

PLATONISM I

The Paternal Thesis

How can we set off in search of a different guard, if the pharmaceutical “system” contains not only, in a single stranglehold, the scene in the *Phaedrus*, the scene in the *Republic*, the scene in the *Sophist*, and the dialectics, logic, and mythology of Plato, but also, it seems, certain non-Greek structures of mythology? And if it is not certain that there are such things as non-Greek “mythologies”—the opposition *mythos/logos* being only authorized *following* Plato—into what general, unnamable necessity are we thrown? In other words, what does Platonism signify as repetition?

—Derrida, *Dissemination*, 167–68

Throughout his reading of Plato’s text, Derrida demarcates dissemination from the understanding of genesis that he calls “Platonism.” I start my exploration of this reading by focusing on the earliest moment of it, the long essay “Plato’s Pharmacy,” first published in *Tel Quel* (1968) and then included in *Dissemination* (1972). In this essay, Derrida describes Platonism as the thesis that the living *logos*, assisted by its father and determined by the traits of the noble birth and the body proper, is the element of all regional discourses, from linguistics to zoology, from cosmology to politics. He understands this thesis as the myth itself, the story that the *logos* tells (a mytho-logy) about its origin—that is, its originary and nonmetaphorical relation to its father.

Platonism tends to annihilate what Derrida identifies as its anagrammatic structure—namely, the site of the concatenations of forms, of the tropic and syntactical movements, which precede and render possible the concatenation or movement of Platonism itself, as well as of philosophy in general. I examine “Plato’s Pharmacy” by taking as my point of departure session 2 of the recently edited course on *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History* (1964–1965). My argument is that the later essay can be reread as an elaboration of Derrida’s earlier analysis of Heidegger’s insight that philosophy demarcates itself from mythology for the first time in Plato. Therefore, a path between two notions of grammar, or syntax, awaits us. On the one hand, we have Heidegger’s search for a grammar for the destruction of the history of ontology and the demarcation of philosophy from mythology. On the other hand, we have grammar as the science of the concatenations of elements, invented by the Egyptian god Theuth, which, for Derrida, constitutes the science of the origin of the world, of the living as well as of the logos, of the disseminated trace.

A PROBLEM OF SYNTAX

In session 2 of *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*, Derrida focuses on the problem of language concerning the destruction announced by Heidegger—that is, the destruction of the history of ontology as “a covering-over or a dissimulation of the authentic question of Being, under not ontological but ontic sedimentations” (Derrida 2016, 1).¹ In so doing, he brings to the fore an issue that Heidegger confines to a marginal place. As he acknowledges, the question “is posed in an added remark, which is a little surprising and, if I have forced Heidegger’s thinking, it is by placing this added remark in the foreground” (25). This remark is included in the final paragraph of the introduction to *Being and Time*, dedicated to the “Exposition of the Question of the Meaning of Being.” Heidegger presents this paragraph as a supplementary remark on the style of his subsequent analyses, which he demands the reader to measure against the task that is being undertaken in the book. I propose inverting the movement of Derrida’s text by starting with the Heidegger passage that Derrida quotes and, from this, going back to the latter’s formulation of the problem of language. Heidegger’s remark reads:

With regard to the awkwardness and “inelegance” of expression in the following analyses, we may remark that this is one thing to report narratively about *beings* another to grasp beings in their *being*. For the latter task not only most of the words are lacking but above all the “grammar.” If we may allude to earlier and in their own right altogether incomparable researches on the analysis of being, then we should compare the ontological sections in Plato’s *Parmenides* or the fourth chapter of the seventh book of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* with a narrative passage from Thucydides. Then we can see the stunning character of the formulations with which their philosophers challenged the Greeks. Since our powers are essentially inferior, also since the area of being to be disclosed ontologically is far more difficult than that presented to the Greeks, the complexity of our concept-formation and the severity of our expression will increase. (1996, 34)²

In the pages that precede the quotation from Heidegger’s text, Derrida anticipates the problem of the language of destruction by highlighting the feature of the forms of concatenation (*enchainement*). “Whence are we to draw the concepts, the terms, the forms of linking [*enchainement*] necessary for the discourse of Destruction, for the destructive discourse?” (Derrida 2016, 23–24), he wonders. A few paragraphs later, he develops this reference to the forms of concatenation of language and discourse by reformulating the problem of the language of destruction as mainly a question of syntax, where syntax is implicitly understood to designate the science of the concatenation of concepts and words. The problem of language, he notes, “is not only a problem of philosophical lexicology, but it is a problem of syntax which concerns the forms of linkage [*enchainement*] of concepts” (25). Here Derrida sheds light on Heidegger’s introductory remark that the task of the subsequent analyses is jeopardized by a lack of syntax. In the following pages, he sets out a careful examination of this remark that takes his exposition beyond the boundaries of Heidegger’s text, toward a seminal reading of Plato’s *Timaeus*. This examination is developed under the heading “*ontic metaphor*” (26), which seems to resonate with the ontic and not ontological sediments that dissimulate the question of Being. Derrida reformulates, once again, the problem of language

by linking it to Heidegger's self-inhibition of narrative. "The language difficulty," he explains, "hangs, then . . . on the fact that for the first time we are going to forbid ourselves resolutely and absolutely from 'telling stories' [*raconter des histoires*, as Derrida interprets the German *über Seiendes erzählende zu berichten* (the English edition has 'to report narratively'), which is translated literally, between parentheses, by '*informer en racontant*' (26)]" (26). Furthermore, he adds that narrative—namely, telling stories—has a specific meaning for Heidegger here: it accounts for "philosophy itself" as the ontic dissimulation of the question of Being and thus as "metaphysics and onto-theology" (26). This suggests that, despite the discrimination between Plato's and Aristotle's analysis of Being and Thucydides's narrative, the former are still on this side of philosophy as telling stories.³

To explain what telling stories means, Derrida alludes to a distinction between origin and genesis, which, as we will see, is at work in a key moment of the *Timaeus* and, on my reading, grounds the interpretation of Platonism elaborated in "Plato's Pharmacy." Derrida (2016) observes:

To tell stories is . . . to assimilate being [*être*] and beings [*étant*], that is, to determine the origin of beings qua beings on the basis of another being. It is to reply to the question "what is the being of beings?" by appealing to another being supposed to be its cause or origin. It is to close the opening and to suppress the question of the *meaning* of being. Which does not mean that every ontic explication in itself comes down to *telling stories*; when the sciences determine causalities, legalities that order the relations between beings, when theology explains the totality of beings on the basis of creation or the ordering brought about by a supreme being, they are not necessarily telling stories. They "tell stories" when they want to pass their discourse off as the reply to the question of the meaning of being or when, incidentally, they refuse this question all seriousness. (29)

I highlight what interests us here: on the one hand, origin as the Being of beings, on the other, genesis as the transition from a being to another, as the becoming of things. Therefore, telling stories consists in the ontic explanation of the origin of beings. The recourse to the

expression “telling stories,” in order to interpret Heidegger’s remark, is made explicit a little later on, when Derrida turns to section 2 in the “Introduction” of *Being and Time*. In the passage recalled by Derrida, Heidegger borrows from Plato’s *Sophist* the determination of the ontic explanation of the origin of beings as a narrative, as telling a story.

The being of beings “is” itself not a being. The first philosophical step in understanding the problem of being consists in avoiding the *mython tina diēgeisthai*, in not “telling a story,” that is, not determining beings as beings by tracing them back in their origins to another being—as if being had the character of a possible being. (Heidegger 1996, 5)⁴

As Derrida observes, philosophy demarcates itself from “telling stories” when the Stranger in Plato’s *Sophist* claims to abandon the mythological discourse in order to address the problem of Being as such.⁵ Furthermore, in a remark on the translation of Heidegger’s passage, Derrida draws attention to the present tense “consists,” observing that telling stories is “a gesture that always threatens the question of being, yesterday, now and tomorrow” (2016, 31). The reading of “Plato’s Pharmacy” that I propose below interrogates the irreducibility of this threat. Unfolding Heidegger’s reference to the *Sophist*, in the seminar, Derrida explores how Plato takes the first philosophical step beyond mythology onto the question of Being. The renunciation of mythology is inscribed in the dialogue at the moment when, after the well-known refutation and parricide of Parmenides, the character of the Stranger sketches out a short history of past ontologies. Plato’s text reads:

As if we had been children, to whom they repeated each his own mythus or story [in the French edition quoted by Derrida: “ils m’ont l’air de nous conter les mythes (*mython tina ekastos phainetai moi diēgeisthai*),” Derrida 2016, 32]; one said that there were three principles, and that at one time there was war between certain of them; and then again there was peace, and they were married and begat children, and brought them up; and another spoke of two principles, a moist and a dry, or a hot and a cold, and made them marry and cohabit. The Eleatics, however, in our part of the world, say that things are many in name, but in nature one; this

is their mythus, which goes back to Xenophanes, and is even older. Then there are Ionian, and in more recent times Sicilian muses, who have arrived at the conclusion that to unite the two principles is safer. (242c–e)

It is worth reading what Derrida adds at the end of the first case of ontology recalled by Plato. He suggests that what the latter tells is the history/story of being as “the history of being as a family history, as a family tree” (Derrida 2016, 32), thus alluding to the ideas of genesis and becoming. The conclusion of the Stranger’s argument, Derrida summarizes, is that “Being is *other* than the determination of the *onta*” and thus “one must be *conscious* of this alterity which is not a difference between *onta*, in order to transgress mythology when one asks what is the origin of beings in their being” (34). However, Plato too admits that the task of abandoning mythology is impossible for the philosopher. Derrida evokes the example of Timaeus’s preliminary remark in his discourse about the origin of the universe—about “the origin of the *world*, the origin of the beings” (35), as Derrida puts it—in *Timaeus* 27d–29d. This remark is interpreted by Derrida as a “response” to Socrates’s demand for “a true story (*alēthinon logon*)” and not “a *muthon*” (35), which precedes the discourse. Approving his interlocutor’s claim for the historical authenticity of the forthcoming discourse, Socrates observes: “The fact that it isn’t a made-up story but a true historical account is of course critically important” (*Timaeus* 26e).⁶ Timaeus begins by explaining that his discourse is marked by two related impossibilities: (a) the task of speaking about the father of the universe to everyone is impossible (28c); and, consequently, (b) it is impossible to give an account of the origin of the universe, namely, of the becoming of beings, that would be “altogether internally consistent and in every respect and perfectly precise” (29c), for the very reason that it regards becoming and not Being.⁷ Derrida interprets Timaeus’s remark at different levels: as a direct response to Socrates’s observation, as a declaration of the impossibility of the ontological explanation of the origin of beings, and, finally, as a response to Heidegger’s question about the language of destruction. Timaeus announces that “when it is a question of the origin of beings, a philosophical discourse adequate to the question is impossible,” and “one must be content to recite [*réciter*], to unroll like [*dérrouler comme*] a genesis, like a becoming–real of things, something that is not becoming, but the origin of things” (Derrida

2016, 35). Ultimately, “one must unroll the *Archē* like a genesis” (35). Here Derrida takes up the distinction between ontological origin and ontic genesis that he had referred to earlier, when designating the activity of “telling stories” as an ontic explanation of the ontological origin of things. I suggest that the emphasized expression of the ontic metaphor consists precisely in the *archē*’s irreducible developing *like* a genesis. Therefore, Timaeus’s remark is interpreted “as the principle of an ironic answer to the question of being—in Heidegger’s sense” (35). It accounts for the inescapable necessity of telling stories, of mythology, of the ontic metaphor.⁸ Does this necessity also imply the impossibility of finding a grammar for the ontological task, and thus the irreducible relation between grammar as a concatenation of concepts and genesis as a concatenation of beings? I leave this double question open for the moment: the pages that follow may be read as an elaboration of it.

THE ORIGIN AND POWER OF THE LOGOS

The following interpretation of “Plato’s Pharmacy” begins with an analysis of the opening scene of chapter 2, entitled “The Father of the Logos,” where Derrida recalls the myth on which Socrates bases his indictment against writing in Plato’s *Phaedrus*.⁹ The myth is preceded by the formulation that “the story begins like this [*L’histoire commence ainsi*]” (Derrida 1981, 75), through which Derrida seems to suggest that the subsequent myth unfolds the story (/history) that the logos tells about its origin, about its originary and nonmetaphorical relation to its father. The story told by Socrates describes the scene in which the god Theuth presents the invention of the characters of writing (*grammata*) to the king of Egypt, Thamus.

Theuth came to him and exhibited his arts and declared that they ought to be imparted to the other Egyptians. And Thamus questioned him about the usefulness of each one; and as Theuth enumerated, the King blamed or praised what he thought were the good or bad points in the explanation. Now Thamus is said to have had a good deal to remark on both sides of the question about every single art (it would take too long to repeat it here); but when it came to writing, Theuth said, “This discipline, my King, will make the

Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories: my invention is a recipe [*pharmakon*] for both memory and wisdom.”
But the King said . . . etc. (*Phaedrus* 274c–e)

Uncovering what is implicit and presupposed in this scene, Derrida observes that the story tells us about the origin of the *logos*—namely, the king, who neither knows about writing nor needs it, since he has the power of speech and is in the position of deciding about the value and utility of Theuth’s invention. This position will be identified, in a moment, with that of the father. Derrida writes:

The value of writing will not be itself, writing will have no value, unless and to the extent that god—the-king approves of it. But god-the-king nonetheless experiences the *pharmakon* as a product, an *ergon*, which is not his own, which comes to him from outside but also from below, and which awaits his condescending judgment in order to be consecrated in its being and value. God the king does not know how to write, but that ignorance or incapacity only testifies to his sovereign independence. He has no need to write. He speaks, he says, he dictates, and his word suffices. Whether a scribe from his secretarial staff then adds the supplement of a transcription or not, that consignment is always in essence secondary. (1981, 76)

Therefore, the *parti pris* of this scene is the relationship between the “origin and power of speech, precisely of *logos*” and the “paternal position” (76)—that is, the story about the origin of the *logos* as the position of the king–father. Derrida summarizes this story through the following formulation: “The origin of *logos* is *its father*” (77). This means that the position of the father is understood as the subject’s power to speak and thus to emit and accompany a *logos*. From this perspective, the father is not a metaphor insofar as he does not result from the importation of the genetic relation from the zoological discourse to the linguistic one. The father and the *logos* are as such by virtue of their originary and nonmetaphorical relationship. To this extent, the *logos* is a son as it is emitted and accompanied by its father. This thesis is anything but trivial as it accounts for the structure of the *logos* in general, from linguistics to zoology. Furthermore, it is precisely from

this perspective that, by definition, writing entails the disappearance of the father, whether natural or violent.¹⁰ Derrida observes:

Not that logos *is* the father, either. But the origin of logos is *its father*. One could say anachronously that the “speaking subject” is the *father* of his speech. And one would quickly realize that this is no metaphor, at least not in the sense of any common, conventional effect of rhetoric. *Logos* is a son, then, a son that would be destroyed in his very *presence* without the present *attendance* of his father. His father who answers. His father who speaks for him and answers for him. Without his father, he would be nothing but, in fact, writing. At least that is what is said by the one who says: it is the father’s thesis. (1981, 77)

Why must we say the origin of the logos by referring to the genitor, to the supposedly zoological metaphor of generation? What does this necessity mean? Indeed, these questions have already been eluded since the relationship between the logos and the father is understood not as a metaphor but as the structure of the logos in general. Derrida illustrates this structure by drawing attention to the determinations that are attributed to the *logoi* in the *Phaedrus*. They are designated as noble creatures—namely, as creatures of noble birth or race (*gennaioi*), and as sons of the subject that pronounces and protects them (*patēr*).¹¹

The logos, this noble creature, does not only belong to a system of discourses; rather, it is the very element of the system itself. Holding on to Socrates’s description of the logos as a living being (*zōon*) in *Phaedrus* 264b–c,¹² Derrida suggests that the logos-*zōon* is the object of linguistics as well as of zoology. In other words, it is the minimal particle, the atom, of these regional discourses. “*Logos* is a *zōon*,” Derrida observes, “an animal that is born, grows, belongs to the *physis*. Linguistics, logic, dialectics, and zoology are all in the same camp [*ont partie liée*]” (1981, 79). As remarked by Socrates in his description, the logos-*zōon* has a body proper and is not deformed. It is “an *organism*,” Derrida explains, “a differentiated body *proper*, with a center and extremities, joints, a head, and feet” (80). This suggests once more that the structure of the logos constitutes a metaphor borrowed from a certain understanding of the living and thus that the relation to its father (the noble birth, the body proper, etc.) hinges on a genetic and

zoological explanation. However, here Derrida relaunched the question of the father. He explains that the relation between the logos and its father does not consist in the metaphorical inscription of the zoological relationship between the son and its genitor into the linguistic discourse. Rather, it is the element of the metaphorical exchange between the regional discourses of the system. The father is not the genetic cause of the living son, nor does the birth of the logos constitute a generation, since the relation between the father and the logos is not metaphorical but originary. In other words, it is this relation that makes them what they are, logos and father. Therefore, the living being is understood on the basis of the logos, and its generation consists in the relation to the power of the logos. Derrida argues:

One would then say that the origin or cause of *logos* is being compared to what we know to be the cause of a living son, his father. One would understand or imagine the birth and development of *logos* from the standpoint of a domain foreign to it, the transmission of life or the generative relation. But the father is not the generator or procreator in any “real” sense prior to or outside all relation to language. In what way, indeed, is the father/son relation distinguishable from a mere cause/effect or generator/engendered relation, if not by the instance of logos? Only a power of speech can have a father. The father is always father to a speaking/living being. In other words, it is precisely *logos* that enables us to perceive and investigate something like paternity. (80)

According to a logic that seems to invert the appearances, what is the most familiar—the very concept of family—is grounded on the originary and nonmetaphorical relation between the logos and its father and not on the genetic and zoological relation between the son and its genitor. Proposing a formulation whose implications extend throughout his early work, Derrida remarks that the concept of family rests on a linguistic rather than zoological element.¹³ “If there were a simple metaphor in the expression ‘father of logos,’” Derrida observes, “the first word, which seemed the more *familiar*, would nevertheless receive more meaning *from* the second than it would transmit *to* it. The first familiarity is always involved in a relation of cohabitation with *logos*” (81). Going back to Socrates’s description of the logos-*zōon*, we

may conclude that the *logos-zōon* does not depend on a zoological metaphor but on the presupposition of the paternal thesis. Therefore, the speculation on the question of the father ends up calling for a reconsideration of the metaphorical organization of the system:

To have simple metaphoricity, one would have to make the statement that some living creature incapable of language, if anyone still wished to believe in such a thing, has a father. One must thus proceed to undertake a general reversal of all metaphorical directions, no longer asking whether *logos* can have a father but understanding that what the father claims to be the father of cannot go without the essential possibility of *logos*. (81)

The system described here is what Derrida designates elsewhere as the *logos spermatikos*, in which the concepts of the living and of the zoological process of generation are grounded on the concept of *logos* and on the relationship between the *logos* and its subject, respectively.¹⁴ The immediate implication of this system is that a living being is what it is only if it bears within itself the power of the *logos* and thus it is accompanied by its father.¹⁵

THE TEXTUALITY OF PLATO'S TEXT

In chapter 3, entitled “The Inscription of the Sons,” Derrida draws attention to “the structural resemblance between the Platonic and the other mythological figures of the origin of writing” (1981, 86). The consequence of this operation, as he points out, consists in casting light on the relation between the myth and the *logos* and on the myth that the *logos* tells about its origin as the position of the father.¹⁶ In particular, I refer to the pages in which Derrida explains that the Egyptian Thot is a “spokesman” (88) of Ra, “the god of creative word,” and replaces it “only by metonymic substitution, by historical displacement, and sometimes by violent subversion” (89).¹⁷ Derrida suggests that the substitution of Ra with Thot, which occurs within the element of linguistic permutations or concatenations (within the limits of grammar, we may say), cannot be understood as merely an inoffensive word play since Thot is often involved in “plots, perfidious

intrigues, conspiracies to usurp the throne.” As Derrida explains, “He helps the sons do away with the father, the brothers do away with the brother that has become king” (90). Does this mean that there is no such a thing as the father, origin and power of the logos, and thus that *logoi* without a father have already replaced and usurped one another? In other words, does this mean that there is anything but genealogical breaks? Indeed, at a certain point, Thot becomes the god of creative speech, Ra. “The same can also be seen to occur in the evolution [*comme une évolution dans . . .*] of the history of mythology” (91), Derrida remarks in a note. Therefore, the logos itself, understood as Socrates’s logos-*zōon*, as the element of the system called Platonism, consists in a genealogical break, a usurpation, that tells the story/history of its originary relation to the father.

In chapter 4, entitled “The Pharmakon,” Derrida remarks that in the word *pharmakon* are tied together the threads of the correspondence between the Egyptian Thot and the character of Socrates’s myth.¹⁸ “My invention is a recipe (*pharmakon*) for both memory and wisdom,” Theuth says according to Socrates. Derrida observes that “the [French] translation [of the word *pharmakon*] by ‘remedy’ [*remède*] erases [*efface*], in going outside the Greek language, the other pole reserved in the word *pharmakon*” (97).¹⁹ The operation of erasing (*effacer*), Derrida explains, consists in the annihilation of the ambiguity—that is, of the uninterrupted communication, between the opposite meanings of *remedy* and *poison*, both of which are gathered together in the unity of the same signifier, *pharmakon*.²⁰ But what, precisely, does this ambiguity and communication account for and, consequently, what does the translation by “remedy” destroy? The textuality of Plato’s text, Derrida answers—namely, the text’s anagrammatic structure, which carries the multiple meanings of a word and the uninterrupted ambiguity and communication between them.

The effect of such a translation is most importantly to destroy what we will later call Plato’s anagrammatic writing, to destroy it by interrupting the relations interwoven among different functions of the same word in different places, relations that are virtually but necessarily “citational.” When a word inscribes itself as the citation of another sense of the same word, when the textual center-stage of the word *pharmakon*, even while it means *remedy*, cites, re-cites, and makes

legible that which *in the same word* signifies, in another spot and on a different level of the stage, *poison* (for example, since that it is not the only other thing *pharmakon* means), the choice of only one of these renditions by the translator has as its first effect the neutralization of the citational play, of the “anagram,” and, in the end, quite simply of *the very textuality of the translated text* [my emphasis]. (98)

As demonstrated by Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, the anagram consists in the structure of general writing that is necessarily presupposed by the phoneme, and thus in the irreducible synthesis of the grapheme.²¹ From the perspective of the analysis developed in the previous section, anagrammatic structure contests the dissociation of writing and speech as well as the paternal position of the *logos-zōon* as the element of the system of discourses and metaphorical exchanges called Platonism. Furthermore, anagrammatic structure intersects what Hegel identifies as the speculative resources of the German language, which sometimes employs the same word for opposed significations. Later, I develop this reference, which can be tracked in key moments across Derrida’s early work.²² Focusing on the text we are reading, I note that anagrammatic structure holds in reserve the different functions—namely, the multiple meanings that a grapheme takes on according to the multiple concatenations in which it is reinscribed. In other words, anagrammatic structure ties together the grammatical or syntactical concatenations that precede the determination of the meaning of a word (for instance, of *pharmakon*) and thus the destruction of its structural ambiguity.²³ As suggested by the verb *ré-citer*, which Derrida uses to account for the relation of the word to its meanings, these grammatical concatenations may be interpreted as stories, as discourses that are repeated and thus are not accompanied by their father. Therefore, the irreducible synthesis of grammatical concatenations and stories that make up the grapheme *pharmakon* constitutes the very element of Platonism, the vigil from which it wishes to dissociate itself. Derrida makes this explicit when he contends that the destruction of the ambiguous and anagrammatic writing in the translation by “remedy” is already “an effect of Platonism,” “the consequence of something already at work . . . in the relation between Plato and his language” (98). The fact that a text aims to destroy its textuality, its anagrammatic structure, cannot be excluded. Rather, it is a work that textuality makes possible and, at the same time, it is never

accomplished so long as the communication between the grammatical concatenations that constitute the anagrammatic structure of a text can never be fully destroyed. “Textuality being constituted by differences and by differences from differences,” Derrida writes, “it is by nature absolutely heterogeneous and is constantly composing with the forces that tend to annihilate it” (98). It is time to recall Thamus’s response to Theuth:

Most artful Theuth, one person is able to bring forth the things of art, another to judge what allotment of harm and of benefit they have for those who are going to use them. And now you, being the father of written letters, have on account of goodwill said the opposite of what they can do. For this will provide forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it, through neglect of memory, seeing that, through trust in writing, they recollect from outside with alien markings, not reminding themselves from inside, by themselves. You have therefore found a drug not for memory, but for reminding. You are supplying the opinion of wisdom to the students, not truth. (*Phaedrus* 274e–275b)

As Derrida explains, Plato, through Thamus, wishes to master the ambiguity of the *pharmakon* by establishing a system of rigid oppositions (good and evil, inside and outside, true and false, essence and appearance). Within this system, he remarks that “writing is essentially bad, external to memory, productive not of science but of belief, not of truth but of appearances” (1981, 108). The line between the opposites drawn by Thamus also demarcates memory (*mnēmē*) from re-memoration (*hypomnēsis*)—that is, as Derrida designates them, “an unveiling (re-)producing a presence” from “the mere repetition of a monument” (“archive”), “truth”/“being” and “sign”/“type” (108–9), etc. At least, this is Plato’s dream: a *mnēmē* dissociated from *hypomnēsis*. Derrida argues against this dissociation, showing that the minimal structure of memory as well as of the living organism is a written sign or an inscription. The latter allows the living being, which is finite—namely, the living organism—to relate itself to the nonpresent, and thus it puts memory to work.

Memory is finite by nature. Plato recognizes this in attributing life to it. As in the case of all living organisms, he

assigns it, as we have seen, certain limits. A limitless memory would in any event be not memory but infinite self-presence. Memory always therefore already needs signs in order to recall the nonpresent, with which it is necessarily in relation. The movement of dialectics bears witness to this. Memory is thus contaminated by its first substitute: *hypomnēsis*. (109)

This reading is based on the definition of the living organism that Plato has in *Timaeus* 89c. A few pages prior, Derrida recalls this definition as follows: “It [the living] has a limited lifetime . . . death is already inscribed and prescribed within its structure, in its ‘constitutive triangles’” (101).²⁴ Furthermore, he measures the limited lifetime of the living organism against the “immortality and perfection,” which, according to *Republic* 2.381b–c, “would consist in its having no relation at all with any outside” and is accomplished only in God (1981, 101). Therefore, the inscription in the memory is the minimal structure of the living organism to the extent that the latter is finite and relates to the non-present only through memory.

AUTOCHTHONY

In the chapter examined above, Derrida parses that the system of opposition evoked by Thamus’s response to Theuth presupposes the very concept of opposition, the matrix of all oppositions, which consists in the line drawn between the inside and the outside and dividing them. He explains:

It is not enough to say that writing is conceived out of this or that series of oppositions. Plato thinks of writing, and tries to comprehend it, to dominate it, on the basis of *opposition* as such. In order for these contrary values (good/evil, true/false, essence/appearance, inside/outside, etc.) to be in opposition, each of the terms must be simply external to the other, which means that one of these oppositions (the opposition between inside and outside) must already be accredited as the matrix of all possible opposition. And one of the elements of the system (or of the series) must

also stand as the very possibility of systematicity or seriality in general. (103)

This insight about the foundational opposition between the inside and the outside is unfolded in chapter 6, entitled “The Pharmakos.” The opening scene of the chapter recounts the myth that the logos tells about its origin (father, noble birth, body proper) and through which it wishes to destroy the other myths that it bears within itself—namely, its own textuality—and to demarcate itself from them. Here the opposition between the inside and the outside is described as the very institution of the myth of the logos and thus of logic itself.

The purity of the inside can then only be restored if the *charges are brought home* against exteriority as a supplement, inessential yet harmful to the essence, a surplus that *ought* never to have come to be added to the untouched plenitude of the inside. The restoration of internal purity must thus reconstitute, *recite*—and this is myth as such, the *mythology* for example of a *logos* recounting its origin, going back to the eve of the pharmakographic aggression—that to which the *pharmakon* should not have had to be added and attached like a *literal parasite*: a *letter* installing itself inside a living organism to rob it of its *nourishment* and to *distort* the pure audibility of a voice. Such are the relations between the writing supplement and the *logos-zōon*. In order to cure the latter of the *pharmakon* and rid it of the parasite, it is thus necessary to put the outside back in its place. To keep the outside out. *This is the inaugural gesture of “logic” itself* [my emphasis]. (128)

In the subsequent analysis, Derrida suggests that this inaugural gesture is political as it accounts for the constitution of the political community of the city. He highlights the systematic link between the word *pharmakos*, which is not used by Plato, and the lexicon of the *pharmakon*. *Pharmakos* is a synonym of *pharmakeus*—namely, the magician or the one who gives the *pharmakon*—a title that Plato attributes to Socrates, as pointed out in the previous chapter of “Plato’s Pharmacy.”²⁵ However, the word has a peculiarity that captures Derrida’s interest: it is “the unique feature of having been overdetermined, overlaid by

Greek culture with another function . . . another role, and a formidable one” (130). Relying on the historiographical sources available at the time of the publication of “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Derrida points out that the *pharmakos* is involved in the ritual practices of purification of a community and its major significations are “the *evil* and the *outside*, the expulsion of the evil, its exclusion out of the body (and out) of the city” (130).²⁶ In Athens, it enters the stage during the celebrations of the public ceremonies of the Thargelias, which comprised the rites of purification of the city. These rites included the sacrifice of two deformed individuals as a remedy for the calamity that affected the city.²⁷

Derrida recounts the story transmitted by his sources by articulating the ritual of the *pharmakos* with the myth told by Socrates in the *Phaedrus* and, more generally, with the myth about the origin of the logos, the paternal thesis of Platonism. In the ritual, what is designated by the “city” or the “community” of the Athenians is the institution of the inside and thus the description of the line that separates the pole of the logos-*zōon* (noble birth, body proper, and so forth) from the opposite pole of the *pharmakoi*. Derrida writes:

The city’s body *proper* thus reconstitutes its unity, closes around the security of its inner courts, gives back to itself the word that links it with itself within the confines of the agora, by violently excluding from its territory the representative of an external threat or aggression. That representative represents the otherness of the evil that comes to affect or infect the inside by unpredictably breaking into it. Yet the representative of the outside is nonetheless *constituted*, regularly granted its place by the community, chosen, kept, fed, etc., in the very heart of the inside. These parasites were as a matter of course domesticated by the living organism that housed them at its expense. (133)²⁸

The political gesture that is at the origins of logic and of the system of the logos-*zōon* can be understood as “autochthony.” This word occurs only once in the “Pharmacy,” as a determination that opposes the Socratic logos to the errancy of writing. “The Socratic word,” Derrida writes, “does not wander, stays at home, is closely watched: within *autochthony* [my emphasis], within the city, within the law, under the surveillance of its mother tongue” (124). A deeper examination of

the meanings of this word is developed by Derrida in later writings, which also rely on Nicole Loraux's studies on the origins of Athens. The next chapter explores the relationship between autochthony and *khōra* as Derrida elaborates it in the reading of Plato's *Timaeus* that he undertakes throughout his work.²⁹

THE NATURAL TENDENCY TO DISSEMINATION

Derrida takes up the interrupted thread of the reading of the *Phaedrus* in chapter 8, entitled "The Heritage of the Pharmakon. Family Scene." As is well known, Socrates compares the written *logoi* to the offspring of painting and remarks that, when interrogated about what they say, they remain silent and limit themselves to indicating the same (*Phaedrus* 275d). From this, he concludes that they cannot protect themselves but demand the assistance of the father (275e). Derrida points out that Socrates speaks about writing from within the system of the *logos-zōon*, as a kind of *logos* that has been written down ("what is written down is a *logos* [*un discours écrit*]," Derrida 1981, 143) and thus dissociated from the presence of the father. Within this system, the written *logos* is not a noble creature but is "deformed at its very birth" (148) and thus constitutes a virtual *pharmakos*. It is measured against its brother of noble birth, the *logos* inscribed in the soul of "the one who understands," which has "the power to defend itself" (*Phaedrus* 276a)—namely, a father—and thus consists in the element of the system of regional discourses or *logoi*.³⁰ As Derrida remarks, Socrates refers to the graphic metaphor to account for the noble brother of the written *logos* and, therefore, for the supposedly nonmetaphorical element that presides over the metaphorical exchanges of the system. What renders this metaphor necessary, although this necessity is eluded by Plato here, is, for instance, that the written sign or grapheme links the living organism to the non-present and constitutes the elementary structure of memory and life. "This borrowing is rendered necessary," Derrida writes, "by that which structurally links the intelligible to its repetition in the copy, and the language describing dialectics cannot fail to call upon it" (1981, 149).³¹ Anticipating what follows in Plato's text, Derrida proposes a distinction between the two *logoi*/brothers that allows him to bring to the fore, for the first time in his published work, the word "dissemination":

It is later confirmed that the conclusion of the *Phaedrus* is less a condemnation of writing in the name of present speech than a preference for one sort of writing over another, for the fertile trace over the sterile trace, for a seed that engenders because it is planted inside over a seed scattered wastefully outside: at the risk of *dissemination*. (149)

This is a metaphor insofar as the logos inscribed in the soul, the element of all metaphorical exchanges, grounds the zoological discourse about the living and the process of generation. From this perspective, the seed at risk of dissemination is understood in relation to writing as a written logos, as a logos deprived of the noble birth as well of the body proper, as a virtual *pharmakos*. In principle, only the logos-*zōon* is generative as it carries with itself the presence and assistance of the father and consists in an engendered organism. Therefore, generation should take place only within the limits of the community (family or city).³²

Socrates suggests that writing is like sowing seeds through a pen, seeds that have no power to defend themselves nor to teach anything (*Phaedrus* 276b–c). In so doing, he establishes an analogy between two kinds of writing and two kinds of seeds, which Derrida describes as, respectively, “superfluous seeds giving rise to ephemeral produce (floriferous seeds)” and “strong, fertile seeds engendering necessary, lasting, nourishing produce (fructiferous seeds)” (Derrida 1981, 151). The consequence of the logos-seed analogy, which goes—against all appearances—from the logos to the seed, is that nature is constituted according to the system of the logos-*zōon*. Therefore, Derrida associates the aforementioned passage from the *Phaedrus* with a text from the *Laws* in which the character of the Athenian describes a law proposal against pederasty and the practices of sex that do not lead to fecundation. Here the implicit figure of the generative seed within the limits of the family seems to draw together law and nature. Plato’s text, quoted by Derrida, reads:

That was exactly my own meaning when I said I knew of a device for establishing this law of restricting procreative intercourse to its natural function by abstention from congress with our own sex, with its deliberate murder of the race and its wasting of the seed of life on a stony and rocky soil,

where it will never take root and bear its natural fruit, and equal abstention from any female field whence you would desire no harvest. (152–53)

Unfolding Derrida's reference, I argue that, from the perspective of the *logos-zōon* and thus of the generative seed of the family, dissemination is understood as contrary to nature as well as to law. However, there is also a place in Plato's corpus, once again in the *Timaeus*, where the germ of the deconstruction of the law-nature articulation and, more generally, of the whole system may be found. It is the description of sperm included in Timaeus's discourse, which Derrida recalls without developing its implications. He limits himself to recognizing that "the natural tendency of sperm is opposed to the law of *logos*" (154). The passage explains that the seed is constituted by a vital drive to go out of itself (and to generate) and, for this reason, the living resists the *logos*. If we link this drive to dissemination, Timaeus's explanation suggests that we can no longer think of the living in relation to the *logos-zōon* and to the latter's determinations. Timaeus observes:

The marrow . . . we have named semen. And the semen, having life and becoming endowed with respiration, produces in that part in which it respire a lively desire of emission, and thus creates in us the love of procreation [*generation*]. Wherefore also in men the organ of generation becoming rebellious and masterful, like an animal disobedient to reason [*tou logou*], and maddened with the sting of lust, seeks to gain absolute sway. (*Timaeus* 91b)

What is at stake in this passage is an understanding of dissemination as the irreducible structure of the living, an understanding that calls into question the system designated as Platonism and based on the *logos-zōon* and the generative seed. Generation itself is made possible only by dissemination and thus before the inaugural gesture of logic, the institution of the city, the living-*zōon*, and so forth. If the *logos* has already been written down and writing has already been dissociated from its father—namely, disseminated—then the grapheme-seed is the element of linguistics, zoology, politics, and thus of all regional discourses.