title of a problem, it is the ironic title of a work that modifies its own form, displaces its own data, and reveals, at the end of the day, a quite different task. A task that consists of not — of no longer — treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to, contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. Of course, discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this more that renders them irreducible to the language (langue) and to speech. It is this "more" that we must reveal and describe.

Note

1 This is written against an explicit theme of my book Madness and Civilization, and one that recurs particularly in the Preface.

Let us read [Plato’s dialogue Phaedrus] more closely. At the precisely calculated center of the dialogue — the reader can count the lines — the question of logography is raised (257e). Phaedrus reminds Socrates that the citizens of greatest influence and dignity, the men who are the most free, feel ashamed (aiskhunontai) at "speechwriting" and at leaving sungrammata behind them. They fear the judgment of posterity, which might consider them "sophists" (257d). The logographer, in the strict sense, is a ghost writer who composes speeches for use by litigants, speeches which he himself does not pronounce, which he does not attend, so to speak, in person, and which produce their effects in his absence. In writing what he does not speak, what he would never say and, in truth, would probably never even think, the author of the written speech is already entrenched in the posture of the sophist: the man of non-presence and of non-truth. Writing is thus already on the scene. The incompatibility between the written and the true is clearly announced at the moment Socrates starts to recount the way in which men are carried out of themselves by pleasure, become absent from themselves, forget themselves and die in the thrill of song (259) . . .

Socrates compares the written texts Phaedrus has brought along to a drug (pharmakon). This pharmakon, this "medicine," this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be — alternately or simultaneously — beneficent or maleficient. The pharmakon would be a substance — with all that that word can connote in terms of matter with occult virtues, cryptic depths refusing to submit their ambivalence to analysis, already paving the way for alchemy — if we didn’t have eventually to come to recognize it as antisubstance itself: that which resists any philosopheme, indefinitely exceeding its bounds as nonidentity, nonessence, nonsubstance; granting philosophy by that very fact the inexhaustible adversity [literally, "othersidedness"] of what constitutes it and the infinite absence of what dissolves it.

Operating through seduction, the pharmakon makes one stray from one’s general, natural, habitual paths and laws. Here, it takes Socrates out of his proper place and off his customary track. The latter had always kept him inside the city. The leaves of writing act as a pharmakon to push or attract out of the city the one who never
wanted to get out, even at the end, to escape the hemlock. They take him out of himself and draw him onto a path that is properly an exodus:

**Phaedrus:** Anyone would take you, as you say, for a foreigner being shown the country by a guide, and not a native – you never leave town to cross the frontier now even, I believe, so much as set foot outside the walls.

**Socrates:** You must forgive me, dear friend; I’m a lover of learning, and trees and open country won’t teach me anything, whereas men in the town do. Yet you seem to have discovered a drug for getting me out (dokes moi ioes emes excou to pharmakon heurkeina). A hungry animal can be driven by dangling a carrot or a bit of greenstuff in front of it; similarly if you proffer me speeches bound in books (*en biblia*) I don’t doubt you can cart me all round Attica, and anywhere else you please. Anyhow, now that we’ve got here I propose for the time being to lie down, and you can choose whatever posture you think most convenient for reading, and proceed.

(230d–e)

It is at this point, when Socrates has finally stretched out on the ground and Phaedrus has taken the most comfortable position for handling the text or, if you will, the *pharmakon*, that the discussion actually gets off the ground. A spoken speech – whether by Lysias or by Phaedrus in person – a speech proffered in the present, in the presence of Socrates, would not have had the same effect. Only the *logoi en biblia*, only words that are deferred, reserved, enveloped, rolled up, words that force one to wait for them in the form and under cover of a solid object, letting themselves be desired for the space of a walk, only hidden letters can thus get Socrates moving. If speech could be purely present, unveiled, naked, offered up in person in its truth, without the detours of a signifier foreign to it, if at the limit an undeferred logos moving, it would not seduce anyone. It would not draw Socrates, as if under the effects of a *pharmakon*, out of his way. Let us get ahead of ourselves. Already: writing, the *pharmakon*, the going or leading astray.

In our discussion of this text we have been using an authoritative French translation of Plato, the one published by Guillaume Budé. In the case of the *Phaedrus*, the translation is by Léon Robin. We will continue to refer to it, inserting the Greek text in parentheses, however, whenever it seems opportune or pertinent to our point. Hence, for example, the word *pharmakon*. In this way we hope to display in the most striking manner the regular, ordered polysemy that has, through skewing, indeterminacy, or overdetermination, but without mistranslation, permitted the rendering of the same word by “remedy,” “recipe,” “poison,” “drug,” “philter,” etc. It will also be seen to what extent the malleable unity of this concept, or rather its rules and the strange logic that links it with its signifier, has been dispersed, masked, obliterated, and rendered almost unreadable not only by the imprudence or empiricism of the translators, but first and foremost by the redoubtable, irreducible difficulty of translation. It is a difficulty inherent in its very principle, situated less in the passage from one language to another, from one philosophical language to another, than already, as we shall see, in the tradition between Greek and Greek; a violent difficulty in the transference of a nonphilosopheme into a philosopheme. With this problem of translation we will thus be dealing with nothing less than the problem of the very passage into philosophy.

The extent of the difficulty is marked out – this is, among a hundred others, the example that retains us here – in that the truth – the original truth – about writing as a *pharmakon* will at first be left up to a myth. The myth of Theuth, to which we now turn...

**The Father of Logos**

The story begins like this:

**Socrates:** Very well. I heard, then, that at Naucratis in Egypt there lived one of the old gods of that country, the one whose sacred bird is called the ibis; and the name of the divinity was Theuth. It was he who first invented numbers and calculation, geometry and astronomy, not to speak of draughts and dice, and above all writing (*grammata*). Now the King of all Egypt at that time was Thamus who lived in the great city of the upper region which the Greeks call the Egyptian Thebes; the god himself they call Ammon. Thamus 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 Thamus 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, Thamus said, "This discipline (*to mathêma*), my King, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories (*sophôterous kai mnemonikóterous*); my invention is a *recipe* (*pharmakon*) for both memory and wisdom." But the King said... etc.

(274c–e)

Let us cut the King off here. He is faced with the *pharmakon*. His reply will be incisive.

Let us freeze the scene and the characters. Let’s look. Writing (or, if you will, the *pharmakon*) is thus presented to the King. Presented: like a kind of present offered up in homage by a vassal to his lord. (Theuth is a demigod speaking to the king of the gods), but above all as a finished work submitted to his appreciation. And this work is itself an art, a worker’s power, an operative virtue. This artefactum is an art. But the value of this gift is still uncertain. The value of writing – or of the *pharmakon* – has of course been spelled out to the King, but it is the King who will give it its value, who will set the price of what, in the act of receiving, he constitutes or institutes. The king or god (Thamus represents Ammon, the king of the gods, the king of kings, the god of gods. Theuth says to him: Ἐς βασίλευς is thus the other name for the origin of value. 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.

From this position, without rejecting the homage, the god-king will depreciate it, pointing out not only its uselessness but its menace and its mischief. Another way of not receiving the offering of writing. In so doing, god-the-king—that-speaks is acting like a father. The pharmakon is here presented to the father and is by him rejected, belittled, abandoned, disparaged. The father is always suspicious and watchful toward writing.

Even if we did not want to give in here to the easy passage uniting the figures of the king, the god, and the father, it would suffice to pay systematic attention—which to our knowledge has never been done—to the permanence of a Platonic schema that assigns the origin and power of speech, precisely of logos, to the paternal position. Not that this happens especially and exclusively in Plato. Everyone knows this or can easily imagine it. But the fact that “Platonism,” which sets up the whole of Western metaphysics in its conceptuality, should not escape the generality of this structural constraint, and even illustrates it with incomparable subtlety and force, stands out as all the more significant.

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. The specificity of writing would thus be intimately bound to the absence of the father. Such an absence can of course exist along very diverse modalities, distinctly or confusedly, successively or simultaneously: to have lost one’s father, through natural or violent death, through random violence or patricide; and then to solicit the aid and attendance, possible or impossible, of the paternal presence, to solicit it directly or to claim to be getting along without it, etc. The reader will have noted Socrates’ insistence on the misery, whether pitiful or arrogant, of a logos committed to writing.

A logos indebted to a father, what does that mean? At least how can it be read within the stratum of the Platonic text that interests us here?

The figure of the father, of course, is also that of the good (agathon). Logos represents what it is indebted to: the father who is also chief, capital, and good(s). Or rather the chief, the capital, the good(s). Patér in Greek means all that at once.
For it goes without saying that the god of writing must also be the god of death. We should not forget that, in the Phaedrus, another thing held against the invention of the pharmakon is that it substitutes the breathless sign for the living voice, claims to do without the father (who is both living and life-giving) of logos, and can no more answer for itself than a sculpture or inanimate painting, etc. In all the cycles of Egyptian mythology, Thoth presides over the organization of death. The master of writing, numbers, and calculation does not merely write down the weight of dead souls; he first counts out the days of life, enumerates history. His arithmetical thus covers the events of divine biography. He is "the one who measures the length of the lives of gods and men." He behaves like a chief of funereal protocol, charged in particular with the dressing of the dead.

The hierarchical opposition between son and father, subject and king, death and life, writing and speech, etc., naturally completes its system with that between night and day, West and East, moon and sun. Thoth, the "nocturnal representative of Ra, the bull among the stars," turns toward the west. He is the god of the moon, either as identified with it or as its protector.8

The system of these traits brings into play an original kind of logic: the figure of Thoth is opposed to its other (father, sun, life, speech, origin or orient, etc.), but as that which at once supplements and supplants it. Thoth extends or opposes by repeating or replacing. By the same token, the figure of Thoth takes shape and takes its shape from the very thing it resists and substitutes for. But it thereby opposes itself, passes into its other, and this messenger-god is truly a god of the absolute passage between opposites. If he had any identity — but he is precisely the god of nonidentity — he would be that coincidentia oppositorum to which we will soon have recourse again. 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. The god of writing is thus at once his father, his son, and himself. He cannot be assigned a fixed spot in the play of differences. Sly, slippery, and masked, an intriguer and a card, like Hermes, he is neither king nor jack, but rather a sort of joker, a floating signifier, a wild card, one who puts play into play.

This god of resurrection is less interested in life or death than in death as a repetition of life and life as a rehearsal of death, in the awakening of life and in the recommencement of death. This is what numbers, of which he is also the inventor and patron, mean. Thoth repeats everything in the addition of the supplement: in adding to and doubling as the sun, he is other than the sun and the same as it; other than the good and the same, etc. Always taking a place not his own, a place one could call that of the dead or the dummy, he has neither a proper place nor a proper name. His propriety or property [self-identity, propriété] is impropriety; or appropriateness, the floating indeterminacy that allows for substitution and play, Play, of which he is also the inventor, as Plato himself reminds us. It is to him that we owe the games of dice (kubia) and draughts (pettia) (274d). He would be the mediating movement of dialectics if he did not also mimic it, indefinitely preventing
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it, through this ironic doubling, from reaching some final fulfillment or eschatological reappropriation. Thoth is never present. Nowhere does he appear in person. No being-there can properly be his own.

Every act of his is marked by this unstable ambivalence. This god of calculation, arithmetic, and rational science also presides over the occult sciences, astrology and alchemy. He is the god of magic formulas that calm the sea, of secret accounts, of hidden texts: an archetype of Hermes, god of cryptography no less than of every other—graphy...

The system of these . . . features is reconstituted when, in the Phaedrus, King Thamus depresses and deprecates the pharmakon of writing, a word that should thus not too hastily be considered a metaphor, unless the metaphorical possibility is allowed to retain all its power of enigma. Perhaps we can now read the King’s response:

But the king said, “Theuth, my master of arts (Otekhnikos Theuth), to one man it is given to create the elements of an art, to another to judge the extent of harm and usefulness it will have for those who are going to employ it. And now, since you are father of written letters (patér en grammatiōn), your paternal goodwill has led you to pronounce the very opposite (tounantion) of what is their real power. The fact is that this invention will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it because they will not need to exercise their memories (lithēm men en puchais parexei mnēmeis amelētēsas), being able to rely on what is written, using the stimulus of external marks that are alien to themselves (dias poeis graphēs exōtēn hup’ allotropon tu) rather than, from within, their own unaided powers to call things to mind (ouk endothen autous hup’ hōsēn anamnētikōmenous). So it’s not a remedy for memory, but for reminding, that you have discovered (oukoun mnēmēs, alla hapōnētikōs, pharmakon hērēs). And as for wisdom (sophia de), you’re equipping your pupils with only a semblance (dōsan) of it, not with truth (alētheian). Thanks to you and your invention, your pupils will be widely read without benefit of a teacher’s instruction; in consequence, they’ll entertain the delusion that they have wide knowledge, while they are, in fact, the most part incapable of real judgment. They will also be difficult to get on with since they will be men filled with the conceit of wisdom (doxosophos), not men of wisdom (anti sophos).” (274c–275b)

The king, the father of speech, has thus asserted his authority over the father of writing. And he has done so with severity, without showing the one who occupies the place of his son any of that paternal good will exhibited by Theuth toward his own children, his “letters.” Thamus presses on, multiplies his reservations, and visibly wants to leave Theuth no hope.

In order for writing to produce, as he says, the “opposite” effect from what one might expect, in order for this pharmakon to show itself, with use, to be injurious, its effectiveness, its power, its dynamis must, of course, be ambiguous. As is said of the pharmakon in the Protagoras, the Philebus, the Timaeus. It precisely this ambiguity that Plato, through the mouth of the King, attempts to master, to dominate by inserting its definition into simple, clear-cut oppositions: good and evil, inside and outside, true and false, essence and appearance. If one rereads the reasons adduced by the royal sentence, one will find this series of oppositions there. And set in place in such a way that the pharmakon, or, if you will, writing, can only go around in circles: writing is not only apparently good for memory, seemingly able to help it from within, through its own motion, to know what is true. But in truth, writing is essentially bad, external to memory, productive not of science but of belief, not of truth but of appearances. The pharmakon produces a play of appearances which enable it to pass for truth, etc.

But while, in the Philebus and the Protagoras, the pharmakon, because it is painful, seems bad whereas it is beneficial, here, in the Phaedrus as in the Timaeus it is passed off as a helpful remedy whereas it is in truth harmful. Had ambiguity is thus opposed to good ambiguity, a deceitful intention to a mere appearance. Writing’s case is grave.

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. And if one got to thinking that something like the pharmakon—or writing—far from being governed by these oppositions, opens up their very possibility without letting itself be comprehended by them; if one got to thinking that it can only be outside of something like writing—or the pharmakon—that the strange difference between inside and outside can spring: if, consequently, one got to thinking that writing as a pharmakon cannot simply be assigned a site within what it situates, cannot be asubsumed under concepts whose contours it draws, leaves only its ghost to a logic that can only seek to govern it insofar as logic arises from it—"one would then have to bend [plier] into strange contortions what could no longer even simply be called logic or discourse. All the more so if we have just immodestly called a ghost can no longer be distinguished, with the same assurance, from truth, reality, living flesh, etc. One must accept the fact that here, for once, to leave a ghost behind will in a sense be to salvage nothing..."

If writing, according to the king and under the sun, produces the opposite effect from what is expected, if the pharmakon is pernicious, it is because, like the one in the Timaeus, it doesn’t come from around here. It comes from afar, it is external or alien: to the living, which is the right—here of the inside, to logos as the zōnom it claims to assist or relieve. The imprints (tupoi) of writing do not inscribe themselves this time, as they do in the hypothesis of the Theaetetus, in the wax of the soul in intaglio, thus corresponding to the spontaneous, autochthonous motions of psychic life. Knowing that he can always leave his thoughts outside or check them with an external agency, with the physical, spatial, superficial marks that one lays flat on a tablet, he who has the tekhnē of writing at his disposal will come to rely on it. He will know that he himself can leave without the tupoi’s going away, that he can...
forget all about them without their leaving his service. They will represent him even if he forgets them; they will transmit his word even if he is not there to animate them. Even if he is dead, and only a pharmakon can be the wielder of such power, over death but also in cahoots with it. The pharmakon and writing are thus always involved in questions of life and death.

Can it be said without conceptual anchorman – and thus without serious interpretive error – that the ἐκποίησις are representatives, the physical surrogates of the psychic that is absent? It would be better to assert that the written traces no longer even belong to the order of the phusis, since they are not alive. They do not grow; they grow no more than what could be sown, as Socrates will say in a minute, with a reed (kalamos). They do violence to the natural, autonomous organization of the mnēmē, in which phusis and psychē are not opposed. If writing does belong to the phusis, wouldn’t it be to that moment of the phusis, to that necessary movement through which its truth, the production of its appearing, tends, says Heraclitus, to take shelter in its crypt? “Cryptogram” thus condenses in a single word a pleonastic proposition.

If one takes the king’s word for it, then, it is this life of the memory that the pharmakon of writing would come to hypnose: fascinating it, taking it out of itself by putting it to sleep in a monument. Confident of the permanence and independence of its types (topoi), memory will fall asleep, will not keep itself up, will no longer keep to keeping itself alert, present, as close as possible to the truth of what is. Letting itself get turned to stone by its own signs, its own guardians, by the types committed to the keeping and surveillance of knowledge, it will sink down into lethargy, overcome by nonknowledge and forgetfulness. Memory and truth cannot be separated. The movement of aithēsia is a deployment of mnēmē through and through. A deployment of living memory, of memory as psychic life in its self-presentation to itself. The powers of lethargy simultaneously increase the domains of death, of nontruth, of nonknowledge. This is why writing, at least insofar as it sows “forgetfulness in the soul,” turns us toward the inanimate and toward nonknowledge. But it cannot be said that its essence simply and presently confounds it with death or nontruth. For writing has no essence or value of its own, whether positive or negative. It plays within the simulacrum. It is in it the type the mime of memory, of knowledge, of truth, etc. That is why men of writing appear before the eye of God not as wise men (sophoi) but in truth as fake or self-proclaimed wise men (doxosophoi).

This is Plato’s definition of the sophist. For it is above all against sophistics that this diatribe against writing is directed: it can be inscribed within the interminable trial instituted by Plato, under the name of philosophy, against the sophists. The man who relies on writing, who brags about the knowledge and powers it assures him, this simulator unmasked by Thamus has all the features of a sophist: “the imitator of him who knows,” as the Sophist puts it (mnēmēs tōu sophou, 286c). . . . What Plato is attacking in sophistics, therefore, is not simply recourse to memory but, within such recourse, the substitution of the mnemonic device for live memory, of the prosthesis for the organ; the perversion that consists of replacing a limb by a thing, here, substituting the passive, mechanical “by-heart” for the active reanimation of knowledge, for its reproduction in the present. The boundary (between inside and outside, living and nonliving) separates not only speech from writing but also memory as an unveiling (re-)producing a presence from remembrance as the mere repetition of a monument; truth as distant from its sign, being as distinct from types. The “outside” does not begin at the point where what we now call the psychic and the physical meet, but at the point where the mnēmē, instead of being present to itself in its life as a movement of truth, is supplanted by the archive, existed by a sign of re-memorization or of commemoration. The space of writing, space as writing, is opened up in the violent movement of this surrogation, in the difference between mnēmē and hypomnēsis. The outside is already within the work of memory. The evil slips in within the relation of memory to itself, in the general organization of the mnemonic activity. 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. But what Plato dreams of is a memory with no sign. That is, with no supplement. A mnēmē with no hypomnēsis, no pharmakon. And this at the very moment and for the very reason that he calls dream the confusion between the hypothetical and the anthropological in the realm of mathematical intelligibility (Republic, 533b).

Why is the surrogate or supplement dangerous? It is not, so to speak, dangerous in itself, in that aspect of it that can present itself as a thing, as a being-present. In that case it would be reassuring. But here, the supplement is not, is not a being (on). It is nevertheless not a simple nonbeing (me on), either. Its slidings slip it out of the simple alternative presence/absence. That is the danger. And that is what enables the type always to pass for the original. As soon as the supplementary outside is opened, its structure implies that the supplement itself can be “typed,” replaced by its double, and that a supplement to the supplement, a surrogate for the surrogate, is possible and necessary. Necessary because this movement is not a sensible, “empirical” accident: it is linked to the ideality of the eidos as the possibility of the repetition of the same. And writing appears to Plato (and after him to all of philosophy, which is as such constituted in this gesture) as that process of redoubling in which we are fatally drawn along: the supplement of a supplement, the signifier, the representative of a representative. (A series whose first term or rather whose first structure does not yet—but we will do it later—have to be overturned and its irreducibility made apparent.) The structure and history of phonetic writing have of course played a decisive role in the determination of writing as the doubling of a sign, the sign of a sign. The signifier of a phonetic signifier. While the phonetic signifier would remain in animate proximity, in the living presence of mnēmē or psychē, the graphic signifier, which reproduces it or imitates it, goes one degree further away, falls outside of life, pulls life out of itself and puts it to sleep.
in-the type of its double. Whence the pharmakon’s two misdeeds: it dulls the memory, and if it is of any assistance at all, it is not for the sake of the hypomnēsis. Instead of quickening life in the original, “in person,” the pharmakon can at best only restore its monuments. It is a debilitating poison for memory, but a remedy or tonic for its external signs, its sympotcmata, with everything that this word can connote in Greek: an empirical, contingent, superficial event, generally a fall or collapse, distinguishing itself like an index from whatever it is pointing to. Your writing cures only the symptom, the King has already said, and it is from him that we know the unbridgeable difference between the essence of the symptom and the essence of the signified; and that writing belongs to the order and exteriority of the symptom.

Thus, even though writing is external to (internal) memory, even though hypomnēsis is not in itself memory, it affects memory and hypnotizes it in its very inside. That is the effect of this pharmakon. If it were purely external, writing would leave the intimacy or integrity of psychic memory untouched. And yet, just as Rousseau and Saussure will do in response to the same necessity, yet without discovering other relations between the intimate and the alien, Plato maintains both the exteriority of writing and its power of maleficent penetration, its ability to affect or infect what lies deepest inside. The pharmakon is that dangerous supplement that breaks into the very thing that would have liked to do without it yet lets itself be breached, roughed up, filled, and replaced, completed by the very trace through which the present increases itself in the act of disappearing.

If, instead of meditating on the structure that makes such supplementarity possible, if above all instead of meditating on the reduction by which “Plato-Rousseau-Saussure” try in vain to master it with an odd kind of “reasoning,” one were to content oneself with pointing to the “logical contradiction,” one would have to recognize here an instance of that kind of “kettle-logic” to which Freud turns in the Traumdeutung in order to illustrate the logic of dreams. In his attempt to arrange everything in his favor, the defendant piles up contradictory arguments: (1) The kettle I am returning to you is brand new; (2) The holes were already in it when you lent it to me; (3) You never lent me a kettle, anyway. Analogously: (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 hypomnēsis 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.

The opposition between mnēmē and hypomnēsis would thus provoke over the meaning of writing. This opposition will appear to us to form a system with all the great structural oppositions of Platonism. What is played out at the boundary line between these two concepts is consequently something like the major decision of philosophy, the one through which it institutes itself, maintains itself, and contains its adverse deeps.

Nevertheless, between mnēmē and hypomnēsis, between memory and its supple-
just as a Corybant seems to hear the strains of music, and the sound of their arguments (hé ekhê touton ton logon) rings loudly in my head that I cannot hear the other side" (54d). Those Corybants, that music, are evoked by Alcibiades in the Symposium in his efforts to describe the effects of the Socratic utterance: "the moment I hear him speak I am smitten with a kind of sacred rage, worse than any Corybant, and my heart jumps into my mouth" (215c).

The philosophical, epistemic order of logos as an antidote, as a force inscribed within the general alogical economy of the pharmakon is not something we are proposing here as a daring interpretation of Platonism. Let us, rather, look at the prayer that opens the Critias: "I call on the god to grant us that most effective medicine (pharmakon teleiotanon), that best of all medicines (ariston pharmakon): knowledge (epistemê)."

Philosophy thus opposes to its other this transmutation of the drug into a remedy, of the poison into a counterpoison. Such an operation would not be possible if the pharmakos-legos did not already harbor within itself that complicity of contrary values, and if the pharmakos in general were not, prior to any distinction-making, that which, presenting itself as a poison, may turn out to be a cure, may retrospectively reveal itself in the truth of its curative power. The "essence" of the pharmakos lies in the way in which, having no stable essence, no "proper" characteristics, it is not, in any sense (metaphysical, physical, chemical, alchemical) of the word, a substance. The pharmakos has no ideal identity; it is anecdotical, firstly because it is not monoeideic (in the sense in which the Phaedo speaks of the eidos as something simple, noncomposite: monoideis). This "medicine" is not a simple thing. But neither is it a composite, a sensible or empirical rucheton partaking of several simple essences. It is rather the prior medium in which differentiation in general is produced, along with the opposition between the eidos and its other; this medium is analogous to the one that will, subsequent to and according to the decision of philosophy, be reserved for transcendental imagination, that "art hidden in the depths of the soul," which belongs neither simply to the sensible nor simply to the intelligible, neither simply to passivity nor simply to activity. The elements-medium will always be analogous to a mixed-medium. In a certain way, Plato thought about and even formulated this ambivalence. But he did so in passing, incidentally, discreetly: in connection with the union of opposites within virtue, not the union of virtue with its opposite.

If the pharmakos is "ambivalent," it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/body, good/evil, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing, etc.). It is on the basis of this play or movement that the opposites or differences are stopped by Plato. The pharmakos is the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) difference. It is the difference of difference. It holds in reserve, in its undecided shadow and vigil, the opposites and the diversifies that the process of discrimination will come to carve out. Contradictions and pairs of opposites are lifted from the bottom of this diacritical, differing, deferring, reserve. Already inhabited by

Anamnestic dialectics, as the repetition of the eidos, cannot be distinguished from self-knowledge and self-mastery. Those are the best forms of exorcism that can be applied against the terrors of the child faced with death and the quackery of the bogyman. Philosophy consists of offering reassurance to children. That is, if one prefers, of taking them out of childhood, of forgetting about the child, or, inversely, but by the same token, of speaking first and foremost for that little boy within us, of teaching him to speak – to dialogue – by displacing his fear or his desire.

One could play at classifying, within the weave of The Statesman (280a ff.), that species of protection (amantrêna) that is called dialectics and apprehended as a counterpoison. Among the things that can be called artificial (manufactured or acquired), the Stranger distinguishes those with the function of doing something (tending toward poëin) and those, called defenses (amantrêna), with the function of preventing suffering (ou me paskhein). Among the latter, one can distinguish (1) antidotes (alethipharmaka), which can be either human or divine (and dialectics is from this perspective the very antidotes of the antidote in general, before any possibility of dividing it up between the human and the divine. Dialectics is precisely the passage between the two) and (2) problemata (problematâta): what stands before one – obstacles, shelter, armor, shields, defenses. Leaving antidotes aside, the Stranger pursues the division of the problemata, which can function either as armaments or as fences. The fences (phragmata) are screens or protections (alestêria) against storm and heat; these protections can be housings or coverings; coverings can be spread below (like rugs) or wrapped around, etc. The process of division goes on through the different techniques for manufacturing these wraps until it reaches the woven garment and the art of weaving; the problematic space of protection. This art would thus rule out, if one follows the divisions literally, all recourse to antidotes, and consequently, to that species of antidote or inverted pharmakon constituted by dialectics. The text excludes dialectics. And yet, it will nevertheless be necessary later to distinguish between two sorts of texture, if one bears in mind that dialectics is also an art of weaving, a science of the sumplêkê [conjunction]. . . .

The eidos, truth, law, the epistêmê, dialectics, philosophy – all these are other names for that pharmakon that must be opposed to the pharmakon of the Sophists and to the bewitching fear of death. It is pharmakeus against pharmakeus, pharmakon against pharmakon. This is why Socrates heeds the Laws as though, through their voices, he were under the power of an initiatic spell, a sonorous spell, then, or rather, a phonetic spell, one that penetrates and carries away the inner courts of the soul. "Thât, my dear friend Crito, I do assure you, is what I seem to hear them saying,
Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy"

person in Egypt called Theuth. He it was who originally discerned the existence, in that unlimited variety, of the vowels (να φθόνημα) – not "vowel" in the singular but "vowels" in the plural – and then of other things which, though they could not be called articulate sounds, yet were noises of a kind. There were a number of them, too, not just one, and as a third class he discriminated what we now call the mutes (αϕθόνημα). Having done that, he divided up the noiseless ones or mutes (αϕθόνημα) until he got each one by itself, and did the same thing with the vowels and the intermediate sounds; in the end he found a number of the things, and affixed to the whole collection, as to each single member of it, the name "letters" (στοιχεία). It was because he realized that none of us could get to know one of the collection all by itself, in isolation from all the rest, that he conceived of "letter" as a kind of bond of unity (δεμον) uniting as it were all these sounds into one, and so he gave utterance to the expression "art of letters," implying that there was one art that dealt with the sounds. (18b–d)

The scriptural "metaphor" thus crops up every time difference and relation are irreducible, every time otherness introduces determination and puts a system in circulation. The play of the other within being must needs be designated "writing" by Plato in a discourse which would like to think of itself as spoken in essence, in truth, and which nevertheless is written . . .

Grammatical science is doubtless not in itself dialectics. Plato indeed explicitly subordinates the former to the latter (253b–c). And, to him, this distinction can be taken for granted; but what, in the final analysis, justifies it? Both are in a sense sciences of language. For dialectics is also the science that guides us "δια τόν λόγον," on the voyage through discourses or arguments (253b). At this point, what distinguishes dialectics from grammar appears twofold: on the one hand, the linguistic units it is concerned with are larger than the word (Cratylus, 385a–393d); on the other, dialectics is always guided by an intention of truth. It can only be satisfied by the presence of the ειδώς, which is here both the signified and the referent; the thing itself. The distinction between grammar and dialectics can thus only in all rigor be established at the point where truth is fully present and fills the logos.14 But what the pericope in the Sophist [the way writing and difference break up the unity of being and kill off the paternal instance of presence and of truth] establishes is not only that any full, absolute presence of what is (of the being-present that most truly "is"; the good or the sun that can't be looked in the face) is impossible; not only that any full intuition of truth, any truth-filled intuition, is impossible; but that the very condition of discourse – true or false – is the diacritical principle of the language. If truth is the presence of the ειδώς, it must always, on pain of mortal blinding by the sun's fires, come to terms with relation, nonpresence, and thus nontruth. It then follows that the absolute precondition for a rigorous difference between grammar and dialectics (or ontology) cannot in principle be fulfilled. Or at least, it can perhaps be fulfilled at the root of the principle, at the point of arche-being or arche-truth, but that point has been crossed out by the necessity

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The text continues with a discussion on the nature of the alphabet, the phonetic opposition between different letters, and the importance of the concept of "writing" as a means of differentiating between various forms of knowledge and expression. It explores the relationship between grammar and dialectics, highlighting the distinction between the two and the implications of this distinction for understanding the nature of language and thought.

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The text concludes with a reflection on the nature of "writing" and its role in the differentiation of knowledge, emphasizing the importance of understanding the distinction between grammar and dialectics in the context of Platonic thought. The discussion underscores the complexity of the relationship between language and thought, highlighting the significance of the concept of "writing" in the Platonic tradition and its implications for understanding the nature of knowledge and truth.
of parricide. Which means, by the very necessity of logos. And that is the difference
that prevents there being in fact any difference between grammar and ontology.

But now, what is the impossibility of any truth or of any full presence of being,
of any fully-being? Or inversely, since such truth would be death as the absolute
form of blindness, what is death as truth? Not what is, since the form of that
question is produced by the very thing it questions, but how is the impossible
plenteous or absolute presence of the eikos on written? How is it inscribed? How
is the necessity of the multiplicity of genres and ideas, of relation and difference,
prescribed? How is dialectics traced?

The absolute invisibility of the origin of the visible, of the good-sun-father-
capital, the unattainment of presence or beingness in any form, the whole surplus
Plato calls epikeina tês ouiasias (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 epikeina tês ouiasias.

Just as Socrates supplements and replaces the father, as we have seen, dialectics
supplements and replaces the impossible noesis, the forbidden intuition of the face
of the father (good-sun-capital). The withdrawal of that face both opens and limits
the exercise of dialectics. It welds it irremediably to its “inferiors,” the mimetic arts,
play, grammar, writing, etc. The disappearance of that face is the movement of
difference which violently opens writing or, if one prefers, which opens itself to
writing and which writing opens for itself. All these “movements,” in all these
“senses,” belong to the same “system.” Also belonging to that same system are the
proposition in the Republic, describing in one term the inaccessibility of the
father epikeina tês ouiasias, and the patricidal proposal which, proffered by the
Stranger, threatens the paternal logos. And which by the same token threatens the
domestic, hierarchical interiority of the pharmacy, the proper order and healthy
movement of goods, the lawful prescription of its controlled, classed, measured,
labeled products, rigorously divided into remedies and poisons, seeds of life and
seeds of death, good and bad traces, the unity of metaphysics, of technology, of well
computed binarism. This philosophical, dialectical mastery of the pharmakon
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 ever
hearing of it, to conceal it by drawing the curtains over the dawning of the West.
How can we set off in search of a different guard, if the pharmaceutical “system”
contains not only, in a single strand, 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, unnameable
necessity are we thrown? In other words, what does Platonism signify as repetition?

To repeat: the disappearance of the good-father-capital-sun is thus the
precondition of discourse, taken this time as a moment and not as a principle
of generalized writing. That writing is epikeina tês ouiasias. The disappearance of truth
as presence, the withdrawal of the present origin of presence, is the condition of
all (manifestation of) truth. Nontruth is the truth. Nonpresence is presence.
Difference, the disappearance of any originary presence, is 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 nontruth, of its
pseudotruth reflected in the icon, the phantasm, or the simulacrum. What is not 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 hollowed out by that
addition which withdraws itself in the supplement that presents it.

The disappearance of the Face or the structure of repetition can thus no longer
be dominated by the value of truth. On the contrary, the opposition between the
true and the untrue is entirely comprehended, inscribed, within this structure or
this generalized writing. The true and the untrue are both species of repetition.
And there is no repetition possible without the graphics of supplementarity, which
supplies, for the lack of a full unity, another unit that comes to relieve it, being
enough the same and enough other so that it can replace by addition. Thus, on the
one hand, repetition is that without which there would be no truth; the truth of
being in the intelligible form of ideality discovers in the edos that which can be
repeated, being the same, the clear, the stable, the identifiable in its equality with
itself. And only the edos can give rise to repetition as anamnesis or maeutics,
dialectics or didactics. Here repetition gives itself out to be a repetition of life.
Tautology is life only going out of itself to come home to itself. Keeping close to
itself through mnèmè, logos, and phòmè. But on the other hand, repetition is the very
movement of nontruth: the presence of what is gets lost, disperses itself, multiplies
itself through mimesis, icons, phantasm, simulacra, etc. Through phenomena
already. And this type of repetition is the possibility of becoming-perceptible-to
the-senses: nonideality. This is on the side of nonphilosophy, bad memory,
hypomnesia, writing. Here, tautology is life going out of itself beyond return. Death
rehearsal. Unreserved spending. The irreducible excess, through the play of the
supplement, of any self-intimacy of the living, the good, the true.

These two types of repetition relate to each other according to the graphics of
supplementarity. Which means that 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
trueness from the false, the inside from the outside, the vital from the mortal, the first
from the second, etc. Conceived within this original reversibility, the pharmakon
is the same precisely because it has no identity. And the same (is) as supplement.
Or in difference. In writing. If he had meant to say something, such would have
been the speech of Theuth making of writing as a pharmakon a singular present
to the King.
But Theuth, it should be noted, spoke not another word.

The great god's sentence went unanswered.

Notes

1. There are two major traditions in philosophy, the materialist and the idealist. Plato is one of the major idealist philosophers, and in this essay, Derrida reviews and refines the materialist critique of the idealist position by focusing on the idealist claim that meaning, truth, and reason exist apart from and above signification in language, which is considered a merely derivative addition or supplement to the true idea present in the mind or logos. Plato describes that logos as a father and a king to suggest its authority in relation to writing particularly, which should obediently represent truth but which can lead truth astray or off its intended path. This was Plato's quarrel with the Sophists, a rival group of philosophers who taught Greek youth to use language to argue points without, according to Plato, training them in proper reasoning. Only when ideas are present is there truth, and without true ideas the techniques of representation such as the memorizing of passages in order to repeat them are the bearers of falsehood. This is why Plato uses an ambivalent word — pharmakon, which means both poison and cure — as a metaphor for writing. Writing endangers true ideas by offering a simulacrum of truth that need not contain true ideas, yet it is an addition or supplement to true ideas that allow them to be communicated. Derrida argues that this Platonic opposition, like all other oppositions Plato uses to order the world into simple binaries such as good/evil, true/false, reason/writing, etc., cannot be sustained. He notices points of ambivalence where the opposed terms weave together, much as the pharmakon weaves together two entirely incommensurable meanings. For example, true ideas (such as Beauty, Justice, etc. which Plato thought existed outside time and were universal and eternal) can be true or eternal only by being infinitely repeatable. They must be as compellingly true a million years from now. Yet repetition is one of the characteristics of writing and of external signification that disqualifies it from truthfulness. Similarly, memory (mnesis), which for Plato is our way of recalling the true eternal ideas that live in our minds and of maintaining a living connection with them, cannot be cleanly separated from memorization (hyppomnemati), the external addition of a technique that bears no living relation to ideas and is characterized by the entry into type of truth. Plato wants there to be a living memory apart from types, but he cannot describe it without inferring its dependence on such types or tupta. The significance of pharmakon, then, is that it draws attention to this fundamental ambivalence, where ideas and representations mix and where it becomes impossible to maintain oppositions of the Platonic variety in the face of a more primordial differential weaving together of terms such that truth cannot rigorously be opposed to everything that Plato thinks is false, especially writing, representation, and grammar. Dialectics, the science of logical reasoning, becomes inseparable for Derrida from grammar and from all of those arts of writing usually banished by idealist philosophy to the side of mere literature. This is the significance for Derrida of Plato's recourse to myths or stories, such as that of Theuth, in his elaboration of a philosophy of supposedly pure ideas. That recourse says something about the profound complicity of ideas and representation and of truth and all the signifying traits and techniques usually expelled as writing. Platonism and idealism in general are attempts to master that fundamental complicity and weaving together of things Platonism considers incommensurable — truth and what is supposedly false, ideas and the graphic techniques as well as the differential relays and detours of writing, presence and absence, full immediacy and empty repetition, etc. At stake is the authority of the father(s) and of all paternalist authorities that would dictate truth.

2. For Plato, Thamus is doubtless another name for Ammon, whose figure (that of the sun king and of the father of the gods) we shall sketch out later for its own sake. On this question and the debate to which it has given rise, see Fruttero, Mythoi, p. 233, n. 2, and notably Eissler, "Platon und das egyptische Alphabet," Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie (1922); Pauly-Wissowa, Real-Encyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft (art. Ammon); Roscher, Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie (art. Thamus).

3. Derrida refers to the myth of the cave in which Plato describes humans as being chained facing in one direction. Behind them is a fire and in front of it, forms are paraded that cast shadows on the wall in front of the chained humans. They see only the shadows and can only infer the existence of the fire. According to Plato, this is the human condition in the face of eternal ideas, which are like the fire. We can only see reflections or representations of them, never the presence of the true ideas themselves. [Ed.]


5. Thus it is that the god of writing can become the god of creative speech. This is a structural possibility derived from his supplementary status and from the logic of the supplement. The same can also be seen to occur in the evolution of the history of mythology. Festugière, in particular, points this out: "Thoth, however, does not remain content with this secondary rank. At the time when the priests in Egypt were forging cosmogonies in which the local clergy of each area sought to give the primary role to the god it honored, the theologians of Hermopolis, who were competing with those of the Delta and of Heliopolis, elaborated a cosmogony in which the principal share fell to Thoth. Since Thoth was a magician, and since he knew of the power of sounds which, when emitted properly, unfailingy produce their effect, it was by means of voice, of speech, or rather, incantation, that Thoth was said to have created the world. Thoth's voice is thus creative: it shapes and creates; and, condensing and solidifying into matter, it becomes a being. Thoth becomes identified with his breath; his exhalation alone causes all things to be born. It is not impossible that these Hermopolitan speculations may offer some similarity with the logos of the Greeks — at once Speech, Reason, and Demiurge and with the Sophia of the Alexandrian Jews, perhaps the Priests of Thoth even underwent, well before the Christian era, the influence of Greek thought, but this cannot be solidly affirmed" (Les Mystèrdes Platon (Paris, 1930), p. 68).


7. Ibid., p. 41.


9. Morenz, La Religion égyptienne, p. 95. Another of Thoth's companions is Maat, goddess of truth. She is also "daughter of Ra, mistress of the sky, she who governs the double country, the eye of Ra which has no match." Erman, in the page devoted to Maat, notes: "one of her insignia, God knows why, was a vulture feather" (La Religion des Égyptiens, p. 82).

10. We would here like to refer the reader in particular to the extremely rich text by Jean-Pierre Vernant (who deals with these questions with quite different intentions).

The structure of this problematic is entirely analogous in the *Logical Investigations* of Husserl. See Speech and Phenomena. One will also reread in a new way, since it is a matter of *sumpleket* and *pharmakon*, the end of the *Statesman*. In his work of weaving (*sumpleket*), the royal weaver will be able to interweave his web through the joining of the opposites of which virtue is composed. Literally, the *sumpleket*, the weaving, is intricated with the *pharmakon*: "But in those of noble nature from their earliest days whose nurture too has been all it should be, the laws can foster the growth of this common bond of conviction (*kata phusin monois dia nomion empheusthai*). This is the talisman (*pharmakon*) appointed for them by the design of pure intelligence. This most godlike bond alone can unite the elements of goodness which are diverse in nature and would else be opposing in tendency" (310a).

CHAPTER 12

Revolution in Poetic Language

Julia Kristeva

[It seems possible to perceive a signifying practice which, although produced in language, is only intelligible through it. By exploding the phonetic, lexical, and syntactic object of linguistics, this practice...escapes the attempted hold of all anthropomorphic sciences...Ultimately, it exhausts the ever tenacious ideological institutions and apparatuses, thereby demonstrating the limits of formalist and psychoanalytic devices.] This signifying practice—a particular type of modern literature—attests to a "crisis" of social structures and their ideological, coercive, and necrophilic manifestations...[W]ith Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Joyce, and Artaud, to name only a few, this crisis represents a new phenomenon. For the capitalist mode of production produces and marginalizes, but simultaneously exploits for its own regeneration, one of the most spectacular shatterings of discourse. By exploding the subject and his ideological limits, this phenomenon has a triple effect, and raises three sets of questions:

1. Because of its specific isolation within the discursive totality of our time, this shattering of discourse reveals that linguistic changes constitute changes in the *status of the subject*—its relation to the body, to others, and to objects; it also reveals that normalized language is just one of the ways of articulating the signifying process that encompasses the body, the material referent, and language itself. How are these strata linked? What is their interrelation within signifying practice?

2. The shattering further reveals that the capitalist mode of production, having attained a highly developed means of production through science and technology, no longer need remain strictly within linguistic and ideological *norms*, but can also integrate their *process qua process*. As art, this shattering can display the productive basis of subjective and ideological signifying formations—a foundation that primitive societies call "sacred" and modernity has rejected as "schizophrenic." What is the extent of this integration? Under what conditions does it become indispensable, censured, repressed, or marginalized?

3. Finally, in the history of signifying systems and notably that of the arts, religion, and rites, there emerge, in retrospect, fragmentary phenomena which have been kept in the background or rapidly integrated into more communal signifying