once again Socrates connects myth, untruth, and the *pharmakon*, but unlike in the *Phaedrus*, here they serve to avert wrongdoing and are good for the soul. Derrida's deconstruction of the *Phaedrus* turns on the essential ambiguity of *pharmakon*, at once a poison and a medicine, and he sees this as a critique of the Platonist position. Yet, the same essential ambiguity is explicitly in Plato's texts, at least if one compares the *Phaedrus* and *Republic*. Derrida reads the *khairain* in this strict

¹⁴⁰ Derrida does not mention this connection in "Plato's Pharmacy".

¹⁴¹ *Republic*, II, 382c.

Platonist way because it helps him reveal the internal problems inherent in Platonism. Plato scholars benefit from the fact that Derrida's critique also highlights the problematic relationship between Platonism and the Platonic dialogues themselves.

(ii) *The Myth of Theuth and the Trial of Writing*

The myth of Theuth comes on the scene late in the *Phaedrus* and its length pales in comparison to the grand Palinode that precedes it. Yet for Derrida it is the central myth of the *Phaedrus* because “this time it is without indirection, without hidden mediation, without secret argumentation, that writing is proposed, presented, and asserted as a *pharmakon*.”¹⁴² The myth is introduced when Socrates and Phaedrus are addressing the difference between proper and improper writing. To answer this question, Socrates relates a story he has “heard of the ancients” that he does not know the truth of.¹⁴³ Long ago in Egypt the ancient god Theuth went to the King of the gods, Thamus, to present his inventions. Theuth invented numbers, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, draughts and dice, and “above all else” γράμματα (letters or writings).¹⁴⁴ When the question of the value of γράμματα arose, Theuth told the King that it “will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memory; for it is a potion [φάρμακον] of memory [μνήμης] and wisdom [σοφίας].”¹⁴⁵ King Thamus corrected Theuth's valuation of writing and proclaimed it “a potion [φάρμακον] not of memory, but of reminding [ὑπομνήσεως]” that offers “the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom [σοφίας δὲ τοῖς μαθηταῖς δόξαν].” Those who only learn from

¹⁴² Derrida, “Plato's Pharmacy,” 74.

¹⁴³ *Phaedrus* 274c.

¹⁴⁴ 274d1f.

¹⁴⁵ 274e3-5.

writings will therefore be “hard to get along with.”¹⁴⁶ The myth ends after the pronouncement of Thamus and Theuth does not give a reply.

Derrida spends three chapters of “Plato’s Pharmacy” reading the Theuth myth and the trial of writing wherein he interprets everything from the correspondence between the Thoth/Theuth figure in Egyptian mythology and his importation into the Platonic text, to the epistemological significance of the trial of writing and its relationship to sophism, while constantly relating his reading back to the logic underlying the metaphysics of presence. What emerges is a complex look at the Platonic problematic of writing that produces the deconstruction of inside/outside, presence/absence, presentation/representation, μνήμη/ὑπόμνησις, and εἶδος/μίμησις, which cause the further breakdown of signified/signifier, truth/untruth, philosopher/sophist, dialectics/sophistics, and speaking/writing.

Derrida analyzes the mythemes that Plato imports into the *Phaedrus* and their connection to the philosophemes of the metaphysics of presence. He intends “to sow the idea that the spontaneity, freedom, and fantasy attributed to Plato in his legend of Theuth were actually supervised and limited by rigorous necessities.”¹⁴⁷ Derrida tries to demonstrate that there is a philosophical necessity underlying Plato’s inclusion of the myth and that understanding this necessity is essential for undermining the Platonist reading of the text, which ignores this significance entirely. For example, Hackforth writes:

The inventor of writing in Greek legend was Prometheus; but he was unsuitable for Plato’s purpose, since it would have been difficult to make anyone play against him the part that Thamus plays against Theuth. And in any case it was natural enough for Plato to go to Egypt for a tale of prehistory, just as in a later dialogue he goes to an Egyptian priest for his story of Atlantis.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ 275a8-10.

¹⁴⁷ Derrida, 85.

¹⁴⁸ Hackforth, 157.

Hackforth does not explain *why* Plato deemed it necessary to have the god of writing put his invention on trial before a King. Moreover, he does not attempt to interpret the details of the Theuth Myth and its characters. In contrast, Derrida examines the relationship between Plato's Theuth and his philosophy, or in other words, the structural relationship between the mythemes and philosophemes in the Platonic text. Derrida's deconstruction of the Theuth myth and trial of writing attempts to show how these structures are determined by the main premises of the metaphysics of presence, *viz.* that Being is presence and that true knowledge occurs only when beings are brought to presence in the soul.

Although Plato does not give an explicit description of Theuth's character, the situations he is brought into and the concepts and themes discussed all "organize the features of a strongly marked figure."¹⁴⁹ What is much more than mere chance or imagination for Derrida is the exact fit between the mythemes associated with Theuth and "the systematic arrangement of Plato's philosophemes."¹⁵⁰ Derrida argues that the mythemes and philosophemes are organized according to the law of non-contradiction and the conceptual binaries it produces.¹⁵¹ According to the structural law of Platonism, the ultimate origin and cause of being is represented by the paternal position. Derrida remarks that *πατήρ* means father, chief, capital, and good. In the Theuth Myth, King Thamus represents the origin and occupies the highest position in the mythical cosmos as king of the gods. Thamus alone has the force to determine the value of Theuth's invention even though Thamus himself does not write because he has no need for it. "He speaks, he says, he dictates, and his word suffices" and hence Socrates' myth ends with the

¹⁴⁹ Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 86.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Such as; speech/writing, life/death, father/son, master/servant, first/second, legitimate son/ orphaned bastard, soul/body, inside/outside, good/evil, seriousness/play, day/night, and sun/moon. (*Ibid.* 85).

pronouncement of the King, there is no need to hear any more and Theuth is not afforded a rebuttal.¹⁵² Thus the *πατήρ* is also connected to speech and mastery. In the myth, Thamus determines definitions and essences, or in other words, he decides the truth of beings. Similarly, the *Republic* claims that the Good bestows being on the other Ideas and renders them intelligible.¹⁵³ The *πατήρ*, in Plato's use of mythemes and philosophemes, introduces being and truth into the world through the exercise of his/its power. In the *Republic* this power is analogous to the sun's life giving light, in the *Phaedrus* this power is expressed through the sovereign speech of the king of the gods. Derrida remarks on the exceptional permanence of this Platonic schema that "assigns the origin and power of speech, precisely of *logos*, to the paternal position."¹⁵⁴ This structural constraint is an aspect of Platonism that came to define Western metaphysical and theological thought for millennia.

The structural correspondence of mythemes and philosophemes defines the relationship between King Thamus and Theuth and the relationship between the things-themselves and their images.¹⁵⁵ For Derrida this relationship is violent because Theuth is patricidal and wants to supplant the King.¹⁵⁶ This is not immediately clear in the *Phaedrus*; Theuth does not, after all, react to Thamus' damning pronouncement in a murderous rage. But he does not have to. Socrates clearly tells the story from a world in possession of writing. Thus, it is Theuth's invention that supplants the King. In inventing writing, a supplement for the living presence of speech, Theuth commits patricide. The written word, orphaned and cut off from its own father, living *λόγος* in

¹⁵² Ibid. 76.

¹⁵³ *Republic* 509b.

¹⁵⁴ Derrida, 76.

¹⁵⁵ Also the relationship between presentation and representation, signified and signifier, same and other, original and copy, and unity and difference.

¹⁵⁶ "His function is precisely to work at the subversive dislocation of identity in general, starting with theological regality." (Ibid. 86).

the soul, will come to substitute for and ultimately supplant the father of living λόγος, who is the Πατήρ-King-Father-Good, i.e. the origin of truth and being. Theuth's patricide is thus a mythical counterpart to writing's destruction of μνήμη, and consequently ἐπιστήμη for phonocentrism. Likewise, it represents the opening of the possibility for the threat that rhetoric and the sophists pose to philosophy because they are content to operate on the level of signification, opinion, and image.¹⁵⁷ In other words they exploit man's ability to mistake mere images or reminders for the things-themselves. Theuth's relationship with Thamus represents the potentially violent, but necessary, relationship between μνήμη and ὑπόμνησις, philosophy and sophistry, the things-themselves and their images, or between the presence of beings and those things that denote their absent presence. In other words, Theuth relates to Thamus (and writing to speech, and ὑπόμνησις to μνήμη, etc.) in the way that the Derridean supplement relates to the thing it stands for.

Curiously Socrates mentions Theuth in another dialogue. In the *Philebus* Socrates also refers to Theuth in his capacity as inventor of γράμματα. Socrates helps Philebus and Protarchus understand how to deal with the "one-and-many problem" using the common understanding of letters as an illustration.¹⁵⁸ Theuth, Socrates says, was the first to discern differences in unlimited φωνή; he divided up the unity of sound into its constituent parts, represented by letters. Taken together, these letters form a "bond of unity" that unites all sounds into one, except the unity is no longer unlimited because it has been meticulously differentiated and distinguished.¹⁵⁹ Derrida

¹⁵⁷ Derrida does not explicitly draw out all of these parallels. Nonetheless his analysis of the correspondence of mythemes and philosophemes obviously opens the door for this kind of reading. While "Plato's Pharmacy" has been criticized for being largely extraneous to the meaning of the dialogue (Cf. Cook "Dialectic, Irony, and Myth in Plato's *Phaedrus*"), I believe that Derrida's analysis of the mythemes inherent in the Theuth Myth connects explicitly with the major themes of the dialogue, as I hope this section demonstrates.

¹⁵⁸ *Philebus* 17d9 (Trans. Dorothea Frede).

¹⁵⁹ 18b4-d2.

remarks that in the *Philebus*, Theuth is “the author of difference: of differentiation within language” a descriptor that holds great significance for the *Phaedrus* as well.¹⁶⁰

This is the extent of what the Platonic corpus offers explicitly on Theuth and so Derrida moves to Egyptian mythology to continue enumerating Theuth’s/Thoths traits. Derrida reconstitutes the structural resemblance between the mythical god of writing and Platonist philosophy partly because it corrupts the opposition between μῦθος and λόγος. We have already shown that the *Phaedrus* corrupts this opposition, but Derrida wants to demonstrate that the extraordinary resemblance between the traits of the god of writing in Egyptian mythology and the role of writing in Platonism points to a deep complicity between these two modes of thought. So deep, in fact, that detailing Thoth’s traits helps us better understand the polemic against writing in Platonism. In the various cycles of Egyptian mythology Thoth is always opposed to his other; father, sun, life, speech, or origin, but he also always represents, supplements, and supplants his other.¹⁶¹ Lest we believe that Derrida’s analysis has gone too far a field from the *Phaedrus*, it is pertinent to remind ourselves that Plato introduced the Egyptian god of writing into his dialogues, twice. Derrida is merely drawing out the full force of that importation.

In Egyptian mythology Thoth, the god of writing, is son of the god-king Ammon-Ra.¹⁶² Derrida notes that Ammon is the Egyptian term for “the hidden” and Ra refers to the sun. Ammon-Ra creates through the force of his voice. The traits of the ultimate πατήρ should be familiar to us, as Derrida notes, “once again we encounter here a hidden sun, the father of all

¹⁶⁰ Derrida, 89.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. 92-3.

¹⁶² Whom Socrates calls Thamus in his myth, “Now the King of all Egypt at that time was the god Thamus [...] and they call the god himself Ammon” (*Phaedrus* 274d3-5).

things, letting himself be represented by speech.”¹⁶³ Thoth is the inventor of writing and the divine secretary but he is only able to use words that have already been thought. “Language, of which he is depositary and secretary, can thus only represent, so as to transmit the message, an already formed divine thought, a fixed design.”¹⁶⁴ Thoth is sometimes associated with the spoken word but only in his capacity as author of difference in language and the plurality of spoken languages on earth. The surface parallels with the *Philebus* and the *Phaedrus* are immediately apparent.

In Egyptian mythology Thoth, the god of the passage between opposites, is a supplement for the king of the gods. For example, he came to be the moon as a replacement for the absent sun god, Ammon-Ra.¹⁶⁵ In other cycles of Egyptian mythology Thoth participates in conspiracies to usurp the throne. In the Osiris cycle, he acts as a “god-doctor-pharmacist-magician” and helps heal both sides of the battle for the throne. Later, he becomes the scribe and bookkeeper of the new king Osiris. Thoth is “master of divine words” and his act of representing the presence of divine speech becomes at the same time an act of supplanting divine speech. Osiris is ever accompanied by Thoth, it is Thoth who inscribes the name of the King in the royal intitulation, Thoth who records the judgements of the dead, Thoth who records history itself, counts out the lives of gods and men, and organizes death. Derrida remarks that Thoth “differs from speech or divine light only as the revealer from the revealed. Barely.”¹⁶⁶ By making himself a supplement for the King, Thoth is also perfectly suited to appropriate his power. Thoth, the other of the sun, father, life, speech, and origin, becomes the moon, helps overthrow his father, supplements for

¹⁶³ Derrida, 87.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. 88.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. 89.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 90.

the new King's creative speech, becomes the god of death, and ultimately becomes the origin of life and speech. All of these traits attributed to Thoth in Egyptian mythology pass easily into Platonist philosophy because they share an "original kind of logic." As Derrida writes, "Thoth extends or opposes by repeating or replacing" and so too, we are told in the *Phaedrus*, does writing.¹⁶⁷

Derrida concludes that Thoth's traits do not comprise an identity as it is understood by the metaphysics of presence. He takes shape in opposition to his other, an other that he comes to supplant, and in that way his very identity opposes itself.

In distinguishing himself from his opposite, Thoth also imitates it, becomes its sign and representative, obeys it and *conforms* to it, replaces it, by violence if need be. He is thus the father's other, the father, and the subversive movement of replacement [...] He cannot be assigned a fixed spot in the play of differences.¹⁶⁸

Thoth is never present as a being-itself because he is always being otherwise and this unstable ambiguity is dangerous to the unified power of the King. Having established the traits of Thoth/Theuth imported from Egyptian mythology into the Platonic text, Derrida turns directly to writing as *pharmakon* in the *Phaedrus* and reveals how it operates with the same logical structure.

B. The Socratic Critique of Writing

As G.R.F. Ferrari remarks, the *Phaedrus*' critique of writing has implications for Platonic philosophy as a whole because it appears to devalue all writing, including philosophical writing.¹⁶⁹ The critique informs how we view the dialogues in relation to the historical Socrates' strictly oral philosophy and the oral teachings of the Academy. Thus, it bears heavily on our view

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 92.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. 93.

¹⁶⁹ Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus*, 204.

of Platonic pedagogy. Moreover, if the *Phaedrus* devalues all writing in favour of speech, this tells us something about how Plato understands the objects of knowledge and their acquisition. If knowledge is the truth about what is, and the highest knowledge the truth about the things-themselves, then how must we characterize the things-themselves such that man is incapable of writing this truth down? Alternatively, if Socrates *were not* devaluing all writing in favour of speech, how would this change the answers to the preceding questions? How we interpret the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus* directly affects our understanding of Platonic epistemology, ontology, and metaphysics. By deconstructing writing as *pharmakon*, Derrida's reading reveals the underlying assumptions that he believes inform Socrates' phonocentrism. In order to understand Derrida's interpretation, we must first summarize Socrates' critique, examine representative interpretations, and then review Derrida's deconstruction.

(i) Socrates' critique of writing (274b – 279b)

The critique of writing occurs just after Socrates explains to Phaedrus that the master rhetorician must also be a dialectician. With this conclusion, Socrates directs the conversation to how one could use words in a way that pleases the gods.¹⁷⁰ The myth of Theuth and the conversation that follows supposedly answer this question. Socrates gives his support for King Thamus' point in two forms, as an analogy between writing and painting and by contrasting phonetic writing with 'writing' in the soul. Socrates agrees that writing functions only "to remind him who knows the matter about which they are written."¹⁷¹ Writing is analogous to painting in that it is only a dead representation of live beings. As images, paintings are impoverished and can only point to the fullness of that which they represent. Likewise, Socrates tells Phaedrus written

¹⁷⁰ *Phaedrus* 273d-274b.

¹⁷¹ 275d1f.

words only point beyond themselves, to the intelligent speech that they are images of. Taken on their own writings cannot produce genuine knowledge in the soul of a reader who does not already know the things that they signify. Writings in-themselves easily fail to convey truth and knowledge because they can only endlessly repeat the same thing even if they are misinterpreted. Thus, the essential problem with the written word is that it is so easily separated from its source. It is like an orphan and “when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself.”¹⁷² This tells us that *ὑπόμνησις* on its own is not sufficient for knowledge – reminding only has value to those who already know the truth.

Next Socrates contrasts writing, the bastard son, with the legitimate son, *viz.* the word that is written in the soul. Writing in the soul is begotten legitimately because it is “written with intelligence in the mind of the learner” and is “the living and breathing word of him who knows.”¹⁷³ The best medium for truth are living words in the soul because they can take root and grow to bear the fruit of knowledge. They fulfill the two functions that writing fails at; they are able to defend themselves by argument and can teach others. So, Socrates concludes, the wise man who “has knowledge of the just and the good and beautiful” will have the sense to plant these “seeds” in the best soil, i.e. he will speak them so that they may continue to grow in his own soul and may take root in another’s. If he does plant a garden of letters (i.e. write), then he will only do so in the spirit fitting the medium, with amusement.¹⁷⁴ A nobler use of his time, however, would be to engage in serious discourse by employing “the dialectic science” (τῆ διαλεκτικῆ τέχνη) with other suitable souls. Continuing the process of dialectical conversation

¹⁷² 275e8-10.

¹⁷³ 276a6f.

¹⁷⁴ 276c5-d10.

allows knowledge to grow in the participants' souls and this will make them happy "to the farthest possible limit of human happiness."¹⁷⁵

After summarizing their findings, Socrates reiterates his position on writing. Writing is not inherently bad, it is disgraceful only if one believes that the text "possesses great certainty and clearness" whereas it is appropriate if one understands that in it "there is necessarily much that is playful" and that even the best writings "only serve to remind us of what we know."¹⁷⁶ Therefore, Phaedrus and Socrates should pray to become the kind of men who recognize these truths and who use words in this noble and legitimate manner. Phaedrus agrees that this is what he prays for, but we should remain skeptical that he makes this statement in earnest. Plato leaves Phaedrus' status at the end of the dialogue ambiguous and I do not think it is possible to confirm absolutely that he understands the distinction Socrates draws between the aims of philosophy and those of rhetoric.¹⁷⁷ The dialogue concludes with Socrates and Phaedrus promising to carry the lessons they learned to the orators, poets, rhetoricians, and speechwriters. Socrates offers a prayer to Pan and the two men leave.

(ii) *Interpretations of the Critique of Writing*

This survey uses Ferrari's schema in *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus* of the three common kinds of interpretation of the critique of writing, the standard, the

¹⁷⁵ 276e-277a.

¹⁷⁶ 278a-b.

¹⁷⁷ Compare, for example, the end of the *Phaedrus* with the end of the *Lysis*. In the *Phaedrus*, Phaedrus says, "Let me also share in this prayer; for friends have all things in common" and Socrates simply replies "Let us go" (279c). At the end of the *Lysis* (where one of the definitions of friends is those who share everything in common) Socrates does not hesitate to say that he and the boys are friends even though they have failed to define friendship (223a). *Lysis* and *Menexenus*, by engaging in dialectical conversation with Socrates, have become his friend. Phaedrus, on the other hand, does not get an answer one way or the other from Socrates about their friendship. This, possibly, shows that my doubt is correct and either Plato is trying to hint that Phaedrus does not learn and thus does not genuinely engage in dialectic with Socrates or, at least, that the dialogue leaves this as an open question.

ironic, and the Derridean. The standard interpretation reads the *Phaedrus* as a genuine and clear critique of all writing in favour of speech. At the same time, in defining writings as *παιδιά*, it argues that Plato attempts to legitimize his dialogues as valuable albeit secondary to dialectic.¹⁷⁸ The ironic interpretation argues that Plato's meaning is the opposite of what Socrates appears to say. Plato is in fact defending his own form of philosophical writing, the dialogue, as the perfect median between the instability of spoken discussion and the rigidity of writing.¹⁷⁹ The Derridean interpretation argues that Plato intends a serious critique of writing in favour of speech but that this critique undermines itself for metaphysical reasons.¹⁸⁰ Appended to this list is a fourth type of interpretation, that of Ferrari himself, which he shares with Griswold (1980), Altieri (1985), and especially Wieland (1982).¹⁸¹ Ferrari's interpretation argues that the contrast between writing and speech is not absolute, and this is clear from the context in which Plato presents the critique. The dangers of writing may infect speech just as the advantages of speech may also be found in writing. The value of both speech and writing should be read within a larger contrast between the concerns of the philosopher and those of the sophist or intellectual impresario, an epithet Ferrari attributes to Phaedrus.¹⁸² Philosophers may view writings as philosophical and the impresario may view speech through his fetish for clever performance. The ultimate purpose of the critique

¹⁷⁸ Ferrari, 206. Ferrari singles out Hackforth 1972 and De Vries 1969 as representatives of the standard interpretation. I would add Zaslavsky as well.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. Ferrari mentions only Ronna Burger 1980 as a representative for the second kind of interpretation. I would consider Nicholson 1999 an interpretation that falls somewhere between the standard one and Burger's.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. 206-207. Obviously Ferrari cites "Plato's Pharmacy" as the source of this kind of critique. He also mentions Fish 1972 and I would add Meljac's "Derrida's Pharmacy: A Note on Derrida and PHAEDRUS".

¹⁸¹ Ibid. See also Moore, "The Myth of Theuth in the *Phaedrus*."

¹⁸² The impresario sees "the production of intellectual talk as an end in itself" and seeks "a life of mere words". As impresario, Phaedrus "attaches himself to leading thinkers, spurs them to perform, and propagates the latest arguments and trends. Anachronistically put, he is literary journalist, publisher, and ubiquitous salon presence rolled together." (Ferrari, 4-9).

of writing in the *Phaedrus*, Ferrari argues, is to demonstrate that the philosophic pursuit of wisdom is superior to the life of an orator, sophist, or impresario.¹⁸³

Ferrari does not directly disagree with the standard interpretation but wants to make one important qualification of it – that it does not attribute sufficient value to the ironies in Plato’s presentation of the critique.¹⁸⁴ Plato’s presentation demonstrates that the contrast between speech and writing is a contrast between mere tools.¹⁸⁵ A philosopher may use writing well and a sophist or impresario may use speech badly. That is not to say that these tools are in themselves equal; writing is still inherently inferior to speech. Nonetheless the distinction between writing and speech is less forceful than the distinction between the good and bad use of either. Thus Plato’s own writing is not denigrated by the critique because, presumably, Plato writes with the aims of a philosopher in mind, that is to say, he writes well and in a way that would “please god best”.¹⁸⁶ Ferrari acknowledges that the standard interpretation does not ignore this last point, but it does not assent to it based on textual evidence. Instead, it asserts that it would be absurd for Plato to have Socrates present a critique of writing so extreme that it would utterly devalue his own work and so the contrast between speech and writing must be qualified. Ferrari’s point is that this

¹⁸³ Ibid. 212.

¹⁸⁴ These ironies include Phaedrus’ behaviour as impresario – his fetish for original performance, his desire to memorize Lysias’ speech and perform it for Socrates – which show that the dangers Socrates attributes to writing can also be applied to speech. When Socrates wants to summarize the conclusions of their discussion, Phaedrus asks that he remind (ὑπόμνησον) him of what they are. Plato’s choice to use this term (Ferrari points out he could have used ἀνάμνησον) shows that Phaedrus is the type of man who risks using the spoken word like the written one. Ferrari also cites the inclusion of Lysias’ speech in the dialogue. Plato tempts his readers to wonder if the speech is authentic, even though the Oreithuia Myth warned against this kind of action. If the interpreter recognizes this lesson, and subdues his curiosity about the speech’s authorship, he will have experienced how a written text can “answer back” by reflecting our own voice as interpreter back on us. “Plato devised his text such that for the event which we cannot experience – his creative performance as author – we may substitute our own performance as interpreters.” This too blurs the line between writing and speech. (Ibid. 206-213).

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. 212.

¹⁸⁶ *Phaedrus* 274b9.

sentiment is correct, but the qualification is in the *Phaedrus* itself and does not need to be assumed for external reasons.¹⁸⁷

Ferrari dismisses the ironic interpretation with the general objection that its thesis is based on the same ironies found in the presentation of the critique that his own interpretation uses as evidence. He argues that the presentation, while ironic, by no means warrants such an extreme interpretation that would have Plato promoting his dialogues as the *ideal* way to philosophize.¹⁸⁸ Ferrari's criticism here is apt. How would the ironist account for the role of dialectical conversation in philosophy, which is clearly promoted in the *Phaedrus* and elsewhere, if the ideal philosophical mode were the *written* dialogue?¹⁸⁹ Ferrari concludes that the *Phaedrus* promotes philosophy over the fetishizing of its effects (like the power to persuade) and the critique of writing shows that philosophers cannot engage with writing alone.

Ferrari's treatment of the Derridean interpretation almost exclusively concerns Derrida's reading of the Theuth myth. According to Ferrari, Socrates tells the Theuth myth to explain the difference between tradition and truth and that a philosopher should value truth much higher. Ferrari's reading of the myth hinges on the short exchange between Socrates and Phaedrus immediately following it wherein Socrates rebukes Phaedrus for focusing on the source and pedigree of the story instead of its content. Phaedrus' persistent concern with pedigree, Ferrari

¹⁸⁷ Ferrari, 212.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. 213.

¹⁸⁹ I also see little in Socrates' remarks on dialectic at 276e-278b that would warrant such an interpretation. He is straightforward ("in my opinion, serious discourse about them is far nobler...") and he is summarizing the conclusions of their previous discussion for Phaedrus. Given what we know about Phaedrus' character, he is already predisposed toward writing and the rhetorical arts and he already holds up the written text as a kind of *pharmakon* for wisdom. If Plato meant for this dialogue to teach us that written dialogues are the ideal medium for philosophy, I would imagine that Socrates would make that clear to Phaedrus. That lesson would appeal to Phaedrus' nature much more than ironically insinuating that dialectical conversation is preferable while actually meaning that the written dialogue is ideal. The ironic interpretation has Socrates taking a needlessly complicated path to teach Phaedrus a lesson that he was, from the very beginning, predisposed to accept.

claims, is a consequence of his pursuit of the effects of wisdom.¹⁹⁰ Presumably because knowing whether or not a story is well-known and accepted by many people as important – like knowing whether or not a myth is factual or historical – is, for Phaedrus, more important for evaluating its value than its truth and the virtue of its lessons. To combat this belief Socrates tells Phaedrus of the simple people who were content to listen to oak or rock because they only valued truth.¹⁹¹ Ferrari argues that these simple people were wise without knowing it because they lived before the formalization of the arts, the very process the Theuth myth narrates. Their naiveté removed the possibility that they could be seduced by sophism. Only with Theuth’s formalization of the arts comes the ability for people to *seem wise* without actually being so. Thus, King Thamus fears that Theuth’s inventions, and writing chief among them, will make his people lose their simplicity and with it their desire only for truth.¹⁹² The Theuth myth therefore narrates the opening of the gulf between the philosopher and the sophist or between those who seek wisdom and those who seek the effects of wisdom alone.

Derrida reads the myth and surrounding conversation as evidence that Socrates, and by implication Platonic philosophy, are phonocentrist and he argues that the presentation of their phonocentrism undermines itself. Ferrari agrees that the dialogue has a phonocentrist thesis, but he believes that the presentation of the myth and surrounding critique helps to defend Socrates’ idolization of simple orality, not undermine it. Ferrari explains, “[t]he bygone race who could listen to oak and rock represent an ideal for Socrates: that of unconcern with questions of pedigree and status where this is irrelevant to truth.”¹⁹³ Before the formalization of the arts these

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ *Phaedrus* 275b-c.

¹⁹² Ferrari, 216-217.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

simple men did not critically interpret their stories and so they literally did not comprehend a distinction between tradition or pedigree and truth. Socrates holds this as an ideal, however, *because* he is not one of these simple men.¹⁹⁴ It is because Socrates lives in the era of writing, and is fully aware of its dangers of manipulation, that he is able to see the value of speech. The problems with writing – that it can be separated from its source, that it repeats the same thing to every audience, and that it produces the appearance of wisdom – are problems precisely because they encourage and enable the actions of the impresario. It is not that speech is immune to these dangers; they lurk in oral communication as we can see in Phaedrus’ adoration of Lysias’ speech. But writing exasperates these dangers because it promotes unreflective fetishization of “what can be set up and handed down in permanent form, the idols of the tribe.”¹⁹⁵ Socrates, he who does not write in the era of the written word, *chooses* to value truth over pedigree and tradition because he can self-consciously make that choice. Thus in setting up the men of oak and rock as his ideal, Ferrari argues “he has found a way to emulate their simplicity, without becoming simplistic.”¹⁹⁶

Ferrari concludes that the critique of writing does not undermine itself and that Derrida was wrong to admonish Socrates for repeating his myth without knowledge, because he told it with an awareness of the limits of his knowledge. Derrida’s reason for pointing out this irony, however, is to demonstrate another way in which the bad characteristics of writing can also characterize speech, and irony of ironies, the very speech that Socrates uses to explain these bad

¹⁹⁴ “Above all, it would not be appropriate – indeed, it would be impossible – for the people of that age to espouse Socrates’ ideal, because their function for him is rather to display it; but despite this, it remains appropriate for Socrates to see his ideal in them – and, again, for just the same reason that it cannot be right for them to see it in themselves: because they simply exhibit the ideal” (Ibid. 218).

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. 220.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. 219.

characteristics of writing shares in them. Ferrari makes a good case for the claim that this irony does not undermine Socrates' critique because he is not actually repeating without knowing. Nonetheless, Derrida's general contention still stands, that speech should not be valued more than writing because their distinction is unclear as evidenced in the dialogue partially by the implicit and explicit attribution of writing's qualities to speech and vice versa.¹⁹⁷ This is the heart of the matter, for while Ferrari certainly agrees with Derrida that the contrast between speech and writing is not essential, he does not believe it for the same reasons or to the same degree. Ferrari believes that the contrast between speech and writing should be subsumed under the contrast between the pursuit of wisdom and the pursuit of the effects of wisdom. But, he insists, speech is better suited to philosophy than writing. While Derrida works to show how the contrast speech/writing is undermined and should be overturned, Ferrari qualifies the contrast but maintains it. We can follow Ferrari's argument and understand why Socrates would find his ideal in those who only care about truth regardless of origin, but the second part of the ideal that values speech over writing needs further justification.

What justifies Socrates' claim that speech should be valued over writing if both mediums are beneficial in service of the right pursuit? If Phaedrus could come to understand that the pursuit of wisdom is more desirable than the life of the rhetorician or sophist, then there would be no further need for Socrates to devalue writing. After all, this scene occurs in Plato's written dialogue. Ferrari, in direct contrast with Derrida, maintains that there are formal reasons for Socrates to prefer speech to writing. Writing is not the best tool for the pursuit of wisdom because of its externality and its ability to persist without the presence of its source. These

¹⁹⁷ These textual slips between speech and writing are only the surface of Derrida's deconstruction of the speech/writing dichotomy. His deconstruction stretches all the way back to the metaphysical plane and ultimately relies on the corruption of the oppositional concepts presence/absence and presentation/representation. This deconstruction is explained completely in the remaining two sections of this chapter.

characteristics make it particularly dangerous for men like Phaedrus who are predisposed to fetishize words instead of engaging in genuine learning. Ferrari believes this “to be a simple truth.”¹⁹⁸ Speech is a good tool for wisdom because it has clarity and permanence, which it achieves through the strength of personal conviction and by being internal and alive.¹⁹⁹ Derrida argues these formal reasons corroborate the phonocentrist conviction that speech is the medium of presence. Speech is privileged because it somehow brings being to presence in the soul while writing only acts as a sign for this absent presence. Derrida’s reading of the Theuth myth traced the logic underlying the belief that writing, as an image and supplement, is dangerous. Ferrari’s interpretation and the standard interpretation both operate within this logic; Ferrari appeals to the same oppositional concepts in his devaluation of writing: it is external, orphaned, and a dead repetition. Below, we examine how Derrida argues that phonocentrism, by defining writing as a supplement and *pharmakon*, is corrupted by its own articulation.

C. Derrida’s Deconstruction of the Socratic Critique of Writing

We left “Plato’s Pharmacy” at the point where Derrida presents the structural correspondence between the mythemes and the philosophemes operating in the dialogue. Having demonstrated that the structural laws governing the mythical relationship between Thamus and Theuth are the same as those that govern the philosophical relationship between Being and its supplements and between speech and writing, Derrida deconstructs these structures.

Phonocentrism, he explains, privileges the voice based on the belief that it is in animate proximity to the presence of beings. “*Phone*, in effect, is the signifying substance *given to consciousness* as that which is most intimately tied to the thought of the signified concept. From

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. 221

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. 221-222.

this point of view, the voice is consciousness itself.”²⁰⁰ In contrast to speech, writing is defined as “a sign signifying a signifier itself signifying an eternal verity, eternally thought and spoken in the proximity of a present logos.”²⁰¹ Writing is twice removed from the presence of the thing-itself because it externally re-presents the internal signifying function of speech. Moreover, if “the formal essence of the signified is *presence*” then it follows that “the privilege of its proximity to the logos as *phonè* [sic] is the privilege of presence.”²⁰² Therefore Platonism privileges speech and denigrates writing because it believes that being is presence. This is why Derrida claims that the inclusion of the critique of writing is not arbitrary and it is not, as Ferrari alleges, an epilogue attached to a lesson about choosing the philosophic way of life. Derrida argues that the *Phaedrus*, from beginning to end, demands the trial of writing because it is grounded by the metaphysics of presence. He wants to reveal that phonocentrism is hypocritical because the charges leveled against writing can also apply to speech. If phonocentrists acknowledged the implications of their condemnation of writing, then they would condemn speech and all signification on the same grounds. They would come to realize that the phonic signifier is just as conventional as the graphic and that there is no transcendental signified. Derrida believes these insights announce themselves within the text, any text, because “language

²⁰⁰ Derrida, inhabiting the logic of phonocentrism, continues, “When I speak, not only am I conscious of being present for what I think, but I am conscious also of keeping as close as possible to my thought, or to the ‘concept,’ a signifier that does not fall into the world, a signifier that I hear as soon as I emit it, that seems to depend upon my pure and free spontaneity [...] Not only do the signifier and the signified seem to unite, but also, in this confusion, the signifier seems to erase itself or to become transparent, in order to allow the concept to present itself as what it is, referring to nothing other than its presence. The exteriority of the signifier seems reduced. Naturally this experience is a lure, but a lure whose necessity has organized an entire structure, or an entire epoch; and on the grounds of this epoch a semiology has been constituted whose concepts and fundamental presuppositions are quite precisely discernable from Plato to Husserl, passing through Aristotle, Rousseau, Hegel, etc.” (Derrida, *Positions*, 22).

²⁰¹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 15.

²⁰² *Ibid.* 18.

bears within itself the necessity of its own critique.”²⁰³ He tries to prove the above arguments while reading Socrates’ critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*.

(i) *Epistemology: deconstructing the possibility of knowledge*

Derrida argues that in professing a preference for dialectics over writing, Plato is only privileging one kind of representational play over another. Plato does so because he believes, consciously or otherwise, that dialectics acts as a fitting supplement for the impossible direct νόησις of the things-themselves, which he nonetheless wishes for.²⁰⁴ Derrida does not believe that this kind of noetic insight is possible, not because of man’s finite and imperfect condition, but because there can be no pure presence of Being itself (even to itself). As a result, Derrida critiques the thesis that true knowledge is made present in the soul through dialectics. He deconstructs the opposition between writing and dialectics by demonstrating how the charges brought against writing in the *Phaedrus* equally apply to speech.

Derrida claims that *pharmakon*’s essential ambiguity cannot be mastered. In Greek *pharmakon* means cure, remedy, poison, and charm and its sign announces all of these meanings at once. Plato’s relationship to *pharmakon* in the *Phaedrus* is also ambiguous because he wants to acknowledge the force of *pharmakon*’s instability and yet at the same time control and master it.²⁰⁵ This struggle is hidden by translations when the translator decides to put “remedy” or “poison” in place of *pharmakon*. While these translations are not incorrect, they lose any sense of *pharmakon*’s essential ambiguity because they operate with a logic that already masters the

²⁰³ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 416.

²⁰⁴ Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” 167.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 98.

pharmakon before the translation is enacted. This logic, the logic of Platonism and the metaphysics of presence, assumes that the ambiguity of the *pharmakon* is controlled and rational.

Plato decides in favor [sic] of a logic that does not tolerate such passages between opposing senses of the same word, all the more so since such a passage would reveal itself to be something quite different from simple confusion, alternation, or the dialectic of opposites.²⁰⁶

For Derrida, the essential ambiguity of *pharmakon* cannot be thought. When *pharmakon* is thought as just one of its many meanings, it-itself already escapes thought. Hence Derrida writes, “such an interpretative translation is thus as violent as it is impotent: it destroys the *pharmakon* but at the same time forbids itself access to it, leaving it untouched in its reserve.”²⁰⁷ Notice that Derrida speaks about *pharmakon* in much the same way that he refers to *différance*. He believes *pharmakon* in the Platonic text enacts the originary disappearance of *différance* because in order to be thought its essential ambiguity must be reduced, measured, and mastered. Its presence as one stable essence consists in its absence because its essential ambiguity is not an essence according to the logic of Platonism.

King Thamus and Socrates try to master the *pharmakon* by assigning it a definition governed by the logic of non-contradiction. They define writing according to one side of a set of hierarchical oppositions; it is bad, false, appearance, external, and illegitimate and is critiqued for having these attributes. Thus for writing to have an essence, Thamus has to halt the *pharmakon*'s passage between opposites. This signals for Derrida that “the *pharmakon* is *comprehended* in the structure of *logos* [and this] comprehension is an act of both *domination* and *decision*.”²⁰⁸ The *pharmakon*'s ambiguity is measured and mastered by the voice of the King. Therefore there must

²⁰⁶ Ibid. 99.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid. 117.

be a prior medium of this decisive action, before definition and the logic of non-contradiction come on the scene, and this is *différance*.

Writing/*pharmakon* calls attention to this forgotten legacy of *différance* both because of its essential ambiguity and because even after the King's decision, writing transgresses its assigned place. While Platonism attempts to think writing/*pharmakon* according to the law of non-contradiction it at the same time continues to view it as unstable and dangerous.²⁰⁹ Thamus and Socrates claim that writing is potentially harmful because, like Theuth, it moves from supplementing to supplanting. Writing has the power to remind the soul of things that it already knows but it also dulls memory by replacing μνήμη with ὑπόμνησις. It is inferior because it is external and yet it is dangerous because it has the power to corrupt the inside. Paradoxically, this unmasterable ambiguity is essential to the way that Platonism thinks writing, even though it *at the same time* tries to think and master it according to the logic of non-contradiction. Platonism devalues writing as “a surplus that *ought* never to have come to be added to the untouched plenitude of the inside” disregarding the inconsistencies inherent in condemning “exteriority as a supplement, inessential yet harmful to the essence.”²¹⁰ The *pharmakon* is dangerous because it is at the same time external and internal, a remedy and a poison, a supplement and a supplanter. These dangers are just as integral to the critique of writing as is the phonocentrist thesis that writing is less valuable because it is a supplement of a supplement, external, a mere appearance or image, and artificial.

According to phonocentrism writing/*pharmakon* has value solely in its ability to point away from itself. It can only operate beneficially when it acts as an external reminder of

²⁰⁹ Ibid. 128.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

knowledge latent in the soul. Derrida reminds us that Socrates tells Phaedrus that writing “has no power to protect or help itself.”²¹¹ That is, to help itself be understood and to have the power to impart knowledge to other souls. Writing lacks these virtues because it fails to bring knowledge to presence by itself. Thus writing’s virtuous application is neither necessary nor sufficient for wisdom; it is a mere supplement useful only to those who already know. When Thamus calls writing a *pharmakon*, its externality is to blame for it being dangerous to living memory in the soul. It is precisely because writing is external but can transgress its place and affect the inside that it can come to “discourage the use of their own memory within them.”²¹² It is also for precisely these reasons that writing can function as a reminder and supplement for living memory. Thus, its status as neither simply external nor simply internal is to blame for its failure and is the reason for its only virtue. This demonstrates, according to Derrida, that writing remains a *pharmakon* even “after” the attempt to master it. The logic underlying the critique of writing/*pharmakon* undermines its own attempt at mastery in its very articulation. The *pharmakon* (is) still essentially ambiguous.

Ferrari thinks it is unproblematic to claim that writing is both beneficial and harmful in its role as an external reminder for the soul because as a tool it is only as good (or bad) as the soul that uses it. Writing can be beneficial as a reminder for the philosopher because he recognizes the limits and dangers of its use. Likewise, writing can be harmful for the non-philosopher because he may mistake its status as a mere reminder. As a result of this danger, Socrates expresses a clear preference for speech. Recall that Ferrari believes the critique of writing should be

²¹¹ Full quotation. “...and every word, when once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself.” *Phaedrus* 275e.

²¹² 275a.

understood through the contrast between the life of the philosopher and the life of those who pursue the effects of wisdom alone. Interestingly, Derrida agrees with Ferrari on this point. He writes, “[i]t is above all against sophistic that this diatribe against writing is directed.”²¹³ It is for this reason that in deconstructing Socrates’ critique of writing Derrida must demonstrate that the contrast between philosophy and sophistry undermines itself.

Derrida argues that for both sophistry and philosophy “writing is considered suspicious and the alert exercise of memory prescribed.”²¹⁴ Both sophists and philosophers urge their followers to exercise their memory, but for different purposes. Sophists want to substitute mnemonic devices for what Socrates calls in the *Phaedrus* “the word which is written with intelligence in the mind of the learner.”²¹⁵ Derrida believes this is what Plato attacks in the condemnation of writing, *viz.* the substitution of μνήμη in the soul for ὑπόμνησις *in the soul*. Thus, in Plato’s critique of writing the boundaries between living/nonliving and inside/outside separate writing from speech but they also separate two different activities *in the soul*, μνήμη and ὑπόμνησις. The distinction between μνήμη and ὑπόμνησις is one between “memory as an unveiling (re-)producing a presence” and “re-memoriation as the mere repetition of a monument.”²¹⁶ Therefore the boundary between inside and outside is not located literally at the point where ψυχή and φύσις meet but instead marks the point where “*mneme*, instead of being present to itself in its life as a movement of truth, is supplanted by the archive, evicted by a sign of re-memoriation or of com-memoriation.”²¹⁷ In other words, memory’s relation to itself *in the*

²¹³ Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” 106.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.* 108.

²¹⁵ *Phaedrus* 276a. *Greater Hippias* 285e mentions sophists using mnemonic devices. (Trans. Paul Woodruff).

²¹⁶ Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” 108-09.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.* 109.

soul already necessitates supplementation because it is finite.²¹⁸ Memory needs reminders to make present what becomes temporally absent to the soul, i.e. what is forgotten.²¹⁹ Derrida therefore concludes that before writing can corrupt living μνήμη, it is always already contaminated by its first supplement, ὑπόμνησις *in the soul*. In fact, it is only because living μνήμη needs to be supplemented by signs or reminders, that writing has a purpose or function at all.²²⁰ Yet Derrida insists that Plato dreams of “a *mneme* with no *hypomnesis*, no *pharmakon*,” a memory that would not need to be supplemented by anything external to its own life as truth present in the soul.²²¹ By contrast, Sophists like Hippias become masters of mnemonic devices and other techniques and thereby capitalize on memory’s inherent need for supplementation.

The necessary supplementation of μνήμη by ὑπόμνησις in the soul is what first opens living memory up to what Derrida calls “the supplementary outside” and its dangers.²²² The supplement has two aspects, a representative aspect that allows it to present itself as a being-present, and its differing aspect, that makes it *not* what it presents itself as. If a supplement were able to fully present itself as a being-present, then it would cease to be a supplement and would be the thing-itself. That being said, the supplement is also not a non-being. Thus in a strange and confusing way the supplement both *is* and *is not*. “Its slidings slip it out of the simple alternative presence/absence. *That is the danger.*”²²³ Derrida claims that once the supplementary outside is opened, by the same structure and necessity the supplement can also be supplemented. The

²¹⁸ Derrida believes this is why Plato attributes life to memory. No doubt, Derrida is correct, one need only think of Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium* as proof that Plato recognized memory’s inherent limitations.

²¹⁹ Derrida points out, “a limitless memory would in any event be not memory but infinite self-presence” (Ibid.).

²²⁰ Recall that Theuth introduces writing as a *pharmakon* for memory. Evidently, memory needs a remedy, just perhaps one that is not equally a poison.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid.

movement of supplementation is necessary because it is “linked to the ideality of the *eidos* as the possibility of the repetition of the same.”²²⁴ If we follow Derrida’s argument here, what he means is something like this: because we are not a god whose life is the eternal self-presence of the things-themselves, the only way for the things-themselves to be present in us is through a structure of repetition and supplementation. Therefore while Socrates laments the use of writing because it is an external supplement, it is also the case that “writing appears to Plato as that process of redoubling in which we are fatally (en)trained: the supplement of a supplement, the signifier, the representative of a representative.”²²⁵ While Socrates may not believe that writing is integral to the pursuit of wisdom, Derrida counters that devaluing writing on the basis of its status as an external supplement for living memory is illogical, since living memory necessitates its supplements, whether they are external writings or “writings” in the soul.

If both writing and those words that are “written” in the soul are supplements, why is writing alone considered external, dead, and a poison for μνήμη? As mentioned above, Derrida argues this is because Plato and the entire tradition of philosophy that he inaugurates are phonocentrists. They regard writing as a supplement for φωνή, and so, being the repetition of a repetition believe it *should* be valued less. Before critiquing this position, Derrida once again inhabits its logic. Phonocentrists believe the phonic signifier remains in animate proximity to μνήμη in the soul, while the graphic signifier merely imitates the phonic signifier. Thus, the graphic signifier is thoroughly external to the internal life of the soul and its memory. Moreover, those who use writing actively dull their memory because it encourages the belief that external signs can in-themselves be mediums for true knowledge. At best, writing helps ὑπόμνησις in the

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.

soul but usually does so at the expense of living μνήμη.²²⁶ The proper way to use writing would be to recognize its subordinate place in the chain of supplementation. Writing supplements both speech and ὑπόμνησις in the soul and speech and ὑπόμνησις supplement living μνήμη in the soul. Writing is therefore useful only as a cure for the limitations of the supplements of μνήμη, viz. speech and ὑπόμνησις. Those who, to use Ferrari's term, fetishize writing cut off their access to living μνήμη in the soul because they give undue value to its supplements.

Having established the logic underlying Plato's alleged phonocentrism, Derrida argues that it fails to master the infection of the supplementary outside. For Derrida, Socrates justifies his critique of writing with the chain of supplementation presented above. Nonetheless there is something odd about claiming that writing is external to the soul and yet dulls memory. If writing were in fact purely external, then it would have no affect whatsoever on the internal life of memory. Nonetheless, "Plato maintains *both* the exteriority of writing *and* its power of maleficent penetration, its ability to affect or infect what lies deepest inside."²²⁷ Derrida breaks down the odd logic of this claim:

1. Writing is rigorously exterior and inferior to living memory and speech, which are therefore undamaged by it.
2. Writing is harmful to them because it puts them to sleep and infects their very life which would otherwise remain intact.
3. Anyway, if one has resorted to hypomnesia and writing at all, it is not for their intrinsic value, but because living memory is finite, it already has holes in it before writing ever comes to leave its traces. Writing has no effect on memory.²²⁸

²²⁶ Ibid. 110.

²²⁷ Ibid. He continues, "The *pharmakon* is that dangerous supplement that breaks into the very thing that would have liked to do without it yet lets itself at once be breached, roughed up, fulfilled, and replaced, completed by the very trace through which the present increases itself in the act of disappearing."

²²⁸ Ibid. 111.

He concludes that because Plato defines the value and function of writing on the basis of the opposition between μνήμη and ὑπόμνησις, his critique of writing is undermined by the above contradictions.

Furthermore, the opposition between μνήμη and ὑπόμνησις is “hardly perceptible” because both are made present through repetition. According to the same structure operating in ὑπόμνησις, living μνήμη repeats the presence of the thing-itself [εἶδος] in the soul. Those attributes that make the εἶδος intelligible for us, its ideality, permanence, and universality, are also constituted through the possibility of the repetition of the same. Therefore Derrida argues if truth [ἀλήθεια] is the unveiling of the intelligible presence of the εἶδος to the soul, this process is made possible through repetition. Repetition, representation, or signification, have two parts; the repeated and the repeater, what is re-presented and that which represents, the signified and the signifier. The true is that which is repeated, re-presented, signified. Thus, “the true is the presence of the *eidos* signified.”²²⁹ The practice of philosophy and dialectics, which function through ἀνάμνησις, and the practice of sophistry, which uses ὑπόμνησις, both “presuppose the possibility of repetition.”²³⁰ Platonism, according to Derrida, distinguishes between philosophy and sophistry because sophistic and ὑπόμνησις focus on the “wrong” side of the repetition, i.e. the signifier, in the *absence* of the thing-itself. Μνήμη contrasts with ὑπόμνησις not as the same contrasts with difference, or as the original contrasts with its image, but as “good” repetition contrasts with “bad” repetition. Sophists abuse ὑπόμνησις because they do not use the mnemonic arts to reanimate truth in their souls, i.e. they do not use “bad” repetition to ultimately point to “good” repetition. Instead, they use these tools to develop the pretense of wisdom, which allows

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

them to claim an impressive polymathy without the actual work of making all of that knowledge a living presence in their μνήμη.²³¹

This demonstrates for Derrida that the opposition between philosophy/dialectics/ἀνάμνησις/speech and sophistry/ὑπόμνησις/writing is determined by the difference between the signified and signifier. Derrida argues that the meaning of philosophy is determined in the act of determining its other, i.e. philosophy is borne from its difference from sophistry.²³² Similarly, the objects of knowledge for philosophy, the things-themselves, emerge from the play of supplementation, and this play is initiated by the thing-itself differing from itself. Plato's impossible dream of a μνήμη without ὑπόμνησις would eliminate philosophy and sophistry in one fell swoop. In other words, without the originary act of the εἶδος differing and deferring itself (i.e. the play of *différance*), intellectual life would cease. Derrida's caricature of Plato, however, remains willfully ignorant of this. For this Plato truth alone is discriminative. Truth here is understood as the "presence (*ousia*) of the present (*on*)."²³³ But according to Derrida's deconstruction truth, and with it its power of discrimination, is determined by the difference between the signifier and the signified. Conversely, truth *is* nothing but discriminating between the thing-itself and its repetitions. Ultimately truth discriminates the same from itself, which is to say it does not discriminate at all. Philosophy and dialectics, sophistry and writing, all operate within this structure.

Building on this conclusion, Derrida turns back to speech. He claims that speech is also a *pharmakon* because it can be turned toward philosophic activity or to activities that directly harm

²³¹ Ibid. 111.

²³² Derrida, with an eye to his critics, takes a moment to tell us to "be fully cognizant that this reading of Plato is at no time spurred on by some slogan or password of a 'back-to-the-sophists' nature" (108). Some modern critics, for example Pickstock in "Plato's Deconstruction of Derrida," evidently missed this note.

²³³ Derrida, 112.

philosophy. The power of speech to animate the ψυχή would in fact make it a more dangerous *pharmakon* than writing because in the wrong hands speech can produce dangerous convictions. Even though the *Phaedrus* critiques writing as *pharmakon* and praises speech, Derrida argues that Plato acknowledges speech as a *pharmakon* explicitly in the text.²³⁴ Furthermore, dialectics presupposes this power of speech just as sophistics and its art of rhetoric does. Thus Socrates the dialectician, like a sophist, is a master of the *pharmakon*, or is a *pharmakeus*.²³⁵ When Socrates and Phaedrus discuss whether rhetoric is an art, they agree that in order to be a master rhetorician, one would have to also be a dialectician. The difference is the goal for which one achieves this mastery over speech.²³⁶ Moreover, as Derrida points out, Socrates is implicitly identified as a *pharmakeus* in the *Symposium* both in Diotima's portrait of Ἔρως, which reminds the reader of Socrates, and in Agathon and Alcibiades' claims about Socrates' powerful seduction with λόγος. The Socratic λόγος acts with the ambiguity of a *pharmakon* because it can awaken desire for wisdom or it can paralyze the soul in ἀπορία.²³⁷ The effects of the Socratic *pharmakon* are sometimes unpredictable even perhaps to Socrates himself who lest we forget was killed by the State because of his actions as a *pharmakeus* for young and influential Athenian men.²³⁸

Derrida rebrands the contrast between philosopher and sophist as “*pharmakeus* against *pharmakeus*, *pharmakon* against *pharmakon*.”²³⁹ Socrates the *pharmakeus* does not manipulate

²³⁴ Cf. “Since it is the function of speech to lead souls by persuasion...” (*Phaedrus* 271c).

²³⁵ Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy”, 115-117.

²³⁶ Recall Socrates’ answer to Tisias, “...this ability he will not gain without much diligent toil, which a wise man ought not to undergo for the sake of speaking and acting before men, but that he may be able to speak and to do everything, so far as possible, in a manner pleasing to the gods” (*Phaedrus* 273e).

²³⁷ Socrates tells Theaetetus about those that undergo his art of midwifery (dialectics): “They suffer the pains of labour, and are filled day and night with distress [...] And this pain my art is able to bring on, and also to allay” (*Theaetetus* 151a, trans. M.J. Levett, rev. Myles Burnyeat).

²³⁸ Derrida, 117-119.

²³⁹ *Ibid.* 124.

his *pharmakon* to harness its powers. In fact, Derrida claims, the power of Socrates' dialectic comes from his renunciation of its benefit, *viz.* "knowledge as power, passion, pleasure". Furthermore, Socrates must accept the death of the body as a sacrifice for his knowledge.²⁴⁰ Whereas that other *pharmakon*, writing, abides in the domain of death and acts as a poison to living memory, Socrates' *pharmakon*, dialectics, conquers death by welcoming it in the face of the immortality of the soul.²⁴¹ Socrates' *pharmakon* is the origin of ἐπιστήμη or "the opening to truth as the possibility of repetition and the submission of that 'greed for life' to law."²⁴² Truth is the truth of the εἶδος, that which is always self-identical and which can always be repeated as the same. These properties make the εἶδος ideal, immaterial and eternal. The Socratic *pharmakon*, dialectics, aims to bring the εἶδος to presence in the soul and to thereby conquer the mortality of the body. Similarly, submission to the permanence of the law allows the philosopher to accept and annul death. Law and its obedience, Derrida claims, mimic the same structure as the repetition of the εἶδος. Laws are constituted and obeyed only through the act of the repetition of the same. Plato, Derrida tells us, always associates λόγος and νομός for this reason, and we are told explicitly in the *Crito* that Socrates accepts death in order not to transgress the laws of Athens because this would do violence to his own self-identity. This reading of the Socratic pursuit of wisdom and its use of the dialectical *pharmakon* as a cure for the limited, irrational particularity of human life is not radical or controversial, in fact as Derrida acknowledges, it agrees with other dialogues.²⁴³ Derrida's point in presenting all of this, however, is to defend his

²⁴⁰ Ibid. 120.

²⁴¹ Derrida assumes here that the Socratic pursuit of wisdom is based on the doctrines of the immortality of the soul and of learning as ἀνάμνησις.

²⁴² Ibid. 123.

²⁴³ Derrida quotes the *Critias* "I call on the god to grant us that most effective medicine (*pharmakon teleotaton*), that best of all medicines (*ariston pharmakon*): knowledge (*epistemen*)" (Ibid. 124). He also quotes from the opening

position that philosophy emerges out of the ambivalence of the *pharmakon* just as sophistry does. Socrates, he argues, is able to use dialectics as an antidote only because *λόγος/pharmakon* has no stable essence. Thus, Socrates may turn what was a poison in the hands of the sophists into a cure. Hence, “the order of knowledge is not the transparent order of forms and ideas [...] it is the antidote.”²⁴⁴ Socratic dialectics derives its power not from some inexplicable animate proximity to the presence of the things-themselves, but from what Derrida calls *the decision of philosophy*. In other words, dialectical speech decides to halt and master the ambiguous *λόγος/pharmakon* so that it may use it for its own aim.

Therefore Derrida reads Socrates’ critique of writing as his preference for one representational play over another. Up to this point, Derrida’s deconstruction has shown that the opposition between *μνήμη* and *ὑπόμνησις* is actually,

...between two forms and two moments of repetition: a repetition of truth (*aletheia*) which presents and exposes the *eidōs*; and a repetition of death and oblivion (*lethe*) which veils and skews because it does not present the *eidōs* but re-presents a presentation, repeats a repetition.²⁴⁵

Socrates claims that the “bad” repetition of writing is tautological and useless for learning and teaching. In this way writing is worse than a mere image of living speech because it fails to capture even a likeness of speech’s animation. “In so doing, writing estranges itself immensely from the truth of the thing itself, from the truth of speech, from the truth that is open to speech.”²⁴⁶ This estrangement is represented in Socrates’ genealogical metaphors. Writing is an

scene of the *Charmides* at length wherein Socrates pretends to be a physician who has a cure (dialectics!) for Charmides’ headaches brought on by his lack of *σωφοσύνη*.

²⁴⁴ Ibid. 138.

²⁴⁵ Ibid. 135.

²⁴⁶ Ibid. 137. Derrida gives a lengthy reading of Socrates’ comparison of writing to painting and the whole class of mimesis in Platonic philosophy in chapter seven “The Ingredients: Phantasms, Festivals, and Paints”. We are not addressing this reading because, as the chapter title indicates, it simply provides more material for Derrida’s deconstruction of the opposition between the *eidōs* and its images.

illegitimate offspring whose father cannot attend to it, or similarly, it is a seed sowed improperly, at best for amusement, but one that will not bear fruit.²⁴⁷ The illegitimate genealogy of writing identifies it as a perversion of the legitimate relationship of father to son (or of εἶδος to speech).²⁴⁸ Writing is an orphan and should be pitied and feared. Pitied because it is incomplete, a mere ghost of a person, wandering anywhere and everywhere completely unaware of its origin. Feared because in being unattached to its father, it easily commits patricide.

After describing writing as an orphan and illegitimate son, Socrates asks Phaedrus if it has a brother of good birth. The genealogy extends to include legitimate offspring that Socrates describes “not merely as a knowing, living, animate discourse, but as an *inscription* of truth in the soul.”²⁴⁹ It is quite remarkable that at this stage of the conversation Socrates chooses to borrow a concept to describe living discourse from its own simulacrum. All of the problems with writing stem from the fact that it remains cut off from the presence of the origin and abides in the order of the signifier alone. Yet Socrates now represents the legitimate signifier, speech, as *writing* in the soul – a metaphor that philosophy has never really done away with. Derrida claims that philosophy necessarily borrows from the order of the simulacrum because intelligibility is produced through supplementation. Moreover, the structure of philosophemes and mythemes that populate the opposition between writing and speech (legitimate/bastard, inside/outside, present/absent, life/death, etc.) are the same that order the history of Platonism as metaphysics. Thus Derrida rather dramatically concludes that, “it can be said that philosophy is played out in

²⁴⁷ *Phaedrus* 275e; 276b.

²⁴⁸ “Writing is not an independent order of signification; it is weakened speech, something not completely dead” (Derrida, 143)

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 149.

the play between two kinds of writing.”²⁵⁰ The critique of writing in the *Phaedrus* really announces a preference for one kind of writing, a fertile and legitimate one, over another. Nonetheless, Derrida must still argue for these claims, and in typical form, his argument proceeds not linearly but this time through the deconstruction of the binary σπουδή/παιδιά.

The *Phaedrus* concludes with Socrates claiming that the only way to use writing nobly is to not take it seriously. Derrida begins his deconstruction from his previous conclusion that writing and speech are both *pharmaka*. In Platonism, the *pharmaka* are both mastered by the decision of philosophy. They are “‘caught’ by philosophy, by ‘Platonism’ which is constituted by this apprehension, as a mixture of two pure, heterogeneous terms.”²⁵¹ Derrida reiterates two important assertions in this statement, that Platonism tries to think the *pharmakon* by reducing its ambiguous fund of meaning (the pharmacy) into an ordered polysemy, and that Platonism is born from this very action. Platonism emerges from the decision of philosophy by carrying it out and yet it operates *as if* difference and deferral emerged from the unity of the same. This is why writing is cast as an external supplement that should never have been brought in as an aid to internal μνήμη. The inside, even though its discrimination emerges from its relation to the outside, must be kept pure. Analogously, μνήμη, even though its own self-relation necessitates ὑπόμνησις, must have its internal integrity restored by dialectical speech. Hence, Derrida writes from the Platonist perspective,

[It] is thus necessary to put the outside back in its place [...] This is the inaugural gesture of “logic” itself, of good “sense” insofar as it accords with the self-identity of *that which is*: being is what it is, the outside is outside and the inside inside. Writing must return to being what it *should never have ceased to be*: an accessory, an accident, and excess.²⁵²

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid. 128.

²⁵² Ibid.

Thus, Socrates pronounces at the end of the *Phaedrus* that “in the written word there is necessarily much that is playful, and that no written discourse, whether in metre or in prose, deserves to be treated very seriously.”²⁵³ He has put writing back in its place by using yet another opposition to keep speech and writing apart, σπουδή/παιδιά. Even if they are both *pharmaka*, and even if when thought by Platonism and deconstructed by Derrida they emerge as two kinds of repetition or trace, Plato’s text still asserts that speech is serious and writing is playful.

Derrida argues that Plato does not denigrate play completely but he does repress it. Play, for Derrida, is *alogos* and *atopos*. It is nothing; there is no such thing as play-itself. Play is like the trace in that its odd existence consists in its lack of essence. Hence, Derrida speaks often of the play of *différance*. The originary action of *différance*, that is differing and deferral *ad infinitum*, is the (non)essence of play. Whereas play as opposed to seriousness, or as opposed to work, is already comprehended within all of the binary oppositions of Platonism. Play thus ceases to be *alogos* and *atopos* and so Derrida writes, “[a]s soon as it comes into being and into language, play erases itself as such.”²⁵⁴ When Socrates describes writing as play, and he certainly means play as opposed to seriousness, he tries to save writing from his own critique. In so doing, Plato appears to give writing a place in his philosophy, albeit a thoroughly subordinate one.

Nonetheless, the relationship between Platonism and writing as play is more complicated than it seems. Derrida returns to his claim that Plato *necessarily* uses writing as a metaphor for speech and argues that Plato “must both put writing out of the question and yet nevertheless

²⁵³ *Phaedrus* 277e.

²⁵⁴ He continues, “Having no essence, introducing difference as the condition for the presence of essence, opening up the possibility of the double, the copy, the imitation, the simulacrum – the game and the graphe are constantly disappearing as they go along. They cannot, in classical affirmation, be affirmed without being negated” (Derrida, 156-7).

borrow from it, for fundamental reasons, all its demonstrative and theoretical resources.”²⁵⁵ Plato often uses writing, grammar, and letters as analogies and this is ostensibly for pedagogical reasons.²⁵⁶ Yet, Derrida argues, there is a necessity behind Plato’s borrowing that points to the irreducibility of difference, or the structural relations of proportionality, within Platonic philosophy. For instance, take dialectics as it is presented in the *Philebus*. Here Socrates says that all things that exist are made up of the one and the many, limit and unlimitedness, and dialectics, unlike eristic discourse, attends particularly to the intermediaries.²⁵⁷ It is in this context that Socrates tells the tale of Theuth as the inventor of differences within φωνή. Derrida argues that the movement of dialectics depends on the play of differences, or, the play of the other within being, and the scriptural metaphor is therefore remarkably fitting. Dialectics’ power to produce ἐπιστήμη in the soul derives from a patricidal ontology because it supplants the thesis that being is one. This patricide plays out explicitly in the *Sophist* and it is understood implicitly in many dialogues, most notably for this thesis, the *Timaeus*. The patricidal ontology necessitates the play of difference, only “without the disruptive intrusion of otherness and nonbeing, of nonbeing as other in the unity of being, writing and its play would not have been necessary.”²⁵⁸ But this intrusion *is* the case, and in fact is originary, and so, Derrida concludes Plato is caught in a difficult position of trying to put writing, play, and the entire structure of difference and *mimesis* in its place as provisional and secondary, while continuing to need and rely on them to understand that which is allegedly essential and primary.²⁵⁹ Thus, even though the *Phaedrus*

²⁵⁵ Ibid. 158-59.

²⁵⁶ Derrida cites *Republic* 368c-e, 402a-b. *Philebus* 16c-18d. *Sophist* 253a. *Statesman* 278a-b.

²⁵⁷ *Philebus* 16d-17a.

²⁵⁸ Derrida, 163-64.

²⁵⁹ “Plato’s Pharmacy” does not explain this argument much further. This is most likely because Derrida assumes his reader is familiar with the long versions present in *Of Grammatology* and *Speech and Phenomena*.

ultimately concludes that writing is at best mere play, in the sense of play as opposed to seriousness, Plato continues to use writing in its function as the irreducible play of differences.

Returning to Ferrari's interpretation, we see that both he and Derrida agree that Socrates believes external 'bad' writing is a worse tool for the pursuit of wisdom than 'good' writing in the soul. Nonetheless, Derrida examines the use of Socrates' analogies and metaphors and concludes, "[w]riting and speech have thus become two different species, or values, of the trace."²⁶⁰ That is the trace of ἀλήθεια as the intelligible being present of the things-themselves. Writing *in the soul* is allegedly a legitimate trace that remains in proximity to its origin. But, we have seen how this crucial, discriminative opposition between writing and speech or between a good and bad trace is barely discernible. The need for this opposition emerges from the Platonist understanding of ἀλήθεια. 'Good' writing is opposed to 'bad' not because living dialogue has the power to constitute truth, but because it is "a writing of transmission, of education, of demonstration, or at best, of dis-covering [...] most of all of properly teaching the true, as it is *already* constituted."²⁶¹ Dialectical "writing in the soul" is *for Platonism* nothing other than the inscription of a trace of the intelligible presence of beings-themselves. Speech is simply believed to be a better trace and a more ideal signifier than writing. Therefore, Derrida concludes, the opposition between dialectics and writing is not between presence and the trace but is between a 'good' trace and a 'bad' one. Thus, it is not surprising that Plato finds himself in the position of rehabilitating writing's status at the end of the *Phaedrus* for it is, after all, barely distinguishable from speech.

²⁶⁰ Ibid. 152.

²⁶¹ Ibid. 154.

Derrida concludes that there is no rigorous distinction between dialectics and grammar because there is no possibility of the full, absolute presence of being-itself. That possibility died with the patricide of the *Sophist*. Unless we argue that Plato is a Parmenidean, we must concede that his metaphysics and ontology necessarily include difference, otherness, and non-being. Yet, dialectics allegedly aims at absolute knowledge and its purpose can only be fulfilled by the absolute presence of Being-itself. But, Derrida argues, Plato's patricidal ontology forbids this outright. Moreover, this patricide is what in fact makes λόγος possible. Dialectics would not be needed if men could experience a full intuition of truth, whereas the "diacritical principle of the *sumploke*" necessitates dialectics. In the movement of dialectics, which attends to intermediaries, truth, as the presence of the εἶδος, must come to terms with difference, relation, absence, and nontruth.²⁶² Derrida thus concludes that dialectics aims at its own erasure; but its very function presupposes that this aim is impossible.

Derrida's deconstructive reading of the Socratic critique of writing corrupts the distinction between philosophy and sophistry, μνήμη and ὑπόμνησις, and speech and writing in order to argue that the Socratic pursuit of wisdom (and the entire tradition of Platonism) originates in *différance*. This is because the metaphysics of presence understands truth as the unveiling of the presence of the things-themselves to the soul. Therefore, Derrida assumes that this is what Plato's philosophers pursue and this is why Socrates privileges speech over writing. Nonetheless the philosopher, like the sophist, will always fail to bring truth to presence in their soul because their means and tools for such a pursuit are confined to the order of the supplement. In fact, truth can be nothing but the *signified* or *supplemented* presence of the thing-itself and thus is always already open to patricidal supplanting. Moreover, there is no way to simply master

²⁶² Ibid. 164-166.

or halt the play of signification and so Platonism's attempt to hierarchize the supplements or signifiers is fruitless. Derrida's deconstruction attempts to show that Platonism pursues this always already absent presence and condemns the supplement without acknowledging that presence emerges from the play of supplementation. The next section examines the final arguments of "Plato's Pharmacy" wherein Derrida reaffirms these conclusions by arguing explicitly that the truth of Platonism emerges from the disappearance of the origin as it differs and defers itself from itself, i.e. from the movement of *différance*.

(ii) *Metaphysics: Deconstructing the presence of the origin*

Derrida pulls together the various threads of his deconstruction to argue that Plato's philosophy aims to bring the unmediated presence of Being-itself to the soul and that this end, however pursued, can never be accomplished. Derrida's entire deconstruction of the *Phaedrus* rests on the assumption that its critique of writing is grounded by the metaphysics of presence. We explored how Derrida's ultimate conclusion is formulated epistemologically, now we turn to its metaphysical formulation. This is best understood when Derrida argues, "the disappearance of truth as presence, the withdrawal of the present origin of presence, is the condition of all (manifestation of) truth."²⁶³ The ultimate origin of being, what Plato sometimes calls τὸ ἀγαθόν as that which is ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας, is for Derrida the absence of presence. Not mere absence as opposed to presence but the peculiar absence/presence that is the movement of *différance*. It is a constitutive absence, the origin (is) its act of being other than itself and thus it must be referred to through the trace or the supplement. Recall that Derrida believes the things-themselves have a primordial deficiency because they cannot be self-present in-themselves. Thus, the (non)origin is

²⁶³ Ibid. 168.

at once, present *and* absent and *neither* present *nor* absent, because its presence is constituted by a movement of repetition necessitated by it also being absent.²⁶⁴ Nonetheless, the (non)origin is the condition for all truth which is also unveiled through the same structures and systems of deferrals and differences. This can also be understood as the impossibility for any truth from the Platonist viewpoint. If we could say that “Plato’s Pharmacy” has one aim, it is to bring this conclusion to light. Derrida’s deconstructive reading reveals this “hidden thread” underlying the *Phaedrus* and it also rethinks the dialogue according to the structure of the trace.

Derrida thus asks, “How is dialectics traced?”²⁶⁵ His question asks two things: how does the movement of dialectics relate to the always already deferred presence of being-itself, and how does Plato intend for this relation to be understood. In terms of the first question, Derrida’s answer summarizes his entire deconstructive reading of the *Phaedrus* that unveils how *différance* is the origin of philosophy, truth, the εἶδος, speech, and knowledge. This is the case for epistemology, demonstrated through the deconstruction of the phonocentrist position, and for metaphysics, demonstrated by his explanation of the origin of the εἶδος through repetition. Thus Derrida writes,

[T]he unattainment of presence or beingness in any form, the whole surplus Plato calls *epekeina tes ousias* (beyond beingness or presence), gives rise to a structure of replacements such that all presences will be supplements substituted for the absent origin, and all differences, within the system of presence, will be the irreducible effect of what remains *epekeina tes ousias*.²⁶⁶

The disappearance of the presence of the origin opens the space for dialectics, which operates within the structure of the trace or supplement even in its ideal medium, speech. Even, in fact, in internal thought. Dialectical thought is traced as a supplement for the impossible νόησις of the

²⁶⁴ This same formulation, the “and” and the “neither, nor” is a focus in “*Khôra*”.

²⁶⁵ Ibid. 167.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

truth as the presence of the εἶδος. In this way dialectics is linked to its alleged inferior, writing, which is also a supplement, and we have already seen the difficulty in rigorously separating and opposing a supplement from a supplement.

The second aspect of Derrida's question, however, is much more ambiguous. On the one hand, Derrida leaves open the possibility that Plato proposes that the origin *is not*. Derrida offers as proof the proposition that τὸ ἀγαθόν is ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας in the *Republic*, the necessary inclusion of *khôra* in the *Timaeus*, and the patricide threatened by the Stranger in the *Sophist*. On the other hand, Derrida argues that the *Phaedrean* myths and the Socratic critique of writing conform to Platonist metaphysics. Socrates calls for the dialectical mastery of the *pharmaka* only because he believes that truth as the unveiling of the presence of beings-themselves is possible. Recall that for Derrida the play of *différance* accounts for the possibility for both truth and nontruth.²⁶⁷ Therefore this repetitive play cannot be mastered or governed by truth, which it produces. Repetition is only possible through what Derrida calls here the *graphics of supplementarity*, or in other words by the movement of the supplement as that which adds and replaces by differing and mimicking. Repetition gives rise to the truth of being by rendering the εἶδος intelligible. Intelligible ideality “discovers in the *eidōs* that which can be repeated, being the same, the clear, the stable, the identifiable in its equality with itself.” Likewise, repetition *at the same time* “is the possibility of becoming-perceptible-to-the-senses: nonideality” because it “is the very movement of non-truth: the presence of what is gets lost, disperses itself, multiplies

²⁶⁷ Derrida effectively summarizes his entire deconstruction of the *Phaedrus* in the following explanation: “*Différance*, the disappearance of any originary presence, it at once the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of truth. At once. ‘At once’ means that the being-present (on) in its truth, in the presence of its identity and in the identity of its presence, is doubled as soon as it appears, as soon as it presents itself. It appears, in its essence, as the possibility of its own most proper non-truth, of its pseudo-truth reflected in the icon, the phantasm, or the simulacrum. What is is not what it is, identical and identical to itself, unique, unless it adds to itself the possibility of being repeated as such. And its identity is hallowed out by that addition, withdraws itself in the supplement that presents it” (Ibid. 168).

itself through mimemes, icons, phantasms, simulacra.”²⁶⁸ Therefore the necessary repetition of the εἶδος equally gives rise to philosophy, μνήμη, λόγος, and φωνή and to non-philosophy, ὑπόμνησις, and γράμματα. Both repetitions only exist as two aspects of the same movement of supplementarity that emerges from the disappearance of the origin.²⁶⁹ Yet ‘Plato’, Derrida believes, continues to try and separate these two repetitions and that is why King Thamus and Socrates try to master the ambiguity of the *pharmakon*.²⁷⁰ Therefore “Plato’s Pharmacy” concludes that ‘Plato’ is caught trying in vain to distinguish between two repetitions. The question remains, however, whether Derrida is talking here about Plato himself or about ‘Plato’ as Platonism has imagined him. “Plato’s Pharmacy” does not give us a definitive answer on this question.

Thus it is not the case that Derrida would directly disagree with Ferrari’s reading or equally with the standard or ironic interpretations of the *Phaedrus*, instead he would fault them for missing the point. Socrates’ pursuit of wisdom, regardless of its particular tools, operates under the mistaken assumption that truth and knowledge derive from the presence of beings-themselves. Instead, Derrida alleges that truth and knowledge derive from *différance*, the supplement, and the trace, and the structures they create. That being said, while Derrida’s deconstruction critiques a Platonism that would purport that being is presence and truth the

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ “...one can no more ‘separate’ them from each other, think of either one apart from the other, ‘label’ them, than one can in the pharmacy distinguish the medicine from the poison, the good from the evil, the true from the false, the inside from the outside [...] conceived within this original reversibility, the *pharmakon* is the same precisely because it has no identity. And the same (is) as supplement. Or in *différance*” (Ibid. 169).

²⁷⁰ By ‘Plato’, we mean the Plato of Platonism. Cf. “... this philosophical, dialectical mastery of the *pharmaka* that should be handed down from legitimate father to well-born son is constantly put in question by a family scene that constitutes and undermines at once the passage between the pharmacy and the house. ‘Platonism’ is both the general rehearsal of this family scene and the most powerful effort to master it, to prevent anyone’s hearing of it, to conceal it by drawing the curtains over the dawning of the West” (Ibid. 167). Derrida believes Platonism tries to separate the two repetitions of the εἶδος and also to actively hide this effort. His views on Plato himself, however, are less clear.

intelligible presence of things-themselves, it does not necessarily stand against a different reading of Platonic metaphysics, ontology, and epistemology.

(iii) *The Epilogue: 'Plato' in his pharmacy*

Derrida ends his essay with a short scene depicting 'Plato' in his pharmacy struggling to abide by the golden rule of philosophy: "One ought to distinguish, between two repetitions." 'Plato' fails in his struggle, arguing with himself, "–But they repeat each other, still; they substitute for each other.../ –Nonsense: they don't replace each other, since they are added..."²⁷¹ This is the death rattle of the metaphysics of presence. The scene ends with 'Plato' left fruitlessly working to distinguish the good repetitions from the bad. He hopes to use the very means (writing, speech, dialectics) whose power issues from *différance* to get back to an origin that *différance* already excludes as impossible. His pursuit of wisdom is based on nostalgia for the pure presence of an origin that has never been present in-itself.²⁷² It is only when looking at his reserves, peering into the *pharmakon* before it has been labeled as "this-or-that remedy", that 'Plato' is faced with the realization that he has no powers of discrimination. This scene depicts a caricature of the Plato of Platonism after deconstruction. It is the hidden scene behind Platonism that Derridean deconstruction unveils. Turning next to "*Khôra*" and the *Timaeus*, we explore if Derrida's reading of the complicity between Plato and Platonism evolves.

²⁷¹ Ibid. 170.

²⁷² For Derrida, Being-itself is always already being otherwise, present only through its necessary disappearance. Hence Spivak writes, "Derrida's ~~trace~~ is the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience." (Spivak, xvii).

CHAPTER THREE: A Critical Reading of *Khôra* in the *Timaeus* and Derrida's "*Khôra*"

I. Reception

In many ways the *Timaeus* is a dialogue about reception. Its premise is a gathering between Socrates, Timaeus, Critias, and Hermocrates organized so Socrates, who the night before had hosted the three men and a now absent fourth, can receive speeches to complement his own. Yesterday Socrates described the ideal city and its citizens and today he wants his city put into action by an account of it at war.²⁷³ The new banquet of speeches begins with Critias' tale of prehistoric Athens defeating the city of Atlantis.²⁷⁴ Critias' story is also about reception, both in that he recounts his many-layered reception of the tale from his ancestors and that the story itself describes how the Athenians received their own forgotten history from the Egyptians of Thebes. After Critias speaks, the men agree on the order of speeches for Socrates. Timaeus will speak next and give an account of the origin of the universe up to the creation of the human beings who populate Socrates' ideal city. Timaeus' cosmogony is also about reception. Most interestingly, he explains how the τρίτον γένος receives the likenesses crafted by the demiurge in the image of the Paradigm.

It is difficult to know how scholars should receive an atypical dialogue like the *Timaeus*. It is largely composed of one long and continuous speech and focuses on the natural foundation of politics and philosophy, a topic that Zuckert points out never concerns Socrates.²⁷⁵ It also scarcely features Socrates; after he suggests that Timaeus give an invocation to the gods before beginning his speech, Socrates remains silent for the rest of the dialogue.²⁷⁶ Plato gives the bulk

²⁷³ *Timaeus* 19c. (Trans. Donald J. Zeyl).

²⁷⁴ 21a8-25d7.

²⁷⁵ Zuckert, 14-15.

²⁷⁶ *Timaeus* 27b.

of the dialogue to the title character Timaeus, Plato's own invention as far as current scholarship can discern. Timaeus regales the gathered men with a great cosmogony that has challenged interpreters for centuries. Since Plato's own time, scholars have debated whether Timaeus' creation story should be read literally or metaphorically. Recently, scholars have shifted to debating the purpose served by Timaeus' cosmogonical account, for instance, whether it is Platonic doctrine or serves a merely didactic purpose.²⁷⁷

A.E. Taylor argues that it would be a mistake to see the *Timaeus* as a source for Plato's own views partly because they differ greatly with those expressed in the *Laws* and because he believes that Plato intended for Timaeus to represent an amalgamation of 5th century Pythagoreanism and Empedoclean natural science.²⁷⁸ Zuckert agrees that Timaeus' cosmogony is not representative of Plato's own thoughts and argues that the dialogue is meant to present a contrast between Socrates and Timaeus. Plato dramatizes the difference between philosophical erotic striving, embodied in the dialogues by Socrates, and unerotic contemplation, embodied by Timaeus, to demonstrate why Socratic philosophy is necessary for a happy and good life.²⁷⁹ Jill Gordon and Jacob Howland disagree with Zuckert's assessment and argue that Timaeus' philosophy includes philosophical ἔρως. They both integrate Timaeus' cosmogony into their understanding of Platonic philosophy and believe that it helps clarify the role that ἔρως plays in philosophic activity for Plato.²⁸⁰

Perhaps the greatest barrier to receiving the *Timaeus* into any systematic understanding of the dialogues is *khôra*, the topic of this chapter and of Derrida's eponymous essay. *Khôra* or the

²⁷⁷ Cf. Finkelberg, "Plato's Method in *Timaeus*."

²⁷⁸ Taylor, *A Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, 13.

²⁷⁹ Zuckert, "Socrates and Timaeus: Two Platonic Paradigms of Philosophy," 352. See also *Plato's Philosophers*. We will discuss her reading further in Chapter Four.

²⁸⁰ Cf. Gordon "Eros in Plato's *Timaeus*" and Howland "Partisanship and the Work of Philosophy in Plato's *Timaeus*."

τρίτον γένος has a long and varied history of interpretation from Aristotle and Plotinus, Proclus and Calcidius, to Gadamer and Derrida. Each has grappled with how to make *khôra* coherent as a metaphysical principle within the traditional Platonist understanding of the theory of Ideas. Derrida argues in “*Khôra*” that *khôra* is necessarily incoherent and that this truth has been systematically ignored in scholarship on the dialogue. He claims that any philosopher faces an insurmountable difficulty when trying to speak about, name, or think *khôra-itself*. This reveals that Platonist structures of speech and thought, which emerge from foundational binaries such as Being/Becoming, cannot receive *khôra*. Derrida concludes that *khôra* must be thought like *différance*, that is precisely as a (non)origin before the beginning of sense, truth, and being as conceived by Platonism. As such, *khôra* calls attention to the limits of system-itself starting with that hegemonic system of thought Derrida calls Platonism, the metaphysics of presence, or simply philosophy. While it is merely implied in “Plato’s Pharmacy”, here Derrida explicitly scrutinizes the way that Platonism has forcibly assimilated *Khôra* into its system through an act of “violent reversion”.²⁸¹ Thus, Derrida’s “*Khôra*” is also concerned with reception, with how the *Timaeus*, and in particular *khôra*, has been received into the logic of Platonism and with what exceeds or precedes that attempt.

II. *Timaeus’ Khôra*

A. *Timaeus 47e – 51a*

Timaeus first introduces what Derrida uniformly refers to as *khôra* mid-way through his speech, after announcing that he must re-start his cosmogony. Thus far he has described the cosmos as it issues from Reason alone. *Timaeus* must now give an account of creation from the errant cause, Necessity (ἀνάγκη), for the cosmos actually came into being from both Reason and

²⁸¹ Derrida, “*Khôra*,” 120.

Necessity. This new starting point necessitates that he introduces a third kind (τρίτον γένος), whereas the previous account from Reason only introduced two forms (εἶδη), the intelligible Paradigm and the sensible Image. These two were sufficient for an account of creation from Reason alone, but not for a cosmogony that proceeds from both Reason and Necessity. After reissuing the warning that his cosmogony is merely a likely account, Timaeus calls once again upon the gods for “safe passage through a strange and unusual exposition [...] to a view of what is likely.”²⁸² So he begins again from a new starting point.

From the beginning Timaeus’ discourse on *khôra* is fraught with confusion. Timaeus warns his audience that this will be the case because he is now compelled to reveal by words (ἐπιχειρεῖν λόγοις ἐμφανίσαι) a form (εἶδος) that is difficult and obscure (χαλεπὸν καὶ ἀμυδρὸν).²⁸³ He starts from what is clear, that *khôra* is a third kind of form and as such must have an essence to distinguish it from other forms. Thus Timaeus asks, what essential properties can we claim for this baffling third kind? He answers, “[t]his above all: it is a *receptacle* of all becoming – its wetnurse, as it were.”²⁸⁴ From this initial attempt at a definition, which relies completely on metaphor, it is obvious that Timaeus’ discourse on *khôra* is not within what Derrida calls the order of proper or philosophical sense.²⁸⁵ Nonetheless, Timaeus declares the preceding definition true, although admittedly not very clear. As he continues to elaborate on this initial definition of *khôra*’s essence, Timaeus produces a series of metaphors, images, and similes. He never provides rational, philosophically rigorous proof of the truth of his statements about *khôra*, something Derrida argues is actually impossible.²⁸⁶ In the dialogue, however, we are

²⁸² *Timaeus* 48d-e.

²⁸³ 49a.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁵ He also argues that it is not within the order of metaphorical sense. See Section III, B below.

²⁸⁶ Derrida, 93.

asked to make do with the cosmogony's likely nature, which does not preclude the possibility that *khôra* has an essence capable of being described with a rational account. Timaeus reminds us that stating it "more clearly" would be "a difficult task", but a difficult task is not impossible.²⁸⁷

Timaeus continues his account of *khôra*'s essence by introducing the problem of the elements.²⁸⁸ The four elements morph into one another and so it is difficult to definitively identify any particular element at any particular time as belonging to a type, or as Timaeus puts it, because of their instability one cannot describe them using the words 'this' or 'suchlike'. By contrast, one can describe as 'this' or 'suchlike' that wherein they appear and that wherefrom they perish because it has stability and is not in constant flux. *Khôra* is like this kind of static, underlying substance that gives place to the fluctuations of the four elements. Similarly, one can mold any number of figures into a piece of gold, so that if asked the question 'what is this?', the safest and most consistently accurate answer would be, 'it is gold'. While the different golden figures come into being and pass away, only the underlying material is stable enough in its properties to be considered a being with an essence.²⁸⁹ The gold is therefore also analogous to that which receives all bodies, what will later be explicitly named *khôra* (χώρα) or 'place'.

Satisfied at the moment with these metaphors, Timaeus explains the relationship between *khôra* and the other two principles of his cosmos, the Paradigm (Being) and its Images (Becoming). *Khôra* receives all Becoming; sensible copies of the intelligible Paradigm are stamped into it in a marvelous and hard to describe fashion.²⁹⁰ Timaeus illustrates the relationship using a genealogical metaphor. *Khôra* is like a Mother, the intelligible Paradigm is like a Father, and the Images are like their Offspring, engendered between the two. This metaphor aligns with

²⁸⁷ *Timaeus* 49a.

²⁸⁸ 49c-50a.

²⁸⁹ 50c.

²⁹⁰ "...τυπωθέντα ἀπ' αὐτῶν τρόπων τινὰ δύσφραστον καὶ θαυμαστόν..." (50c).

ancient Greek biology according to which the father is completely responsible for the formal essence of the child while the mother provides the place and space to incubate it. Timaeus underscores this view when he explains that *khôra* has no properties or forms of its own, otherwise these would interact with and distort the properties of the varied images it receives. To reinforce this point Timaeus presents yet another image: *khôra* is like the odourless base of a perfume, which the perfume-makers choose precisely because it must not interfere with the fragrant components introduced into it. For this reason, we must conclude that *khôra* is void of all forms.²⁹¹ Nonetheless, much like the odourless base of the perfume smells like whatever fragrances are added to it, *khôra* appears like the things that it receives into it although it does not have any of them as its own attributes. Timaeus concludes by admonishing that we must not speak of her, this Mother, Nurse, and Receptacle, as any of the four material elements. If we wish to speak truly, we must describe her as “a Kind invisible and unshaped, all-receptive, and in some most perplexing and most baffling way partaking of the intelligible.”²⁹² With this statement, Timaeus’ description of *khôra*’s essential properties reaches its first conclusion.

B. Timaeus’ ‘rational argument’ for khôra’s essence: 51b3 – 52d2

Perhaps recognizing a need for clarity in the above account, Timaeus begins a new explanation of *khôra*’s essence and announces, “[b]ut we must prefer to conduct our inquiry by means of a rational argument.”²⁹³ Timaeus reasons that this new attempt should begin from a clear distinction to secure that it will be more rational and exacting. Thus, he needs to provide proof of the distinction between the things-themselves, i.e. the intelligible Ideas, and their images. Nonetheless, he does not want to append a rather long proof onto this already lengthy discourse, so he will settle for a more obvious distinction, *viz.* that between knowledge (*voûç*) and

²⁹¹ 50e-51a.

²⁹² 51a.

²⁹³ “Καθ’ ὅσον δὲ ἐκ τῶν προειρημένων δυνατόν ἐφικνεῖσθαι τῆς φύσεως αὐτοῦ, τῆδ’ ἂν τις ὀρθότατα λέγοι” (51b).

true opinion (δόξα ἀληθής). If it is the case that knowledge and true opinion are distinct, then it must also be the case that the Ideas are intelligible and distinct from their sensible images. Timaeus explains knowledge comes from instruction and is resistant to persuasion, is accompanied by true accounts, and found among few men. True opinion, however, is common among all men and arises from persuasion and is vulnerable to it. Since we come to knowledge and opinion differently, Timaeus affirms that they must have distinct objects and thus the purely intelligible Paradigm and its sensible Images must also be distinct.²⁹⁴ From this inference, he concludes that there must be a third kind that gives place to the interaction between the Paradigm and its Images. This is because if the Images are likenesses of the Paradigm and yet are distinct from it, and all that is generated must be generated *in* something and somewhere, then the likenesses cannot come to be in the Paradigm. If this were the case, it would mean that the Paradigm and its Images “at the same time become one and the same, and also two.”²⁹⁵ Since this is impossible, Timaeus concludes that there must necessarily be three distinct principles – the Paradigm, its Images, and *khôra*.

With his account on more solid footing, Timaeus re-articulates *khôra*'s relationship to the other two kinds. Specifically, he describes *khôra* in relation to their existence, their essence, and man's apprehension of them.

Figure 1

Kind	Existence	Essence	Apprehension
<i>Khôra</i>	Exists always and cannot be destroyed.	Provides a fixed state for all things that come to be.	Apprehended by a kind of bastard reasoning that does not involve sense perception.

²⁹⁴ Cf. footnote 10 above. Timaeus' argument is shared by Platonists who connect the necessity of the Ideas to the distinction between knowledge and mere opinion.

²⁹⁵ 52d1.

Paradigm	Has not been brought into being and is not destroyed.	Keeps its own form unchangingly. Neither receives into itself anything else, nor itself enters into anything else. Is one thing.	Invisible and intelligible. Cannot be perceived by the senses at all. It is the role of the understanding to study it
Images	Begotten [...] now coming to be in a certain place and then perishing out of it.	Shares the Paradigm's name and resembles it.	Perceived by the senses, apprehended by opinion, which involves sense perception.

Khôra shares characteristics with both the Paradigm and its Images and yet differs significantly from both. While it appears to share in Being with the Paradigm in that both exist and cannot be destroyed, *khôra* is similar to the Images in that its essence is defined through its relation to things outside of itself. *Khôra* is unlike the Images, however, because it does not derive its meaning from rational concepts. *Khôra's* unique existence and essence seem to necessitate a unique category of apprehension as well. Timaeus makes five claims about how one might apprehend or think of *khôra*:

- (1) It is apprehensible by a kind of bastard reasoning (λογισμῷ τινὶ νόθῳ)
- (2) And by the aid of a non-sensation/ does not involve sensation (ἀναισθησίας)
- (3) It is barely an object of belief/conviction (μόγις πιστόν)
- (4) We look at it as in a dream (ὄνειροπολοῦμεν βλέποντες)
- (5) So, we can only affirm that it is necessary for existence (ἀναγκαῖον)²⁹⁶

Timaeus concludes that because of (1) to (5), even upon waking, we are unable to state the truth about *khôra* or come to its aid with a rational λόγος. Unsurprisingly, parsing out these five claims brings us no closer to a clear understanding of man's apprehension of *khôra*. In fact, while Timaeus alleges that this second attempt at defining *khôra* is more exacting and rational than his previous image-laden account, upon scrutiny it is clear that the above statements are no more

²⁹⁶ 52b.

rigorous than comparing *khôra* to a piece of gold. For example, Timaeus claims that *khôra* is apprehensible by a “bastard reasoning” without defining where this kind of reasoning would fall within the Platonic schemas that define reason in contrast to opinion, i.e. the very distinction upon which this account began. Adding confusion, Timaeus claims that this “bastard reasoning” is aided by ἀναισθησίας or a want or lack of sensation.²⁹⁷ The illegitimacy of this mode of reasoning is therefore not due to its mixing with sensation. Nonetheless, one can only speculate on what exactly Timaeus means by ἀναισθησίας and how it joins with bastardized reasoning. This confusion is not helped by the final addition that *khôra* is hardly even an object of conviction or belief. In total, Timaeus asserts that one cannot reason about it, cannot sense it, and can hardly hold an opinion or belief about it. To the soul, *khôra* is unlike any other existent thing. Timaeus nonetheless insists that there must exist a third kind whose strange essence is to receive all images of the Paradigm because it is *necessary to explain the existent cosmos*. In one effort Timaeus declares the impossibility of reasoning about or sensing *khôra* and at the same time insists on its necessary existence.

C. Conclusion

Timaeus makes two attempts at defining *khôra* and neither one results in a clear account of its essence. The reader is duly warned to expect this outcome, yet Timaeus still leaves interpreters with a hermeneutic challenge. He appears to render his own likely account of *khôra* inapprehensible outside of “bastard reasoning” in a “dream-like” state. The remaining dialogue offers no assistance for this difficulty; Timaeus neatly summarizes his account and moves on:

²⁹⁷ The term ἀναισθησία was used by Aristotle to mean “want of feeling or perception; insensibility to pleasure or pain”. The adverbial form was also found in the writings of Isocrates, Thucydides, and Demosthenes with similar meaning. Cf. LSJ.

Let this, then, be a summary of the account I would offer, as computed by my 'vote.' There are being, [*khôra*] and becoming, three distinct things which existed even before the universe came to be.²⁹⁸

Although he has affirmed its necessary existence multiple times, Timaeus provides no way of understanding the distinction between *khôra* and the other two kinds, no rational definition of *khôra*'s essence, and thus no way of thinking *khôra-itself*. We will see below that Derrida's analysis works within this abyss or chasm in the middle of Timaeus' cosmogony, or one might say, before the very origin of his universe.

III. Derrida's "*Khôra*"

Derrida's deconstruction demonstrates that the impossibility of naming, speaking, or thinking about *khôra* reveals the *mise en abyme* or "putting into the abyss" underlying all attempts at bringing being to presence. The recurrent Derridean phrase *mise en abyme* refers to an infinite representation of representation and one way to imagine it is as a mirror facing a mirror endlessly reflecting itself to itself. Deconstructing the metaphysics of presence reveals this abyss of representation that is in place of the traditionally conceived origin of pure presence. Recall, for example, Derrida's claim quoted in Chapter One that "one must recognize that there is *a supplement at the source*."²⁹⁹ In "*Khôra*", Derrida tries to demonstrate how *khôra* traces this originary play of the supplement in the *Timaeus* and into the system of Platonism itself. Although he does not explicitly refer to *différance*, Derrida draws a parallel between the effect of *khôra* on Platonism and the *mise en abyme*. Gayle L. Ormiston remarks in her essay "The Economy of Duplicity: *Différance*" that two tropes Derrida uses to discuss *différance* are analogues of the *mise en abyme*: the "bottomlessness of infinite redoubling" and the "bottomless chessboard".³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ *Timaeus* 52d.

²⁹⁹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 304.

³⁰⁰ Ormiston, "The Economy of Duplicity: *Différance*," 46-47.

Thinking of *différance*, Ormiston continues, naturally leads to thought of the abyss of representation. Likewise in “*Khôra*” Derrida shows that *khôra* functions as an analogue of *différance* by announcing a *mise en abyme* at the origin of Timaeus’ universe. Through expanded commentary on three statements from his essay, this section recreates Derrida’s deconstruction of *khôra*. Each analyzed statement develops the thesis that *khôra*, as it is presented in Plato’s text, is an analogue of *différance* misunderstood by Platonism. First, we examine the claim that when thinking or speaking about *khôra* “[t]ropology and anachronism are inevitable.”³⁰¹ Second, we look at Derrida’s conclusion that:

...the discourse on *khôra* is no longer a discourse on being, it is neither true nor probable and appears thus to be heterogeneous to myth, at least to mytho-logic, to this philosopho-mytheme which orders myth to its philosophical telos.³⁰²

Finally, the chapter concludes by exploring the claim that:

[p]hilosophy cannot speak philosophically of that which looks like its ‘mother,’ its ‘nurse,’ its ‘receptacle,’ or its ‘imprint-bearer.’ As such, it speaks only of the father and the son, as if the father engendered it all on his own.³⁰³

In many ways Derrida’s entire essay elaborates this final quote, thus mirroring Timaeus’ own discourse on *khôra*, which elaborates his first definition of the third kind.

A. Tropology and anachronism

Tropology and anachronism are inevitable. (94)

A discourse on *khôra* is always both tropological and anachronistic. The compound word ‘trop-ology’ refers to a logical structure of tropes that populate similes and metaphors. ‘Trope’ conjures up repetition and cliché as well as the meanings derived from its root in the Greek *τρόπος* meaning turn, style, manner, or way. Tropology, in this case, references Derrida’s theory that all meaning is created through repetition or the turning of the word/concept in on itself in the

³⁰¹ Derrida, “*Khôra*,” 94.

³⁰² *Ibid.* 113.

³⁰³ *Ibid.* 126.

never-ending play of supplementation. Platonism, a logical system of interrelated concepts, is formed through this endless repetition. It is as if repetition or μίμησις is the prototypical Platonist trope, present without fail in every word, thought, or concept. A discourse on *khôra* is tropological because it borrows from established and iterable concepts whose interrelated meanings are governed by a logical structure. This logical structure is organized according to familiar, Platonist hierarchical binaries many of which were discussed at length in “Plato’s Pharmacy” and in Chapter Two. Derrida argues that these binaries underlie a “tropological texture” involved in all interpretation, discourse, and thought of *khôra*.³⁰⁴ For example, Timaeus designates *khôra* as female and associates it with a mother or a nurse whose role in creation is to receive. Platonist binaries such as male/female and active/passive govern the connection between the figures of a mother, nurse, and female receptivity. With this in mind, Derrida leaves *khôra* untranslated as a gesture meant to bring this tropology to light. Any act of translation necessarily operates within the tropological structure and is therefore both decisive and exclusionary. In what may be a largely symbolic gesture, Derrida seeks to halt this incessant exchange of figures by remaining loyal to one word, which he nonetheless warns is no more proper or fitting of *khôra* than any other.³⁰⁵

Discourse on *khôra* is also anachronistic because Platonist tropologies organize the meaning of Being and its likeness, Becoming, whereas *khôra* gives place to the interaction of Being and Becoming and thus precedes any meaning that would issue from this mixture.³⁰⁶ All the various translations, figures, analogies, similes, and other ways of speaking about or thinking *khôra* are always inadequate because – and I must also anachronistically borrow from this

³⁰⁴ Ibid. 93-94.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Ibid. 92

tropology here – they are *khôra*'s offspring. In other words, they organize man's thinking of the *cosmos*, which is born from the interaction between *khôra* and the Paradigm. Therefore the tropology that underlies, for example, Timaeus' analogy between *khôra* and the piece of gold, is anachronistically applied to describe *khôra*. *Khôra* is thought through concepts and a logical structure that owe their existence to *khôra* and could not therefore be proper or adequate descriptions of its function or essence. Nonetheless, there is no way to get outside the anachronistic perspective when thinking or speaking about *khôra* because Platonist structures of meaning inform philosophical language. In fact, the anachronistic tropology of Platonism gives *khôra* its 'essence' and is what allows Timaeus to name *khôra* a receptacle, place, or imprint-bearer. Thus Derrida's concern is not with finding some impossible way to approach *khôra* beyond tropology and anachronism – they are *inevitable* – but instead to alert that this problem has gone undetected in the history of interpretation.

Derrida intends to shift the conversation on *khôra* from fruitless attempts to define its essence, which are always plagued by anachronism and tropology, to an analysis of why it is that *khôra* sits so uneasily within Platonism. Many interpreters of the *Timaeus* “gamble here on the resources of rhetoric without ever wondering about them” and fail to see the insufficiency of Platonist tropes for describing *khôra*.³⁰⁷ Without this crucial first insight, they are content to confine their analyses to the content of Timaeus' discourse on *khôra* and not to the tradition that Timaeus' speech operates within. This interpretive decision is quite strange, Derrida remarks, considering that Timaeus himself indicates that *khôra* interacts problematically with the distinction between the intelligible and the sensible. Thus Derrida writes, “this problem of rhetoric – particularly of the possibility of naming – is, here, no mere side issue.”³⁰⁸ In fact, the

³⁰⁷ Ibid. 92.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

problem of the possibility of naming *khôra-itself* is one way of expressing the essential difficulty that *khôra* presents to Platonist ontology and metaphysics. In short, *khôra* cannot be named because it has no definable essence; therefore we are incapable of distinguishing it from other existents. Derrida suggests that Timaeus' need to defer to myth and metaphor is not a result of his poor understanding or inability to express his ideas clearly. All known orders of discourse, including both mythical and philosophical discourse, emerge from the foundational opposition between Being and Becoming. Since *khôra* gives place to this opposition, Derrida reasons that one cannot subject *khôra* to the laws that it itself situates – except, of course, anachronistically. He calls attention to this fact because he wants to question how it is *khôra* could exist beyond its names. Could *khôra-itself* be, or does *khôra* only 'exist' in the naming of its figures and likenesses? Derrida begins this conversation in "*Khôra*" and explains how *khôra* does not exist in a way that can be determined by philosophy.

B. Khôra, mythemes, and philosophemes

...the discourse on khôra is no longer a discourse on being, it is neither true nor probable and appears thus to be heterogeneous to myth, at least to mytho-logic, to this philosopho-mytheme which orders myth to its philosophical telos. (113)

Having shown that all discourse on *khôra* is anachronistic and tropological, Derrida argues that *khôra* is not the proper object of any recognized order of discourse. This argument anticipates the objection that his remarks about tropes and anachronisms are irrelevant given that Timaeus intentionally describes *khôra* metaphorically through images. Derrida counters that whether one characterizes Timaeus' discourse as a $\mu\tilde{\theta}\omicron\varsigma$ or a $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\nu\ \epsilon\iota\kappa\omicron\tau\alpha$ (likely account), these definitions fall within the horizon of a "mytho-logic", which *khôra* escapes from. *Khôra* upsets this logic by being neither the proper object of a rigorous $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ nor of a mythic fable because there is no concept of *khôra-ness* to abstract from its formal expressions. Derrida's deconstruction reveals that *khôra* no longer belongs to the "horizon of sense, nor to that of

meaning as the meaning of being.”³⁰⁹ One can only declare its (baffling) existence without comprehending what or how it ‘is’.

Derrida shows that recognized and legitimate orders of discourse cannot reach *khôra* by critically examining the metalinguistic character of Timaeus’ account. This continues a theme already found in Plato’s narrative fiction where we find Timaeus concerned with the character and limits of his cosmogony and of his discourse on *khôra* in particular. As described above, Timaeus repeatedly qualifies his ability to speak clearly and rationally. For instance, at line 48a, he announces that his account cannot be equated with an account of first principles so his audience should only expect a likely or probable discourse. Recalling Timaeus’ overture at lines 29a-c, it is clear why this is the case. Timaeus explains that a thing grasped by a rational account (πρὸς τὸ λόγῳ) and thought (καὶ φρονήσει) is changeless or self-identical. Whereas the cosmos is created as an image of the Paradigm, it follows that any account of the cosmos will have the same likely character as the image (εἰκόνοϛ) it describes. Do not be surprised therefore, Timaeus tells his audience, if the accounts he produces on things such as the coming-to-be of the cosmos are not entirely consistent or accurate.

Before turning directly to Derrida’s analysis, it is worthwhile to draw out some of the difficulties inherent in Timaeus’ self-assessment. Timaeus claims that his account of the cosmos is merely likely because the cosmos is coming-into-being. Like the Paradigm, however, *khôra* is a metaphysical principle that is not in a state of becoming. We can accept Timaeus’ likely account of the Paradigm only on the condition that its character is due to external constraints and not the subject-matter itself. The Paradigm is undoubtedly best described through a clear and rational λόγος and it is dependent on the individual’s soul to be fit for the task. Although Timaeus does not give a rational account of the Paradigm here, its essence is understandable through

³⁰⁹ Ibid. 93.

reason.³¹⁰ Moreover, Timaeus chose to give a likely account because his goal is to describe the cosmos, not to give a rational account of first principles.³¹¹ It is more difficult to accept that this is the case for *khôra*. Plato is unclear about whether Timaeus believes it would be possible to give a rational account of *khôra* in different circumstances. On the one hand, Timaeus claims that what he states about *khôra* is true, and while it needs to be stated more clearly, this is a very difficult task.³¹² On the other hand, a few lines later, Timaeus claims that even upon waking from our dream-like state we would be unable to distinguish *khôra-itself*.³¹³ The inherent problem is that *khôra* belongs to neither recognized genus of being; it does not come-into-being like the images it receives and without a determinate essence it cannot be classified as a self-same being like the Paradigm. If a likely account is suited to a likeness like the cosmos, and a rational account is suited to the Paradigm, what kind of account is suited to *khôra*? Moreover, how could one ever affirm that what is said of *khôra* is true or false? The *Timaeus* never answers these question directly. Derrida isolates these difficulties in his deconstructive reading, beginning with the problem of determining if *khôra-itself* is the proper object of a μῦθος or λόγος.

From the start Derrida rejects the idea that there could be a rational discourse on *khôra*. He recalls “that the discourse on *khôra*, as it is *presented*, does not proceed from the natural or legitimate *logos*.”³¹⁴ Nonetheless, one cannot safely assume on this basis that the discourse must be a μῦθος. Derrida asks:

Does such a discourse derive, then, from myth? Shall we gain access to the thought of the *khôra* by continuing to place our trust in the alternative *logos/mythos*? And what if this thought called *also* for a third genus of discourse?

³¹⁰ Timaeus may not think that limited human reason can achieve this [Cf. 29c-d], but the point here is that the impossibility of giving a rational account of *khôra* is not the same as the inability of mankind to give a rational account of the Paradigm.

³¹¹ Cf. *Timaeus* 51b-e.

³¹² 49a.

³¹³ 52b-c.

³¹⁴ Derrida, 90.

And what if, perhaps as in the case of the *khôra*, this appeal to the third genre was only the moment of a detour in order to signal toward a genre beyond genre? Beyond categories, and above all beyond categorical oppositions, which in the first place allow it to be approached or said?”³¹⁵

These questions provoke us to think about the consequences *khôra* brings to bear on a system that defines μῦθος and λόγος according to a hierarchical relationship. With a short aside on how Hegel’s “speculative dialectic inscribes mythic thought in a teleological perspective”, Derrida explains how he reads the “mytho-logic” of Platonism.³¹⁶ According to Hegel, Derrida writes, “the mytheme *will have been* only a prephilosopheme offered and promised to a dialectical *Aufhebung*.”³¹⁷ Hegelian philosophy views the signified concept as the unchanging meaning or essence that can be clothed in progressive formal presentations. This schema, Derrida argues, cannot apply to *khôra* because it does not fulfill the criteria of a concept; a hidden truth insinuated by Timaeus’ struggle to outline for it a third genus of discourse and apprehension. *Khôra* has no essence beyond its formal presentation and no force of abstraction can isolate its concept from its form. When one tries to go behind the metaphors, images, and similes to grasp the concept itself, there is nothing there. Thus thought on *khôra* cannot submit to the Hegelian *Aufhebung* because behind its metaphorical formal supplement is yet another supplement. *Khôra* is not properly a Nurse or Mother, and equally, it is not metaphorically a Nurse or a Mother.³¹⁸ Both modes – the philosophical and the metaphoric – reach out toward an unchanging essence that *khôra* does not possess. Therefore, Timaeus’ “timidly preliminary” remarks that *khôra* would

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Ibid. 100. Derrida connects Hegel’s position to Platonism. Cf. “...this logico-philosophical evaluation is not applied to Plato. It derives already from a certain ‘Platonism.’ Hegel does not read Plato through Aristotle as if doing something unknown to Plato, as if he [Hegel] were deciphering a practice whose meaning would have remained inaccessible to the author of the *Timaeus*.” (Ibid. 102-103).

³¹⁷ Ibid. 100-101.

³¹⁸ Ibid. 92.

require a third kind of discourse and thought, let us glimpse the silhouette of a ‘logic’ that would defy Platonist “mytho-logic”.

In an illuminating footnote Derrida explains why it is important for philosophers to acknowledge this. While they have taken up the task of analyzing the different images of *khôra*, philosophers have neglected to question the “meta-linguistic or meta-interpretative recourse to these values of metaphor, of comparison, or of image.”³¹⁹ The use of tropes to describe *khôra* is inevitable, but this does not preclude a deconstructive critique of their operation in Plato’s text and in the texts of interpretations of the dialogue. Moreover, the peculiar case of *khôra* makes the need for such a deconstruction especially obvious. Derrida’s argument against a Hegelian categorization of Plato’s metaphors for *khôra* in the *Timaeus* could be applied to any Platonist concept. With the thought of *khôra* specifically, however, the rhetorical code governing these tropes comes up against its own limit. Not only are the *khôra* passages some of the most enigmatic in the Platonic corpus, but *Timaeus* gives *khôra* a power and role that seems to explicitly defy metaphysical dualism. With *khôra* the structural law of Platonism ceases to be obviously or immediately relevant because it is constructed on the basis of oppositional concepts³²⁰ “from which *khôra* precisely escapes” according to the text.³²¹ Derrida’s deconstruction thus reveals two often overlooked things. First, that *khôra* can only be made intelligible through metaphorical detours, and second, that as a result of the first, the hierarchical opposition between metaphorical sense and proper sense encounters its limit with thought of *khôra*. Recognizing this limit does not deprive the structural law of its value, but it does restrict its power. While the case of *khôra* makes this problem particularly acute, Derrida even questions

³¹⁹ Ibid. n.1, 146.

³²⁰ Derrida gives the examples of intelligible/sensible and eidos/image.

³²¹ Ibid.

the choice to borrow “from a certain Platonic tradition (metaphor is a sensory detour for acceding to an intelligible meaning)” to read Plato at all, a thought he expands on later when he turns to Platonism as violent reversion.³²²

Clearly Derrida’s argument that *khôra* is neither the proper object of a μῦθος nor a λόγος must be understood in conjunction with his claim that *khôra* has no determinate essence because language gives *khôra* form. This is problematic in-itself for Derrida. All interpretations of *khôra* “always consist in *giving form* to it by determining it”, he writes, even though this is precisely what *khôra* promises not to do in its role in Timaeus’ cosmogony.³²³ Timaeus does not abide by his own rules. He describes *khôra*’s essence as its power to receive the likenesses of the Paradigm while maintaining an essential separation from them and gives *khôra* form through the “anthropomorphic schemas of the verb *to receive* and the verb *to give*.”³²⁴ Timaeus names *khôra* a “place”, “receptacle”, “Nurse”, “Mother”, “unformed gold”, and “inert perfume base”. Each image illustrates *khôra*’s power by comparing it to existents defined by the actions of giving and/or receiving. Derrida argues that these images fall short of explaining how *khôra-itself* receives beyond metaphor and comparison. Since *khôra* is not one of the received types of existent, i.e. it is not sensible or intelligible, it cannot be received by philosophical discourse, which includes metaphorical or mythological discourse within its purview.³²⁵ Although one may provisionally say that *khôra* is like any number of existents that receive or give place, one still fails to express anything meaningful about *khôra-itself*. In other words, there is no progressing beyond this likely account because *khôra* is nothing but the images it receives into itself and yet it is also specifically not these images. Furthermore, we cannot accept that a metaphorical account

³²² Ibid. See below Section C.

³²³ Ibid. 94.

³²⁴ Ibid. 95.

³²⁵ Ibid. 97.

is the proper mode for describing *khôra* because the $\mu\tilde{\upsilon}\theta\omicron\varsigma$ can only have meaning in its relation to the $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\varsigma$. If this relationship is corrupted and one cannot grasp hold of the logical concept provisionally cloaked in a mythic shell, then one enters an abyss of representation populated by nothing but signifiers. This is precisely what thought on *khôra*'s essence leads to according to Derrida's reading.

Yet, even outside of his metaphors and images, Timaeus steadfastly insistence that *khôra* receives. He says of *khôra*, "If we describe her as a Kind invisible and unshaped, all-receptive [...] we shall describe her truly."³²⁶ Derrida argues that to properly attribute the differentia "all-receptive" to *khôra* would be to remove all meaning from the description. *Khôra* must receive in a peculiar manner unlike that of all known existents. Firstly, because *khôra* receives in such a way that leaves it devoid of attributes. Secondly, it is difficult to grasp what reception would mean outside of Platonist structures of meaning that determine, for example, the system of gift and debt that provides the context for the dialogue. *Khôra* exceeds these structures and cannot be defined by them. Hence Derrida says, "*Khôra* must not receive for *her own sake*, so she must not *receive*."³²⁷ Receptivity, whether applied to *khôra* as a metaphorical or proper description, is yet another figure that *khôra* gives place to but cannot claim as its own.

What is Derrida's *khôra*? It is nothing but the things that it receives and the process of receiving them; it is also not reducible to these things and this process, thus there is some kind of excess or remainder. This excess does not belong to the horizon of being and cannot be given form through philosophical discourse. It may appear, however, that *khôra* is a kind of super-essentiality, which could be accessible through a peculiar mode of understanding like the *via negativa* of theology. A.E. Taylor's commentary on the dialogue raises this possibility. Taylor

³²⁶ *Timaeus* 51a.

³²⁷ Derrida, 98.

concludes that Timaeus can only use a bastard form of reasoning to understand *khôra* because, although it exists, one cannot ascribe determinate predicates to it.³²⁸ He believes it is possible that Timaeus' "bastard reasoning" is a way of tempering Parmenides' position on apprehending the nothingness of space. Where Parmenides claimed that one could not think of space because one must always think of something with a positive character, Timaeus says one can think of the nothingness of space but only through an illegitimate mode of reasoning.³²⁹ To grasp *khôra* we need to empty our mind of all determinate figures and think of it in an illegitimate and dream-like state. Thus "bastard reasoning" is simply Timaeus' description for a mode of apprehension that would reach out toward a being defined by its formlessness and lack of positive attributes.

According to Derrida, however, one can only grasp something like *khôra* through the play of the abyss of representation. Taylor's position that "bastard reasoning" is a kind of palliation of Parmenides' claim, can be rebutted by Derrida's argument that *khôra* is not the proper object of a *μῦθος* or a *λόγος*. "Bastard reasoning" would not escape from Derrida's deconstruction unless it was meant as a kind of apprehension beyond the logic of philosophy. As a recognized mode of apprehension, "bastard reasoning" would produce a corresponding thought or conception in the soul that could be classified according to the Platonist schema wherein all meaning originates from a being-present. The discourse that emerged from "bastard reasoning" would therefore fall somewhere within hierarchical binaries like truth/falsity and *λόγος/μῦθος* and Derrida's deconstructive critique would still apply. Alternatively, if one reads "bastard reasoning" as exceeding Platonist structures of meaning, then there is no discrepancy between this position and Derrida's. This, however, does not mean that Derrida regards *khôra* as a kind of metaphysical super-essentiality. Chapter One described how Derrida dismisses the idea that *différance*, his

³²⁸ Taylor, *A Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, 343.

³²⁹ *Ibid.* 344-45.

(non)origin of all that is being-present, can be thought in this way. A super-essentiality, or some kind of ineffable mode of being, is still reducible to binary onto-theological categories because it is still a type of presence.³³⁰ Derrida's analysis of *khôra* follows the same 'logic'. In "*Khôra*" he argues that there is *khôra*, but "what *there* is, there, is not [...and] it will be risky to see in it the equivalent of an *es gibt*."³³¹ All negative theology implies an *es gibt*, he continues, but *khôra* like *différance* or the *mise en abyme* is not a present-being of any genus. One can always produce a deconstruction of a mode of apprehending *khôra-itself*, whether it is "bastard reasoning", the *via negativa*, or something similar. Likewise there is no value in searching for a genre of discourse that would let us approach *khôra-itself*, because there *is* no *khôra-itself*. Thus, Derrida concludes one can declare *khôra*, but no discourse could give *khôra* meaning because it has no presence for acts of language to gesture toward.

A discourse on *khôra* must, therefore, play within the abyss because it gives to be thought that which is neither sensory nor intelligible being. It is not possible to inscribe *khôra* within a discourse, even a merely probable myth like the one Timaeus tells, because it exceeds "the constitutive oppositions of mytho-logic as such."³³² Thus in Derrida's analysis, when we speak or think about *khôra*, we never reach it-itself. Whatever exists beyond the horizon of Being and its likeness is something that language (speech or thought) is not equipped to describe. This does not mean that *khôra* is nothing; it does mean that *khôra* is "nothing that may be and be said ontologically."³³³ Derrida is careful to point out the subtle difference here. *Khôra* is an excess that cannot be reduced to any conceptual categories received by philosophical logic. When speaking or thinking about *khôra*, one actually brings to mind those things inscribed in *khôra* that

³³⁰ Cf. Ch.1, 37

³³¹ Derrida, 96.

³³² Ibid. 113.

³³³ Ibid. 99.

have meanings present for us. This is an act of violent reversion, and like the *pharmakon*, *khôra* will always have a remainder that resists this determination.

C. *Mise en Abyme*

Philosophy cannot speak philosophically of that which looks like its 'mother,' its 'nurse,' its 'receptacle,' or its 'imprint-bearer.' As such, it speaks only of the father and the son, as if the father engendered it all on his own. (126)

Throughout “*Khôra*” Derrida laments that philosophy has hitherto ignored that *khôra* corrupts philosophical logic by exceeding its horizon. The previous two sections reconstruct Derrida’s arguments that we cannot speak, think, or name *khôra* and concluded that *khôra* exceeds the logical structure of meaning that governs Being and its likeness Becoming. The third and final quote under analysis summarizes Derrida’s deconstruction of Timaeus’ genealogical metaphor that designates the Paradigm the Father, *khôra* the Mother, and the created cosmos their Offspring.³³⁴ This deconstruction reveals the main conclusions of Derrida’s essay; that *khôra* cannot be thought of as an ‘origin’ and that philosophy-as-Platonism is a “violent reversion” upon Plato’s text.

In one of his images for *khôra*, Timaeus uses a genealogical metaphor to situate it as a principle of the cosmos. This is a familiar trope employed in creation myths and elsewhere in the Platonic corpus. In Timaeus’ cosmogony, *khôra* resembles a Mother who couples with the Father to bring forth Offspring. The tropological texture underlying this metaphor extends out to include many familiar conceptual oppositions. Nevertheless, like any of the other figures or tropes applied to it, the figure of a ‘mother’ is something *khôra* receives and therefore cannot also be its attribute. Likewise, *khôra* is utterly unique, achronic, and alogical, and therefore could not possibly belong to the genus or race of women. Since one cannot situate *khôra* according to the binary male/female, *khôra* cannot form a couple with the Father or Paradigm. In fact, Derrida

³³⁴ Cf. *Timaeus* 50d.

claims, the Father forms an oppositional couple with the Son, also known as the Intelligible/Sensible or Being/Becoming binary, whereas *khôra* forms a dissymmetrical relation to the Father/Son binary; *khôra* marks a place for the opposition Father/Son, but does not itself couple to produce, engender, or procreate. When philosophy speaks about *khôra* (the mother), it is really speaking about itself, i.e. the interaction between intelligible Being and sensible Becoming (the father and the son), thus forgetting the necessity of *khôra*. This is just another way of saying that all discourse and thought on *khôra* is composed of tropologies anachronistically applied to describe something like *khôra*. The excess that is *khôra* does not belong to the philosophy born from the coupling Father/Son. *Khôra* is pre-originary and gives place without acting as an origin according to any anthropological schemas. Thus, Derrida concludes, *khôra* is before and outside the origin.³³⁵ This abysmal space precedes and exceeds philosophical discourse. Philosophy can only speak philosophically about the images of the Paradigm *khôra* receives, which are used to give form to something *khôra-like*.

This deconstruction reveals that *khôra* places Platonism *en abyme*. Derrida is speaking of the abyss between the intelligible and the sensible, but also of an abyss between Being and the existent, λόγος and μῦθος, and most importantly, between all these conceptual dichotomies and ‘*le tout autre*’. This is the abyss represented by the dissymmetrical relation between the peculiar Mother and the regular coupling of Father/Son. Platonism, which thinks the Father and the Son, is placed into the abyss with the discourse on *khôra*. This is the abyss in which the abyss between the conceptual pairs above is thought; that is, *khôra*.³³⁶ In other words, the philosophical discourse on *khôra* is *en abyme*. It takes place in the abyss of representation, in *khôra*. For all of the reasons stated in sections A and B above, Derrida has shown that speech or thought on *khôra*

³³⁵ Derrida, 123.

³³⁶ Ibid. 104.

is entirely composed of the images which *khôra* receives. Such that the discourse on *khôra* enacts the *mise en abyme* by reflecting the images upon themselves, pointing from one image to another and back again. There is no philosopheme behind the mythemes, there are only images and reflections of images. Derrida argues that this is prefigured in Plato's fiction as well. He speaks of Socrates' receiving of the speeches and the system of gift and debt, the politics of the giving and receiving of children, wives, and occupations in his ideal city, and Critias' tale of receiving Athenian pre-history and the chain of oral traditions. For Derrida, the *Timaeus* is a series of "receptacles of narrative receptacles" all of which are said to take place in *khôra*. *Khôra* is the receptacle of all tales and discourses composed of philosophemes and mythemes and also of the logic that governs them, *viz.* philosophy-as-Platonism. But in giving place to philosophy, *khôra-itself* exceeds or precedes it all.³³⁷

Therefore when philosophy speaks about or thinks *khôra*, it only does so as a "violent reversion". By philosophy Derrida undoubtedly means the kind of Platonism described in Chapter One and criticized in "Plato's Pharmacy".³³⁸ Derrida's entire project is centred on revealing the limits of the possibility of systematizing the whole, and in "*Khôra*" he explains the privileged place Platonism has in this history of violent reversions:

'Platonism' is not only an example of this movement, the first 'in' the whole history. It commands it, it commands this *whole* history. A philosophy as such would henceforth always be 'Platonic.' Hence the necessity to continue to try to think what takes place in Plato, with Plato, what is shown there, what is hidden, so as to win there or to lose there.³³⁹

Derrida deconstructs *khôra* in the *Timaeus* to reveal how Platonism deconstructs itself in Plato's text. Thus, in "*Khôra*" we find that he draws a more explicit distinction between Plato-the-author

³³⁷ Ibid. 117.

³³⁸ Through deconstruction, Derrida wants to approach *khôra* while avoiding a violent reversion. Chapter Four explores ways in which Derrida's reading of Plato nonetheless does violence to the Platonic texts.

³³⁹ Ibid. 121.

and Platonism than previously expressed in “Plato’s Pharmacy”. In “*Khôra*” Derrida writes that Platonism abstracts an “ontologic” from Plato that, for example, subordinates the mytheme to the philosopheme. This “ontologic” governs both Hegel and Aristotle and countless other philosophers. The “ontologic” of Platonism is not wholly alien to Plato and is neither arbitrary nor illegitimate. Nonetheless, reading the *Timaeus* through this Platonist lens is a “violent reversion”.³⁴⁰ This is not to say that there is something violent about Platonism in particular. In the preface to “Plato’s Pharmacy” Derrida states that any interpretation of a text is violent. It is too often assumed that because Platonism issues from the texts of Plato, it is simply reading the text according to its own logic. Platonism is an abstraction from the heterogeneous fiction of Plato that is then applied back to the text as a means of interpretation. As if – and this is crucial – *as if* it did not already emerge from an interpretation of the text. *As if* Platonism were a sort of natural issuance from the text that did not exclude or cover over any meaning; *as if* such a reading were even possible. Derrida writes:

Once this abstraction has been supercharged and deployed, it will be extended over all the folds of the text, of its ruses, overdeterminations, and reserves, which the abstraction will come to cover up and dissimulate.³⁴¹

Platonism is applied to all of the motifs at work in the *Timaeus*, including those that cannot and should not be dominated by such a law, most notably, *khôra-itself*. Yet this violent reversion is not uniformly successful and cannot contain everything in the text without remainder. Derridean deconstruction works to reveal the remainder lurking in the text. The above deconstruction meant to demonstrate how *khôra* resists this determination and in doing so introduces “a certain disorder, some potential incoherence, and some heterogeneity in the organization of these

³⁴⁰ Ibid. 119-120.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

theses.”³⁴² By declaring that Platonism cannot speak philosophically about *khôra*, Derrida is in effect announcing the limits of its logic and its inability to completely master Plato’s texts.

³⁴² Ibid. 120-121.

CHAPTER FOUR: Plato Exits the Pharmacy

I. An Answer to the Derridean Critique of the *Phaedrus* and the *Timaeus*

Derrida frames his deconstructions of Plato by the polemic between postmodernism and Platonism. He explicitly aims to show that the metaphysics of presence corrupts itself by failing to master the meaning of the dialogues. He focuses on *pharmakon* and *khôra* for this reason as examples of elements that, to borrow a phrase from Spivak, are “carrying the burden of *différance*” in the texts.³⁴³ They are reminders that difference and deferral always already resist and exceed Platonism’s attempts at mastery. Derrida’s reading of Plato purportedly critiques Platonism, in order to reveal that which lies beyond it. Yet, by framing his deconstruction as a critical response to Platonism, Derrida overlooks the possibility of a Platonic philosophy beyond Platonist doctrine. Recall from Chapter One that what is at stake for Derrida is to examine whether *pharmakon* and *khôra* are “(1) ‘in’ (2) ‘Plato’ (3) ‘Greek words’ (4) that designate ‘Greek things’ (significations or realities)”.³⁴⁴ The proceeding analysis shows that Derrida rigidly identified what ‘Plato’ and ‘Greek’ meant before he approached the dialogues themselves. It is unsurprising, therefore, that his deconstructions implicitly conclude that *pharmakon* and *khôra* are not ‘Greek’ and are not ‘in Plato’ because they resist Platonist structures of meaning. In other words, Derrida’s deconstructions reveal that they are neither Greek nor Platonic according to the self-imposed standards of Platonism. By initiating his deconstruction as a reaction to a particularly Platonist abstraction of the texts, however, Derrida suppresses, covers over, and ignores crucial elements of the dialogues that point toward an anti-Platonist Plato.

It may seem strange to argue that Derrida is inattentive to those aspects of the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus* that resist Platonism. Deconstruction allegedly operates precisely by drawing out

³⁴³ Spivak, xlix.

³⁴⁴ Derrida, “We Other Greeks,” 19.

elements of the texts that undermine Platonism. Nonetheless, Derrida is only attentive to those things that directly corrupt Platonist theses, while ignoring alternative avenues for exploration. Earlier we described deconstruction as destruction with a view toward construction. After analyzing Derrida's deconstructions of the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*, it appears a more apt description is that he first constructs an interpretation to deconstruct. This method is surprisingly exclusionary. While it shares a will to show how the dialogues resist Platonism, it is not the same as New Wave Plato scholars returning and rethinking the dialogues. The project Derrida undertakes in his reading of Plato and the project of the Platonic New Wave have different goals and methods. In *Postmodern Platos*, for example, Zuckert astutely remarks:

Derrida does not return to the Platonic text to revive a full appreciation of the many layered teaching(s) conveyed by the poetic presentation – in contrast to the doctrines later abstracted by Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger – even though he thinks Plato's art deserves more attention.³⁴⁵

Derrida's deconstruction recognizes that Plato's texts have multiple meanings, but only to criticize the exclusion performed by Platonism. He criticizes Platonism for abstracting one particular meaning from the text and using it to interpret the entire text, covering over any other meanings. Nonetheless in deconstructing the dialogues as *Platonist texts*, Derrida effectively ignores the other possibilities inherent in it, and it is those possibilities that interest the Platonic New Wave. While the Platonic New Wave calls for a more holistic reading of the dialogues, Derrida's project distorts and excludes some of their central meanings. This is an answer to the Derridean critique; not in the form of a rebuttal, but in the form of an invitation to return to Plato beyond Platonism *and* its internal deconstruction.

³⁴⁵ Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, Derrida*, 239.

II. Problems with Derrida's Hermeneutics

According to Gregory Fried, postmodernism has a project of liberation.³⁴⁶ Derridean deconstruction works to free philosophy from totalitarianism, specifically from the metaphysical tradition and its privileging of presence. Derrida sees deconstruction as “a way of reminding the other and reminding me, myself, of the limits of the power, of the mastery.”³⁴⁷ As we saw in Chapter One, some contemporary Plato scholars argue that Platonism is a distortion of the dialogues and a misunderstanding of the project of Platonic philosophy. Derrida also argues that Platonism is a distortion, an abstraction, and a violent reversion. Both projects thus attempt to liberate us from the tyranny of Platonism. They diverge, however, in their characterization of Platonic philosophy. Derrida's treatment of the Greeks and in particular the way that he reads Plato is heavily influenced by Heidegger. His desire to continue Heidegger's critique of the Western tradition means that he makes many of the same assumptions about Platonic philosophy. Derrida, like Heidegger, characterizes the tradition as onto-theology, or alternatively, as the metaphysics of presence.³⁴⁸ Derrida, again like Heidegger, considers Plato the father of this tradition that is still oppressively dominating Western thought.³⁴⁹ Thus Derrida's deconstructions proceed on the assumption that according to Platonism, philosophy brings the unmediated presence of Being into the soul.

Consequently, Derrida and Heidegger assume Plato is dogmatic and doctrinal. For Fried, this assumption stems from the belief that Plato has an *echonic*, not *zetetic* philosophy. *Echonic* philosophy, from the Greek ἔχειν or ‘to have’, claims philosophers can possess truth itself by

³⁴⁶ Fried, 158.

³⁴⁷ Derrida, *Positions*, 385.

³⁴⁸ Zuckert, 201.

³⁴⁹ Heidegger writes that Plato's metaphysics “is present as the all-dominating fundamental reality – long established and thus still in place – of the ever-advancing world history of the planet in this most modern of modern times” (“Plato's Doctrine of Truth,” 181-2).

making it present in their souls without mediation.³⁵⁰ Platonism, as Heidegger and Derrida see it, is undoubtedly *echonic*. They believe that “Platonism is a *theory*, or more to the point, a *doctrine*, and a decisive one for the West, of how philosophy may come into possession of the truth.”³⁵¹ Fried argues that Socrates, as Plato presents him, explicitly does not practice *echonic* philosophy. Socrates is a *zetetic* philosopher, i.e. he is one who seeks. Socrates seeks truth, but he never grasps it. Therefore Socratic dialectic is a never-ending seeking for the transcendent, not a method for grasping the truth. It is employed with the understanding that man cannot absolutely transcend his finitude. Fried concludes, “*zetetic* philosophy is bold enough to depart from the given but modest enough to return to it without laying claim to the final story.”³⁵² The *zetetic* philosopher is therefore free and liberated in that he has shed the will to dogma or to nihilism. He has done so without giving up his conviction that hints of transcendent truth, such as the glimpse of Beauty seen in a beautiful face, intimate what his soul should strive after. His inherent humility, however, frees the philosopher to let Truth guide his actions without a desire to master it by occupying a position of absolute knowledge.³⁵³

Fried argues that the polemical project of postmodernism has trouble getting along with *zetetic* philosophy. He describes a particular caricature of a postmodern anarchist who deconstructs systems of meaning in acts of adolescent rebellion. They see freedom as “a purely negative dialectic” or a tearing down of systems.³⁵⁴ In their view, there is no freedom without there first being tyranny. *Echonic* Platonism is the perfect target because it has reigned unchallenged for much of history. These postmodern anarchists deconstruct Plato to overthrow

³⁵⁰ Fried, 164.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Ibid. 167.

³⁵³ Ibid. 170.

³⁵⁴ Ibid. 166.

the Philosopher-King. They would find it very difficult to continue their polemic against a *zetetic* and humble Socrates who does not set up tyrannical systems. It is not given, however, that Fried's caricature represents Derrida's project and its relationship to Plato. Fried says of Derrida:

Derrida constitutes a particularly difficult case, since he endeavors to show that multiple readings of Plato are possible; yet he does this to overturn the traditional Plato as totalizing idealist and thereby honors Heidegger by trying to go on beyond him in the critique of metaphysics.³⁵⁵

Although Derrida clearly relates to Plato through the polemic between postmodernism and Platonism, in his deconstructions he also recognizes that the dialogues have many voices and many potential meanings. Thus there are reasons to believe that Derrida saw the possibility for a different conception of Platonic philosophy even if he left it largely unexplored. In "We Other Greeks" Derrida explains that he considers his work part of the Greek project because "by insisting upon the deconstruction at work in the 'origin' and already from the 'origin' itself [...] we are still Greeks, certainly, but perhaps other Greeks."³⁵⁶ Nonetheless, Derrida still insists that by pointing to *différance* within the Greek tradition he is "other enough to have not only, also, altered the Greek in us, but to bear within us something wholly other *than* the Greek."³⁵⁷ Derrida moves between identifying his project with Plato's own and seeing his work as wholly other.

Other scholars recognize this tension as well. Zuckert describes Derrida's relationship to Plato as a continuation of the critiques carried out by both Nietzsche and Heidegger before him and that Derrida shows that the dialogues have multiple meanings to support his project's overarching goal to prevent totalitarianism in the form of total rationalization.³⁵⁸ Zuckert's characterization of the Derridean project of liberation is quite similar to Fried's description of

³⁵⁵ Ibid. n.1, 172.

³⁵⁶ Derrida, "We Other Greeks," 27.

³⁵⁷ Ibid. 27-28.

³⁵⁸ Zuckert, 202.

zetetic freedom. Both philosophies see liberation as the absence of a unified rational system of meaning. Yet they differ in that Zuckert claims Derrida does not believe we can control rationalization and the will to totalitarianism. Deconstruction protects us from its worst effects by continuously submitting systems to an internal critique, thereby preventing “the successful imposition of any form of totalitarian order.”³⁵⁹ It accomplishes this by showing that the goal of philosophy from Plato to Husserl – absolute knowledge as the unmediated presence of Being in the soul – is impossible. Therefore its project of liberation necessarily presupposes that Plato’s dialogues share this goal and any other meanings in the texts only prove that this goal is untenable.

Thus Derrida ignores how Plato’s texts *point away from a will to doctrine and dogma*. This allows him to produce his deconstructions, for which Plato must be a Platonist. Derrida’s reading strategy requires that the dialogues have central theses, i.e. Platonist doctrines. Derrida’s misreading of Plato therefore “indict[s] his historical influence rather than his actual thought.”³⁶⁰ “Plato’s Pharmacy” and “*Khôra*” intentionally present interpretations of the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus* that align with Platonist dogma and Derrida forms these interpretations using Platonist hermeneutics. For instance, he identifies the voices of Socrates and Timaeus, i.e. the characters who speak the most, with Plato.³⁶¹ He does not examine the way that the interlocutors interact with one another in their particular contexts.³⁶² While he pays very close attention to Plato’s language, Derrida suggests that the multiplicity of meanings in the texts is more a condition of all texts in a language, rather than an intentional and significant part of Plato’s philosophy. Drew Hyland critiques Derrida for failing to “genuinely integrate the philosophic significance of the

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ Rosen, “The Rhetoric of Jacques Derrida II: Phaedrus,” 236.

³⁶¹ Hyland notes Derrida gives a much more attentive and subtle reading to Nietzsche where he is careful to point out the differences between the philosopher and Zarathustra (98).

³⁶² Zuckert, 224.

dialogue form into his interpretation of Plato.”³⁶³ Derrida certainly does not justify his choice to skip almost half of the *Phaedrus* to focus on the critique of writing. Similarly, Derrida only focuses on those parts of the *Timaeus* that serve his purpose thereby ignoring the vast majority of Timaeus’ speech. This is not so different from Platonists separating out the allegedly more philosophical parts of the dialogues for scrutiny and ignoring the rest. Derrida often finds it necessary to turn to the *Laws* and the *Republic* to make Platonist arguments that he cannot find expressed in the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*, but are crucial for his deconstruction. For example, in “Plato’s Pharmacy” Derrida argues that Plato believes writing has a dangerous power in part because it is “occult”. This point is obvious because Plato’s “mistrust of the mantic and magic, of sorcerers and casters of spells, is well attested”, which Derrida proves by citing *Laws* X 909b-c and *Republic* II 364ff.³⁶⁴ Derrida makes no attempt to justify his decision that on this particular point the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* and Socrates of the *Republic* represent Plato’s authorial voice, whereas Socrates of the *Phaedrus*, the one who claims “the best things we have come from madness” which can be “given as a gift of the god,”³⁶⁵ does not. Derrida elects when to embrace Plato’s equivocity and when to present only one aspect of his voice, covering over the other equally Platonic meanings.³⁶⁶ For these reasons and more, it is clear that what Derrida deconstructs is Platonism, not Plato, and as Hyland points out Derrida does not sustain this distinction well.³⁶⁷

³⁶³ Hyland, 89.

³⁶⁴ Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” 97.

³⁶⁵ *Phaedrus* 244a.

³⁶⁶ Precisely what Derrida, in this very argument, criticizes Plato for doing to *pharmakon*.

³⁶⁷ Hyland, n7, 191.

It is only when Derrida employs deconstructive hermeneutics that he acknowledges that a more holistic interpretation of the dialogues points beyond Platonism.³⁶⁸ He capitalizes on the dialogue form and Plato's narrative fiction to undermine the theses he has already read into the texts and to argue his point about the (non)origin as *différance*. In "Plato's Pharmacy", for example, Derrida argues that Plato's dialogues share the same status as writing in the *Phaedrus*, viz. they are only playful reminders "when read from the viewpoint of Socrates' death". Plato writes in the space opened up by the "father's" death and in this case he writes a dialogue that has the father, Socrates, tell a myth wherein the father of the gods links writing to death. Derrida remarks that "[t]hese scenes enclose and fit into each other endlessly, abyssally. The pharmacy has no foundation."³⁶⁹ He continues this reading in "*Khôra*", which makes a very similar point about the structure of the *Timaeus*. This time, however, Derrida explicitly remarks that Platonic irony is an excess that disturbs Platonism's logical abstraction from the text. Derrida reads the premise of the gathering in the *Timaeus*, that Socrates wants his ideal city to be brought to life, as deeply ironic. This is because the dialogue that proceeds from this intention is completely caught up within the "dead" order of the simulacrum. The narrative of the *Timaeus* is an image of the relationship between *khôra* and Platonism. *Khôra* puts philosophy into the abyss and the *Timaeus* enacts a *mise en abyme* in that it reflects its own action.³⁷⁰ Derrida arrives at this conclusion by analyzing the seven narratives contained in the *Timaeus*.³⁷¹ He claims the text pretends to take a

³⁶⁸ "The *topoi* of the dialogue are never indifferent. The themes, the topics, the (common-)places, in a rhetorical sense, are strictly inscribed, comprehended each time within a significant site. They are dramatically staged, and in this theatrical geography, unity of place corresponds to an infallible calculation or necessity" (Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 69).

³⁶⁹ Ibid. 148.

³⁷⁰ Derrida, "*Khôra*." 126.

³⁷¹ F1 The *Timaeus* itself; F2 The previous night's conversation; F3 The present description of the ideal city; F4 Young Critias recounts a tale he told the night before; F5 Old Critias' tale of a conversation he had with Solon; F6 Solon's tale of a conversation he had with an Egyptian priest; F7 The Priest's tale of the origin of Athens according to scriptures (Ibid. 121-122).

realist turn from the present retelling of Socrates' description of the ideal city toward Critias' story of true deeds accomplished by the Athenians. This so-called real event reaches its present audience via two Critiases and Solon's unfinished poetry. Derrida points out that Socrates has just dismissed the poets as only capable of imitating what they are trained in and therefore not suited for the present task. Now, however, he embraces Critias' tale of a tale of a tale borne from a poet. For Derrida this irony "accentuates the dynamic tension between the thetic effect and the textual fiction" that has Socrates eager to hear a tale in the form of a myth without a fixed origin as something real.³⁷² Derrida relates this narrative back to the *Phaedrus* and claims that because Critias' tale is orphaned without a father it must be opposed to the philosophical λόγος. Therefore Derrida selectively reads the dialogues holistically, but always from the perspective of his critique of the dominant Platonist reading.

One could argue that Derrida does not in either "Plato's Pharmacy" or "*Khôra*" take a definitive stance about Plato's complicity with Platonism. On the one hand, Derrida makes it explicitly clear that he is uninterested in Plato's intention as an author; what matters is the textuality of the dialogues.³⁷³ On the other hand, in order to carry out his deconstructive reading, Derrida effectively converts Plato into a dogmatist, i.e. a Platonist who defends the metaphysics of presence. The inherent problem is that Derrida wants to both deny the significance of authorial intention and at the same time insist that Plato (and other philosophers) had a will to totalitarianism to justify his critique. This may point to a problem with Derrida's deconstructive hermeneutics in general, and it becomes especially acute with Plato. For instance, Hyland challenges the idea that Plato's dialogues could be deconstructed if the deconstructive strategy is to destabilize authoritative claims in the text. Hyland argues that Plato's dialogues precisely do

³⁷² Ibid. 123-124.

³⁷³ Cf. Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 73, 95, 129.

not have central, authoritative claims. Instead, they contain multiple meanings, unanswered questions, and competing theses.³⁷⁴ Hyland conjectures that Plato's philosophical project was actually much closer to Derrida's own than Derrida's reading acknowledges.

This is because Hyland believes that Plato's dialogues are attentive to marginal meanings. In other words, one of the purposes of the dialogues is to call into question the distinction between central and marginal, and Plato accomplishes this by choosing to write in the dialogue form. Thus, Derrida's reading of the dialogues is "only a partial repetition of a genuine reading."³⁷⁵ Hyland puts forth the hypothesis that Plato's texts are "undeconstructable" because they have no central thesis present for deconstruction. He concludes, "[p]erhaps the dialogues are not so much *texts to be deconstructed* as *deconstructive happenings* themselves."³⁷⁶ As such they call for a holistic reading that would be attentive to the interaction between the margins and all the central meanings. Nonetheless, Hyland maintains that Derrida's deconstructions are valuable in that they bring attention to the marginal meaning in the dialogues.

Even if we do not completely agree with Hyland's description of the dialogues, he is correct to point out that Derridean deconstruction suffers from a problem of attribution. In other words, before his deconstruction can begin, Derrida must attribute definite claims to the text.³⁷⁷ If, as we are suggesting, Derrida makes a mistake or is far too narrow in his attribution, then his deconstruction risks critiquing something other than the text he is reading. For example, Z. Giannopoulou questions the legitimacy of Derrida's deconstruction of *khôra* partially on the grounds that his critique is based on a misreading of the *Timaeus*. In "*Khôra*", Giannopoulou writes, Derrida deconstructs strong binarisms and metaphysical dualisms that cannot be

³⁷⁴ Hyland, 94-95.

³⁷⁵ Ibid. 99 – 100.

³⁷⁶ Ibid. 101.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

unproblematically attributed to Plato.³⁷⁸ Derrida's deconstruction misses the mark because the *Timaeus* already complicates Platonist dualism without deconstruction. With *khôra*, "Plato, explicitly, in the *Timaeus* invites us to reconsider metaphysical dualism."³⁷⁹ Giannopoulou is unconvinced of Derrida's argument that *khôra* corrupts or challenges Platonic metaphysics, on the contrary, it furthers a project already begun in Plato.³⁸⁰

Further complicating things for Derrida is his claim that authorial intention is irrelevant for deconstruction. Derrida has trouble connecting this with the fact that he must attribute central claims to a text in order to proceed. His explanation in "Plato's Pharmacy" that deconstruction operates under the assumption that the distinction between what is voluntary and involuntary in a text is meaningless suffers from this difficulty.³⁸¹ Language, Derrida asserts, inherently has a play of differential meanings whether the author intended it or not.³⁸² Therefore, the multiplicity of meanings issuing from *pharmakon*, for example, do not form a web of Plato's voluntary or intentional meanings. Sometimes, Derrida allows, Plato plays upon *pharmakon*'s ambiguities voluntarily, but in other cases "Plato can *not* see the links".³⁸³ He continues, "[o]ne can always choose to believe that if Plato did not put certain possibilities of passage [between meanings] into practice, or even interrupted them, it is because he perceived them but left them in the impracticable."³⁸⁴ Derrida, however, claims we could only prove this belief from some impossible position of absolute mastery over the textual system.

³⁷⁸ Giannopoulou, "Derrida's Khora, or Unnaming the Timaeian Receptacle," 168.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 178.

³⁸⁰ Both Giannopoulou and Hyland point out that another example is the ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας in the *Republic*, which already explicitly corrupts a Being/Becoming binary before Derrida's reading.

³⁸¹ Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 73.

³⁸² Hyland, 104.

³⁸³ Derrida, 96.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Nonetheless, he immediately qualifies this statement and says, “This limitation can and should nevertheless be displaced to a certain extent [...] let us attempt to produce some of the effects [of such a displacement] as we go along, as we continue our march through the Platonic problematic of writing.”³⁸⁵ One of the effects he is referring to is how the supplement *pharmakon* corrupts the *Phaedrus*’ phonocentrist thesis. Derrida has just admitted that his reading distinguishes between meanings of *pharmakon* recognized by Plato and used to promote phonocentrism and those that Derrida must draw out through deconstruction. Later, Derrida discusses the extent to which Plato intended to include indeterminacy and ambiguity in the *Phaedrus*. Derrida once again claims that it is impossible to determine to what extent Plato voluntarily manipulates the semantic ambiguity of *pharmakon*.³⁸⁶ Yet, shortly thereafter, Derrida claims that the chain of meaning his deconstruction draws out was concealed in the text. As proof he offers that “Plato seems to place no emphasis on the word *pharmakon* at the point where writing’s effects swerve from positive to negative”. Likewise, “[w]hile expressly comparing writing to painting, Plato will not explicitly put this judgment together with the fact that elsewhere he refers to painting as a *pharmakon*.”³⁸⁷ Derrida thinks that these connections are implicit in the dialogues and that his deconstructive reading brings them out. He faults Plato for not explicitly drawing out this connection himself, while at the same time recognizing that it is in fact drawn out in Plato’s texts. Therefore, we see the tension between Derrida’s two hermeneutic gestures. One, to bring out the multiple meanings inherent in Plato’s texts, and two, to contrast them with the one central meaning he attributes to the texts. Hyland, Zuckert, and others are correct to critique Derrida on this point. It is because he assumes that Plato is a doctrinal thinker

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Ibid. 129.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

that Derrida also assumes that if Plato was aware of the ambiguity in his texts he would have explicitly said so. Derrida ignores the fact that Plato's formal and stylistic choices, i.e. writing dialogues with multiple characters in fictional settings, already *explicitly* distance his philosophy from a system of doctrinal assertions. Plainly stated, Derrida wants to associate Plato with Platonism and then show that the Platonic texts are not Platonist.

This raises the question: is Derrida forced to radically change the Platonic text to accomplish his deconstruction? The answer depends, of course, on what one thinks Platonic philosophy is trying to accomplish. Yoav Rinon argues that the textuality of the Platonic text cannot be deconstructed without drastically changing the text and thereby eliminating the possibility for deconstruction. He argues that in "Plato's Pharmacy" Derrida creates a different textual weave that is alien to the Platonic one.³⁸⁸ Specifically, Rinon says that the *Phaedrus* is constructed through hierarchical, but not oppositional, differences. Derrida's reading ignores this hierarchical construction and thus mischaracterizes the relationship between speech and writing.³⁸⁹ Rinon thinks that Derrida's deconstruction of the *pharmakon* is legitimate in and of itself, it just cannot be accomplished within the text of the *Phaedrus* without doing violence to it.³⁹⁰ Turning back to Giannopoulou, it is clear that he makes a similar argument about the Derridean deconstruction of the *Timaeus*. To perform his deconstruction Derrida, Giannopoulou claims, unjustifiably diminishes *khôra*'s ontological stability. *Khôra* may not have "internal properties", but it does have "external properties", viz. "malleability, adaptability, and durability".³⁹¹ Therefore, although *khôra* is formless and cannot receive anything as its own, this

³⁸⁸ Rinon, 541.

³⁸⁹ Rinon's argument is that the distinction between good and bad is within both writing and speech, not a distinction that opposes writing to speech. Much like Ferrari, Rinon believes that Socrates' so-called critique of writing is really a critique of shameful writing and/or speech in favour of beautiful writing and speech. (Cf. 541-546).

³⁹⁰ Ibid. 549.

³⁹¹ Giannopoulou, 20.

does not mean it has no nominal or existential identity. Timaeus let it be known that *khôra* is stable (i.e. it is not in flux) and has a defined power, to receive the likenesses of the Paradigm.³⁹² Although *khôra*'s ontological status can only be understood in relation to Being and Becoming, this does not mean that it destabilizes Platonic metaphysics. That is, if as Giannopoulou argues, Platonic metaphysics is not dualist in the way Derrida claims. *Khôra* does not corrupt "a rigid binary system of Forms and particulars", instead all three genera relate hierarchically to each other. The Forms bestow being on the Images, and *khôra* exists for the sake of the Images.³⁹³ Thus Derrida deconstructs a metaphysics that the *Timaeus* and its *khôra* explicitly do not hold.

The most problematic aspect of Derrida's reading of Plato is that he misses much of what could be justifiably called the central meanings of the dialogues. In other words, by confining his analysis to Platonism and analogues of *différance* in the texts, Derrida ignores a substantial part of what the dialogues say. To prove this point, this thesis concludes with a case-study on the prominent role that Plato gives to ἔρωξ in the pursuit of wisdom, a topic Derrida almost completely ignores. This demonstrates the depth and scope of meaning lost by Derrida's problematic hermeneutical strategy for reading Plato.

III. ἔρωξ: Finding Meaning Beyond the Derridean Critique

Derrida notably does not carry out a sustained discussion of the role of ἔρωξ in both dialogues. This omission is obviously troubling for a reading of the *Phaedrus*, which is an overtly erotic dialogue. I would argue that ἔρωξ also plays a centrally important role in the *Timaeus* because its conspicuous absence from Timaeus' cosmos points to a marked difference between his ideal human beings and the characteristics associated with Socratic philosophers in the *Phaedrus* and elsewhere. This final section of the thesis, therefore, looks at the central role ἔρωξ

³⁹² Giannopoulou does not directly answer Derrida's deconstruction of the power of reception.

³⁹³ Ibid. 178.

plays in Platonic philosophy and in recent scholarly interpretations of the two dialogues in question. These readings offer an example of the scope of meaning covered over by Derrida's deconstructions.

A. Erotic striving, metaphysics, and the philosophical life

It is important to address the role ἔρωϝ plays in the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus* because it is arguably a fundamental aspect of Plato's thought, including his metaphysics.³⁹⁴ Rosen argues, for example, that the dialogues do not present a metaphysics in the form of a science of being *qua* being, but do give us "an elaborate presentation of the human soul in terms of the erotic desire for the Ideas."³⁹⁵ Associating Plato with the metaphysics of presence ignores the centrality of ἔρωϝ because ἔρωϝ helps explain the Platonic focus on the primacy of μῦθος and becoming, not λόγος and being.³⁹⁶ By attending to ἔρωϝ in the dialogues, Rosen argues one can see that for Plato the intellect, which is separated from the transcendent Ideas, is set in motion by erotic desire.³⁹⁷ James Wood agrees that ἔρωϝ is crucial for an understanding of Platonic philosophy and he argues that it is the best defence against a Heideggerian characterization of Plato. Like Fried, Wood believes Plato describes the philosophical life as "perpetual striving and seeking" and for Wood zetetic philosophy is thus "fundamentally erotic."³⁹⁸ Ἐρωϝ, he argues, defines both the task and goal of philosophy for Plato. Its task is erotic because it is inconclusive and always in between lacking and fulfillment. Philosophy's goal is erotic because it strives toward

³⁹⁴ Drew Hyland claims "Plato is one of the first thinkers of our tradition to genuinely appreciate the profundity, the complexity, and so the deep significance of human eros" (*Finitude and Transcendence in the Platonic Dialogues*, 71).

³⁹⁵ Rosen, "Is Metaphysics Possible?," 241.

³⁹⁶ Ibid. 242-244. "...the turn away from the primacy of form to the primacy of the formation-process [...] is certainly related to the Platonic doctrine of Eros. But since the pejorative sense of metaphysics refers to the notion of pure forms, this observation serves only to emphasize the inaptness of the designation of metaphysics as Platonism. One might put it this way: the Aristotle of the Aristotelian tradition created metaphysics by ignoring the Platonic reservations with respect to discursive, as opposed to mythical, thinking, and by replacing the mythical or hypothetical doctrine of Ideas with the scientific doctrine of species-forms."

³⁹⁷ Ibid. 249.

³⁹⁸ Wood, "Contra Heidegger: A Defense of Plato's 'Productionist Metaphysics'," 234.

reproduction in the Beautiful. One cannot actually grasp the Beautiful but it acts as an “orienting ideal”, meaning that it is only ever apprehended mediately and yet its value is in its ability to orient the soul toward what is good. Plato continuously emphasizes that training the soul to erotically desire the Beautiful will have positive effects on the finite world both ethically and politically.³⁹⁹

Both Rosen and Wood appeal to the function of ἔρως as an intermediary in their descriptions of Platonic philosophy. Ἐρως plays a role in many dialogues and one must read it across multiple texts to understand how it is thought to function in this way. The *Symposium* clearly describes ἔρως as an intermediary that can move between opposites.⁴⁰⁰ This is significant because a paradoxical existence between opposing concepts disturbs the logical structure of the metaphysics of presence. In the *Symposium*, Diotima claims that ἔρως, the divine embodiment of desire, is always residing between two opposites. Ἐρως is simultaneously poverty and wealth, he is not quite god and not quite human, he is between immortality and mortality, and between beauty and ugliness.⁴⁰¹ Significantly, with this description Diotima introduces the idea that something could be neither one of a pair of opposites nor both opposites, but somehow exist in between them. Likewise, we learn from the *Phaedrus* and within a larger context through the *Philebus* that desire exists between lacking and fulfillment. The lover both lacks what he desires and yet somehow has the desired as the end that he moves towards.⁴⁰² This is why Diotima describes ἔρως as the son of *Poros* (plenty) and *Penia* (poverty). This has interesting implications for Platonism’s presence/absence dichotomy. In an erotic relationship, that which is desired is both absent from the lover’s soul, hence it is a lack, and is also present in the lover’s soul as

³⁹⁹ Ibid. 235-238.

⁴⁰⁰ *Symposium* 202a-b. (Trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff).

⁴⁰¹ 202b-204b.

⁴⁰² 200a-b.

something desired. Therefore the object of desire is neither present nor absent and therefore escapes the logic of presence. Ironically, this formulation has a central place in deconstruction because Derrida uses this formula to describe *différance*, the originary differing and deferring activity that produces presence from out of a primordial absence. For Derrida, the “origin” is at once, present and absent and neither present nor absent, because its presence is constituted by a movement of repetition necessitated by it also being absent.⁴⁰³

Ἔρωσ shares its intermediary state with the Socratic philosopher who, as a lover of wisdom, is somehow between ignorance and knowledge. The philosopher is not ignorant, because he knows that he does not know, but he is not wise either. Diotima explains that ἔρωσ also exists between ignorance and wisdom and so he is a philosopher who is a lover of all things good and beautiful.⁴⁰⁴ Finally, Diotima claims that ἔρωσ acts as an intermediary between finite men and the transcendent gods.⁴⁰⁵ There are two important conclusions to draw from this part of Diotima’s story. First, ἔρωσ navigates the gap between finitude and transcendence, and second, that ἔρωσ in the soul of a philosopher compels him to love the good and the beautiful. The *Lysis* augments Diotima’s speech about the nature of human desire and its object. The *Lysis* describes how man desires the Good with a phenomenological analysis of ἔρωσ. Man is neither good nor bad and from this middle state he desires the Good as *proton philon*, which is characterized as something that both belongs to him and is lacked.⁴⁰⁶ Socrates explains this connection by distinguishing between two kinds of presence. Ignorance can be present in a man without him *being* ignorant or it can be present in a man in such a way as to make him ignorant. The first kind of presence allows for the presence of something bad, like ignorance, but in such a way that it

⁴⁰³ Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” 167-8.

⁴⁰⁴ *Symposium* 204b-c.

⁴⁰⁵ 203a.

⁴⁰⁶ *Lysis* 216c (Trans. Stanley Lombardo).

leads towards something good, by provoking a desire for knowledge.⁴⁰⁷ This is the state of the philosopher that Diotima described in the *Symposium* who is in between ignorance and knowledge. Turning back to the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*, we explore how they can be read by attending to the role that ἔρωϝ plays and therefore produces very different meanings than Derrida acknowledges in the texts.

B. "Ἐρωϝ in the Phaedrus

Derrida's deconstruction of the *Phaedrus* crucially omits a sustained reading of ἔρωϝ in the dialogue. This is an immensely significant problem. The *Phaedrus* is undoubtedly a dialogue about desire and the pursuit of philosophy. By excluding ἔρωϝ from his characterization of Socrates, Derrida fundamentally misunderstands how Socrates practices philosophy. Since Derrida critiques the dialogue on the basis that it promotes Platonism through Socrates, he must exclude or distort the evidence in the *Phaedrus* that Socrates is an erotic or *zetetic* philosopher.

"Plato's Pharmacy" skips from the prologue to the Theuth myth and barely addresses Lysias' speech, Socrates' first speech, the myth of the Cicadas, or the Palinode. Derrida's only short mention of erotic seduction occurs in the chapter "Pharmacia" about the prologue. Here Derrida writes that the *pharmakon* seduces and leads its lover astray and this is illustrated when Phaedrus lures Socrates to the countryside with Lysias' speech hidden beneath his cloak. Derrida argues, "a speech proffered *in the present, in the presence* of Socrates, would not have had the same effect [...] it would not seduce anyone."⁴⁰⁸ It is true that in the prologue Socrates says Phaedrus could lead him anywhere he pleases "by holding before me discourses in books".⁴⁰⁹ We could take this scene literally as Derrida appears to and follow his interpretation that writing has

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid. 218a-c. It is interesting that Derrida does not connect this argument to *khôra*, which is said to have the Images present in it without being any of them.

⁴⁰⁸ Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 71.

⁴⁰⁹ *Phaedrus* 230e.

not only seduced Socrates, but that it has the power to harm him by leading him away from the legitimate pursuit of wisdom. This reading certainly supports the indictment that writing is a dangerous supplement. Nonetheless, Socrates' seduction by Lysias' written speech is better read ironically. Elsewhere in the Platonic corpus Socrates has never professed a desire for written works but has often expressed his desire for conversation. Moreover, he approached Phaedrus before he even knew that he had Lysias' speech hidden beneath his cloak. It was in fact Phaedrus' rapturous fascination with Lysias' speech that attracted Socrates and seduced him into walking outside the city walls. Phaedrus, utterly beguiled by the clever speech, is Socrates' *pharmakon* not the speech itself. Hence, Plato writes that the speech is hidden beneath Phaedrus' cloak; this sexually suggestive image strongly hints that Socrates finds Phaedrus desirable. If any doubt remains that this is the case, Socrates' remarks after Phaedrus has finished delivering Lysias' speech make it clear. Socrates exclaims that he is "overcome" by the speech *because* he was watching Phaedrus' joy and delight at reading it.⁴¹⁰ Another level of irony is also at work here. Socrates is genuinely entranced by Phaedrus' love of Lysias' speech but not because he believes that Phaedrus' beloved is worthy. On the contrary, Socrates mocks the object of Phaedrus' desire while at the same time being attracted to his desire itself. This, I believe, is Socrates' motivation for engaging with Phaedrus throughout the dialogue because he wants to turn Phaedrus' desire toward a more worthy and noble beloved, wisdom. Derrida's reading of this scene misses this point entirely.

Returning again to the opening scene, we see how the entire dialogue is the story of Socrates retraining Phaedrus' desire from pursuing rhetoric to philosophy. The *Phaedrus* opens with Socrates exclaiming, "Phaedrus, my friend! Where have you been? And where are you

⁴¹⁰ 234d2-3.

going?”⁴¹¹ Socrates wants to direct Phaedrus’ obvious enthusiasm and desire for the art of persuasion, as seen in his fetish for Lysias’ crafty speeches, to a desire for Being and Truth, lived as a life dedicated to the love of wisdom, the art of dialectics, and the pursuit of self-knowledge. To answer the first of Socrates’ questions, Phaedrus has just come from Epicrates’ house where he was enraptured by Lysias’ speech in praise of the non-lover. But where is Phaedrus going? He plans on walking the countryside memorizing Lysias’ speech by reciting it repeatedly. In doing so he has physically removed himself from the city of Athens and the political sphere. By contrast, Socrates almost never leaves Athens because, as he points out “I am devoted to learning; landscapes and trees have nothing to teach me – only the people in the city can do that.”⁴¹² Nonetheless, Socrates has been led out of the city allegedly charmed by the speech Phaedrus holds. Yet, for the reasons above, it is clear that Socrates has been led by his attraction to Phaedrus’ enthusiastic desire for the written speech and not by the speech itself. So where is Phaedrus going? He is now going with Socrates. Socrates makes sure that he accompanies Phaedrus on his walk, and by reciting speeches of his own Socrates ultimately coaxes Phaedrus into having a philosophic conversation about the value and nature of the rhetorical arts, speech-writing, and dialectics. By the end of the dialogue, Socrates sends Phaedrus off with a message for Lysias: a philosopher can defend his writing with truth and knowledge whereas a speechwriter has nothing more valuable than his words.⁴¹³

Thus by the end of the dialogue, not only has Socrates removed Phaedrus’ fetishistic desire for Lysias’ speech, but he has helped Phaedrus come to realize that if he wants to master the persuasive art of rhetoric he must first master dialectics, the art that aims at truth, whose

⁴¹¹ 227a.

⁴¹² 230d4-5.

⁴¹³ 278d-e.

practitioners are called wisdom's lovers. Socrates has transformed Phaedrus' desire from a driving force pushing him to emulate Lysias to a driving force pushing him to pursue philosophy.

Through their conversation, the two men conclude:

...no one will ever possess the art of speaking [...] unless he acquires the ability to enumerate the sorts of characters to be found in any audience, to divide everything according to its kinds, and to grasp each single thing firmly by means of one form.⁴¹⁴

In other words, a rhetorician must also be a dialectician. Immediately after this summary statement, Socrates adds:

[a]nd no one can acquire these abilities without great effort – a laborious effort a sensible man will make not in order to speak and act among human beings, but so as to be able to speak and act in a way that pleases the gods as much as possible.⁴¹⁵

Finally, Socrates finishes the point – and Phaedrus' lesson – when he says,

...if the way round is long, don't be astonished: we must make this detour for the sake of things that are very important, not for what you have in mind. Still, as our argument asserts, if that is what you want [to be a great orator], you'll get it best as a result of pursuing our own goal.⁴¹⁶

Socrates explicitly instructs Phaedrus that if *his personal* desire to master the art of speaking should be fulfilled, then Phaedrus must first pursue *their shared* desire to be dialecticians, who are “as happy as any human being can be.”⁴¹⁷ It is not hard to see which pursuit Socrates believes Phaedrus should have as his final end. In the course of the narrative fiction, Socrates has sparked Phaedrus' desire to be a philosopher by making him realize that he could only be accomplished at the art of rhetoric by knowing the art of dialectics. Thus from the narrative stratum, we learn that ἔρως is a physical driving force, and when directed toward truth, knowledge, self-knowledge, and

⁴¹⁴ 273d-e.

⁴¹⁵ 273e.

⁴¹⁶ 274a.

⁴¹⁷ 277a.

all of the things that Socrates and Phaedrus agreed were necessary preconditions for rhetoric, then ἔρωϛ can become a driving force for philosophy.⁴¹⁸

Examining the Chariot Myth, we see a different elaboration of the same point, that ἔρωϛ is a driving force for philosophy that will lead to man's greatest happiness.⁴¹⁹ Through this myth we learn that ἔρωϛ is a god-gifted madness found in the souls of all philosophers and praised as "the cause of our greatest goods".⁴²⁰ In the Myth, Socrates tells Phaedrus a story about the activity of immortal and disembodied souls before and after life. Here the soul is represented as a chariot containing a charioteer and driven by two horses. The horses are at odds; while one horse is "a lover of honour with modesty and self-control" who obeys verbal commands and needs no whip, the other horse has no self-control and when the charioteer has an erotic desire for something, this horse will yearn after it with all of its strength.⁴²¹ Often this is read as an image of rationality competing with base desires in the soul, with the assumption that two horses with self-control would be far better. This reading, however, misses the important nuance in this mythical image, that the 'irrational horse' is also the only horse that spurs activity. While the direction of his energy may require refinement, this horse is without a doubt the driving force behind the chariot's movement. When the charioteer has a desire, it is the irrational horse that moves him to his object.⁴²² So we see figured in the Chariot Myth the very same journey that Socrates undertakes with Phaedrus by nudging his desires away from Lysias and toward philosophy. If Phaedrus had no desire in his soul instead of misguided desires, Socrates' opportunity would have greatly lessened.

⁴¹⁸ Steven Berg notes that in the Symposium Socrates characterizes ἔρωϛ as "the truth seeking principle" that "stands in the way of ignorance of one's own ignorance" (*Eros and the Intoxications of Enlightenment: On Plato's Symposium*, 98).

⁴¹⁹ Derrida, notably, does not analyze the Chariot Myth in his reading.

⁴²⁰ *Phaedrus* 266b1.

⁴²¹ 253d-e.

⁴²² 253e-254b1.

In the Myth we also learn that chariots representing different souls course around the lower heavens striving ever-upwards in order to catch a mere glimpse of Reality (the things-themselves). The successful chariots that reach near the top of the heavens still barely glimpse Reality. This activity is driven by an erotic desire for the Ideas. The chariot-ride up the heavens toward Reality is a mythic representation of the activity of philosophy on earth. Socrates makes this clear when he claims “a soul that has seen the most [of Reality] will be planted in the seed of a man who will become a lover of wisdom or of beauty, or who will be cultivated in the arts and prone to erotic love.”⁴²³ Socrates confirms that an erotic desire for Being, found in the embodied *and the* disembodied soul, is necessary for philosophy as an earthly activity. Moreover, Socrates describes the desire borne from the soul’s small glimpse of Reality as madness. When the soul of a living philosopher is reminded of the glimpse they had in the heavens, they are overcome because “their experience is beyond their comprehension [...and] they cannot fully grasp what it is that they are seeing”.⁴²⁴ Thus the Chariot Myth tells us that an erotic desire for Being is necessary for philosophy and its object cannot be wholly understood rationally, instead a mere glimpse of Being produces frenzied madness in the soul.

The above reading of the *Phaedrus* sows doubt in Derrida’s characterization of the dialogue. Can we accurately say that in the *Phaedrus* Plato portrays philosophy as outlined by the metaphysics of presence and deconstructed by Derrida? Recall that Derrida argues the goal of philosophy is to bring Being to an unmediated presence in the soul. This presence is a coincidence of Reality and the individual soul wherein Being is present as an object of knowledge for man. Epistemologically, this coincidence is unmediated truth, where the soul understands Being without need for language or signification. By contrast, in the *Phaedrus* when

⁴²³ 248d.

⁴²⁴ 250a-b1.

closest to Reality/Being/Things-Themselves in the heavens, the disembodied soul is in an erotic rapture. Translate this to the lived experience of a philosopher, and the soul is overcome with divinely-gifted madness. This is not the clear, simple presence of Being the metaphysics of presence describes. Moreover, the entire explanation of the soul's relationship with Being is told within the realm of myth and metaphor. Even within the myth, souls are not able to grasp Being. The best souls glimpse Reality and are able to stay in heaven a bit longer until they too eventually lose their wings and are forced down into body once again. Once on earth, these souls are born into potential philosophers who will spend their lives desiring Being. After death, the cycle begins anew.⁴²⁵ It appears that man's condition is to always relate to Being erotically, that is, between lacking and fulfillment and presence and absence. Thus, by ignoring the centrality of ἔρωϑ in the *Phaedrus*, Derrida's deconstruction mistakenly attributes to Socrates (and by extension Plato) a view of philosophy, as governed by the structural logic of the metaphysics of presence, which is incompatible with the dialogue.

C. Ἐρωϑ in the Timaeus

The *Timaeus* contains one of the most significant intrusions of indeterminacy into Platonic metaphysics, but never appeals to ἔρωϑ to mediate it. How, then, can the picture of erotic philosophy presented above stand up to the conflicting reading that seems to emerge from the main speech of the *Timaeus*? One possible answer is that Timaeus represents unerotic philosophy and this is why he constructs a cosmos that lacks the mediating activity of desire. Without ἔρωϑ to act as an intermediary, he must conceive of philosophy as an activity that does not need to bridge the gap between the immanent and the transcendent. Inconsistencies or problems with Timaeus' cosmogony can be read against the background of the distinction between erotic and unerotic philosophy and this should give ample reason to pause before claiming that Timaeus'

⁴²⁵ 248a-250c.

cosmogony corrupts Socratic philosophy. Once again, by ignoring this potential reading of the *Timaeus*, Derrida's deconstruction greatly weakens its stance as a critique of Platonic philosophy.

The *Timaeus* is an atypical Platonic dialogue because it is one of the few texts where Socrates is not the main speaker. Therefore, it is imperative to account for Timaeus' relationship to Socrates when interpreting the text. Zuckert takes on the task of situating Timaeus in Plato's philosophical project. She asks the question, does Timaeus' cosmogony complete or challenge Socratic political philosophy? While Timaeus' task set out by Socrates is to provide an origin story for the men who would populate Socrates' ideal city, Zuckert concludes that Timaeus fails to complete the task as given because his cosmos is unerotic.⁴²⁶ Zuckert's argument depends largely on her associating Socratic philosophy with ἔρωϝ. Sallis gives a similar argument and claims that Timaeus tells the assembled men the origin story of a city that has submitted all erotic desires to technical control. Sallis differs with Zuckert, however, and argues that in the beginning of the dialogue Socrates describes the third city from the *Republic*, the one spoken of just before the long digression into the philosopher. As evidence of this fact, Sallis points out that Socrates fails to mention the Philosopher-Kings in his summary and yet mentions all of the controversial details of the *Republic*'s third city.⁴²⁷ Therefore, Timaeus does not fail to describe the erotic and philosophic city Socrates asked for, he intentionally describes the technical and moderate Guardian-led city introduced in *Republic* Book VIII. Sallis argues that this is the city Socrates requested to see put into action. The comic failure of Timaeus' inability to account for the erotic in his cosmos, reveals for Sallis that ἔρωϝ lies outside the limits of τέχνη and *poesis*.⁴²⁸ Both

⁴²⁶ Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues*, 15f.

⁴²⁷ Sallis, *Chorology: On Beginning in Plato's Timaeus*, 23-24.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.* 25-27.

Sallis and Zuckert, therefore, read the *Timaeus*' lack of ἔργος as centrally important to understanding the dialogue.

Unlike *zetetic* philosophy, it is clear that Timaeus believes man can achieve the ultimate end of philosophy, *viz.* ordering the soul in complete conformity with the heavens. Just as the cosmos is good because it is an image of the Paradigm, so too the human soul is good when it orders itself to be an image of the uranic revolutions of the cosmos.⁴²⁹ Derrida, as we know, wants to show “there never is, was, or will be an ideal order that can be produced or contemplated as a whole”.⁴³⁰ This is precisely what Timaeus explicitly claims is possible. He says that if a man has “seriously devoted himself” to learning and wisdom then,

there is absolutely no way that his thoughts can fail to be immortal and divine, should truth come within his grasp. And to the extent that human nature can partake of immortality, he can in no way fail to achieve this: constantly caring for his divine part as he does, keeping well-ordered the guiding spirit that lives within him, he must indeed be supremely happy.⁴³¹

Timaeus clearly believes that with proper training and care, one can achieve the goal of philosophy. Derrida's deconstruction in “*Khôra*” argues against these claims by exploring how Timaeus introduces unaccounted for indeterminacy into his cosmos. But by failing to recognize the conspicuous absence of ἔργος in Timaeus' account of the good life, Derrida overlooks an obvious and important distinction between Timaeus and Socrates.

Zuckert's reading of the dialogue argues that the *Timaeus* was intended by Plato to illustrate the difference between unerotic Timaeus and erotic Socrates. The *Timaeus* does not provide a cosmogony for Socrates' philosophy; it “dramatizes the disjunction between the principles on the basis of which Timaeus claims that this is the best possible world and the only

⁴²⁹ *Timaeus* 90d.

⁴³⁰ Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, Derrida*, 207.

⁴³¹ *Timaeus* 90b-c.

things Socrates ever claimed to know - *ta erotika*.”⁴³² Both philosophers represent two very different philosophies and consequently two different understandings of the good life. Zuckert argues that ἔρωϑ, for Timaeus, is a symptom of incompleteness without the positive effects attributed to it elsewhere in the Platonic corpus. In other words, ἔρωϑ creates confusion in the soul and does not help it strive toward the good and the beautiful.⁴³³ Contrast this with, for example, Diotima’s account of the philosopher who has ἔρωϑ as his leader.⁴³⁴ If, Diotima says, one approaches all sensible particulars as a lover, then one’s soul can be directed towards the things-themselves. Diotima explains how driven by ἔρωϑ, one would move from loving a beautiful body, to loving beautiful customs, to eventually loving wisdom, i.e. practicing philosophy.⁴³⁵ While this movement “up the ladder” occurs, the lover is constantly “giving birth” in beauty by begetting ideas that are likenesses of the Forms. The climax of the ascent is a vision of Beauty “itself by itself with itself”.⁴³⁶ Diotima explains that if one should ever experience this vision they would no longer be enraptured by beautiful boys, but would instead beget true virtue.⁴³⁷ As we saw above, a similar mythical argument is made by Socrates in the Palinode of the *Phaedrus* that ἔρωϑ plays a necessary role in philosophy and the pursuit of the good and the beautiful.

For Timaeus, man’s god-given ability to see the ordered movements of the heavens, not ἔρωϑ, has given him philosophy.⁴³⁸ Philosophy is a predetermined fact of life explained in purely materialist terms. The goal of philosophy is to contemplate the heavens because the best part of

⁴³² Zuckert, *Plato’s Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues*, 422.

⁴³³ *Ibid.* 39f.

⁴³⁴ *Symposium* 201a.

⁴³⁵ 210c-d.

⁴³⁶ 210c-211b.

⁴³⁷ 212a.

⁴³⁸ *Timaeus* 47a-b.

the human soul resides in the top of the body and “raises us up away from the earth and toward what is akin to us in heaven.”⁴³⁹ This, Timaeus explains, is why the body stands erect. Timaeus philosophy is not transcendent for similarly materialist reasons. Given the logical necessity of man’s low position within the created cosmos, he does not have the kind of nature that would allow him to transcend his circumstances. The Demiurge created the cosmos by contemplating the Paradigm but even he was constrained to only create a work “as excellent and supreme as its nature would allow.”⁴⁴⁰ By the same necessary constraints, man is created as a mixture of the good and the necessary, of immortal and mortal souls, and of the intelligible and the sensible. The best that man should strive for is to re-order his soul from the disorder and confusion introduced at birth.⁴⁴¹ For Timaeus, the apex of human achievement is to grasp and maintain the particular kind of harmony and order that man is permitted to achieve by his own material make-up. Even death and the diseases of the mind are explained by physical manipulations of the matter of the universe. For instance, old age comes “when the roots of the triangles [that make up the body] are slackened as a result of numerous conflicts they have waged [...] they are no longer able to cut up the entering food-triangles into conformity with themselves.”⁴⁴² The inability to integrate food-matter harmoniously into one’s body eventually leads to death. Timaeus also explains diseases, even those of the mind such as ignorance, as results of material imbalances and an inability to maintain order within the body or soul.⁴⁴³ Therefore, philosophy for Timaeus is a defined procedure to remove material disharmony by ordering the soul in harmony with heavenly movements.

⁴³⁹ 90a.

⁴⁴⁰ 30b.

⁴⁴¹ 44a-b.

⁴⁴² 81c-d.

⁴⁴³ 86b-87b.

While Timaeus' philosophy is thoroughly individualistic, Socratic philosophy is essentially collaborative. Zuckert argues that one of the aims of Socrates' erotic philosophy is to foster philosophical friendships, something Timaeus does not account for because each individual can understand the cosmos by his own efforts alone.⁴⁴⁴ Timaeus' cosmos excludes someone like Socrates, who loves to engage in conversation and learn from the people in cities, and hence Socrates does not speak once Timaeus begins his account.⁴⁴⁵ The good life described by Timaeus does not live up to criteria Socrates has accepted elsewhere. Not only is it devoid of friendships, but it also provides no pleasure. Timaeus rather optimistically declares at the end of his cosmology that if properly trained and directed man cannot fail to grasp truth, to partake in immortality, and to be "supremely happy."⁴⁴⁶ This contemplative philosophical life, however, is happy and excellent but not explicitly pleasurable. Timaeus puts pleasure and pain within man's mortal soul not his immortal soul, the seat of his intelligence. He describes pleasure and pain as "dreadful but necessary disturbances" that are fused with sense perception.⁴⁴⁷ Thus Zuckert concludes that because Timaeus does not recognize the different kinds of pleasure Socrates outlined in the *Philebus*, including purely intelligible pleasures, he cannot call his contemplative life pleasurable.⁴⁴⁸ This is problematic because in the *Philebus* Socrates and Protarchus agreed that only a life that mixed knowledge with pleasure could be worth choosing as the good life for mankind.⁴⁴⁹

Furthermore, without appealing to pleasure or desire, Timaeus has trouble explaining what would motivate any man to be a philosopher. While Timaeus does mention being a lover of

⁴⁴⁴ Zuckert, n423, 464.

⁴⁴⁵ Cf. *Phaedrus* 230d4-5; *Timaeus* 27b.

⁴⁴⁶ *Timaeus* 90c.

⁴⁴⁷ 69c-d.

⁴⁴⁸ Zuckert, 455.

⁴⁴⁹ *Philebus* 22a.

understanding and knowledge (τὸν δὲ νοῦ καὶ ἐπιστήμης ἐραστὴν) and having a love of learning (φιλομαθίαν) in connection with philosophy,⁴⁵⁰ Zuckert claims this is not the same as the Socratic philosophical desire for Beauty, Being, or the Good.⁴⁵¹ Socratic ἔρωσ is an “elevation and modification of the eros between human beings that expresses itself first in generation or procreation, then in the search for immortality, and finally in philosophical friendships.”⁴⁵² Timaeus does not connect sexual ἔρωσ and the desire for knowledge. In fact, he considers all other desires to be diseases that must be remedied.⁴⁵³ Under Timaeus’ care, a young erotic man like Phaedrus or Alcibiades would have little hope of turning their desires toward philosophy. Timaeus clearly removes, with ἔρωσ, any transcendent element from his description of philosophy. The goal of Timaeian philosophy is immanent and finite and does not even extend beyond the limits of each individual soul. Erotic philosophy, on the contrary, strives toward that which is ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας, is communal, productive, and begets virtue.⁴⁵⁴

Taken together, the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus* illustrate the contrast between *echonic* and *zetetic* philosophy. As we have seen above, one of the most significant distinctions between the two practices is ἔρωσ. The consequences of this difference in philosophical practice can be explored politically as we saw above in Zuckert’s claim that Timaeus’ unerotic philosophy cannot account for philosophical friendships and leaves philosophers with no motivation to help fellow citizens with their knowledge.⁴⁵⁵ Likewise, Eva Buccioni argues that ἔρωσ allows a philosopher to pursue wisdom unselfishly and with the needs of his fellow citizens in mind, thus

⁴⁵⁰ *Timaeus* 46d-e; 90c.

⁴⁵¹ I have listed all three potential objects of desire mentioned earlier in this Chapter because I am not able to explore their relationship here. By no means am I equating them.

⁴⁵² Zuckert, 425.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.* 464.

⁴⁵⁴ Cf. *Republic* 509b.

⁴⁵⁵ As Zuckert says Timaeus provides no reason for the philosopher to descend back down into the cave (467).

attending to needs that transcend the limits of his own soul.⁴⁵⁶ Berg claims that contemplating the Beautiful-itself is not the final end of erotic striving. The goal of Socratic erotic philosophy is the earthly, human good and this is made clear in the *Symposium* when the immediate consequence of a vision of Beauty-itself is the birth of true virtue in the soul.⁴⁵⁷ ἔρως also defines man's relation with the metaphysical. Zuckert argues that Timaeus and Socrates have completely different beliefs about what the Ideas are. While Socrates imagines them as eternal and intelligible paradigms of the objects of human desire like Beauty and the virtues, Timaeus sees them as purely intelligible concepts like Same, Other, Proportion, and Line.⁴⁵⁸ Therefore, we can see not only how difficult it is to integrate Socratic and Timaeian philosophy into one systematic whole, but also how much potential meaning is lost in the attempt to do so.

Thus Derrida's reading of the *Timaeus* misrepresents the meaning of the dialogue because he does not address its conspicuous lack of ἔρως. One of the most significant aspects of Timaeus' cosmos is that it has no place for Socratic erotic philosophy. Derrida's deconstruction misses this reading and critiques the dialogue only on the assumption that it intends to present a rational and cohesive cosmogony in keeping with the tenants of Platonism. Derrida reveals through deconstruction that liminal elements in the text, like *khôra*, cannot be completely mastered by the logic of the metaphysics of presence and concludes, therefore, that the structural logic of the *Timaeus* corrupts itself. If one reads the cosmogony through the contrast between Timaeian and Socratic philosophy, however, it could be argued that the indeterminacy *khôra* introduces into Timaeus' metaphysics is a problem for Timaeus (and Platonism), but not necessarily for Socrates. This is not because Socrates has a competing metaphysics; it is because his project of philosophy

⁴⁵⁶ Buccioni, "The Psychological Forces in Plato's *Phaedrus*," 353-354.

⁴⁵⁷ Berg, 123.

⁴⁵⁸ Zuckert, 477.

is *zetetic* and thus is not concerned with creating a rational and encyclopedic metaphysical doctrine. Therefore, without addressing the dramatic contrast between Socrates and Timaeus, one cannot argue that the *Timaeus* promotes the metaphysics of presence, even if Timaeus' cosmogony does.

IV. Conclusion

We have explored Derrida's relationship to Plato as evidenced in both his deconstructions of the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus* and, in a larger context, through his reading of Platonism and the metaphysics of presence. Our analysis reveals that Derrida reads Plato with two gestures, on the one hand Plato is a totalizing idealist, and on the other hand, the indeterminacy in the dialogues shows that he did not create a completely rational system of meaning. Responding to Derrida's deconstructions of Plato helps reveal how complex, multifaceted, and irreducibly equivocal the dialogues are. While Derrida's focused reading of Plato capitalizes on these moments of indeterminacy or hints of *différance* to critique the metaphysics of presence, this project has tried to demonstrate that Plato is not a dogmatic thinker and does not univocally privilege presence. It may not be possible to confirm that Plato did not *believe* Being is presence, yet it is also difficult to argue that Plato had a cohesive metaphysical theory. Moreover, by attending to the centrality of ἔργον in the dialogues, we see that an integral tenet of Plato's thought moves beyond the presence/absence binary. Therefore there is a sense, and a significant one, in which Being transcends the distinction presence/absence for Plato, *viz.* as an object of desire that is neither fully present nor fully absent from the lover's soul. Deconstructing the metaphysics of presence as it is read into the dialogues by Platonism is not a satisfactory critique of Platonic philosophy. Thus Derrida's deconstructions of the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*, while attentive to the margins of Platonism, overlook much of Plato.

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