
Deconstruction: Fad or Philosophy?

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Disseminate, *v.* [f. L. *disseminat-* ppl. stem of *disseminare* to spread abroad, disseminate, f. Dis- I+*semen*, *semin-* seed; cf. F. *disséminer* (14th c. in Littré).] 1. *trans. lit.* To scatter abroad, as in sowing seed; to spread here and there; to disperse (things) so as to deposit them in all parts. 2. *fig.* To spread abroad, diffuse, promulgate (opinions, statements, knowledge, etc.). 3. *intr.* (for *refl.*) To diffuse itself, spread.

Dissemination, *n.* The action of scattering or spreading abroad seed, or anything likened to it; the fact or condition of being diffused; dispersion, diffusion, promulgation.¹

Academic conversations are now frequently sprinkled with the word 'deconstruction.' Like other novel neologisms—Kierkegaard's 'leap of faith,'² Haeckel's 'ecology,'³ Kuhn's 'paradigm shift,'⁴ or Rawls's 'veil of ignorance'⁵—the use of *deconstruction* more often than not strays far and wide of its original, intended meaning.

In part, this equivocation is due to historical accident: the North American intelligentsia was introduced to Jacques Derrida's thinking more through departments of English and Literature than

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¹ *Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 506.

² *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 15.

³ *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen*.

⁴ *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 89.

⁵ *A Theory of Justice*, 136-42.

departments of Philosophy.⁶ As a result, the philosophical foundations of deconstruction have been blurred and seemingly forgotten. ‘Deconstruction,’ a term appropriated by Derrida from Martin Heidegger,⁷ is now taken to be a vaguely defined relativistic method of literary criticism which holds that any interpretation of a text is as good as another, rather than a rigorous metaphysics and epistemology. For example, the following definition of deconstruction recently appeared in the program of a highly reputable acting company: “*Deconstruction*—a theory about language and literature that developed in the 1970s, and is characterized by the notions of textuality and intertext. Briefly, deconstruction says that all the world is text and that because of context, no text’s content can really be read or interpreted.”⁸ As well-intentioned as this author may be, this amorphous type of definition of deconstruction—now prevalent—obscures the rigorous philosophical foundations of the theory.

*‘Deconstruction’
widely misused.*

My purpose is to make clear the philosophical foundations of Derrida’s theory of deconstruction. Most precisely, deconstruction is Derrida’s critique of Plato’s metaphysics. To understand deconstruction, we first briefly recapitulate Platonic metaphysics. Second, using Derrida’s meticulous reading of the *Phaedrus*, we examine the way Plato represents writing (*grammata*) as a drug (*pharmakon*). Third, we turn to Derrida’s critique of Plato. Fourth and finally, we reassert the philosophical status of deconstruction and reassess the contribution of Derrida to Western Philosophy.

One caveat: many original theories carry with them a new vocabulary, and Derrida’s deconstruction is no exception. For a basic Derridean glossary, see the Appendix.

⁶ Although Derrida showed up in person at a 1967 Johns Hopkins conference on Structuralism to announce the end of Structuralism (vide “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle [eds.], *Critical Theory Since 1965*), Derrida’s ideas were popularized state-side through the work of Paul de Man and others at Yale’s Department of English, Language, and Literature.

⁷ In a discussion of the phenomenological method, Heidegger uses the German word ‘*abbau*,’ translated as “de-constructing,” to describe the project of uncovering ontological assumptions through historical exegesis and critique. See *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 23.

⁸ Playbill for *Art*, Pioneer Theater Company, University of Utah, January 2001.

1. An Ordered Cosmos: Platonic Metaphysics

Plato's ontological vision is perfectly teleological, rigidly hierarchical, and beautifully ordered. All that *exists* is oriented towards an ultimate, eternally unchanging *telos* which absolutely and ultimately entails the meaning for every existent thing's *Being* (in the verbal sense). This *telos* dictates why acorns grow up to be oaks, tadpoles grow into frogs, babies become adults. It explains why acorns, tadpoles, and adults that do not do this are *perversions* of nature, things that do not manifest what they are supposed to, beings that do not fit into the teleological structure of the cosmos.

For Plato,
all reality
embodied in
unchanging
telos.

This *telos* can be thought of as the Good, the Idea, the Eschaton or the Transcendental Signifier. It is the Sun in the Allegory of the Cave,⁹ the realm of the Forms: "It is there that true being dwells, without color or shape, that cannot be touched; reason alone, the soul's pilot, can behold it, and all true knowledge is knowledge thereof," Socrates says.¹⁰ True knowledge is knowledge of the Forms; metaphysics is the way we are able to gain true knowledge, to see the universe's ontological structure, to see its *telos*. Via metaphysics, Plato determines that this absolute embodiment of Being is unchanging, because to change is to need to become different, and the *telos* is perfect and in need of nothing else.

Corporeal
entities
viewed as
corruptions of
incorporeal
Forms.

But anyone familiar with life on earth knows that everything changes. We are subject to disease and death. Why? Because this corporeal realm in which we are stuck is merely a corruption, an imperfection of the incorporeal plane of the Forms. Corporeal entities are imperfect representations of its super-temporal Form, and consequently change form. A human is an imperfect (less true) rendition of the ideal Form Human, which is God or the Idea of *Homo sapienness*.

A table is an imperfect rendition of the Ideal Table which embodies complete Tableness. The earthly table will inevitably collapse, as living things will inescapably die. Ideality is immateriality, and substance inhibits any temporal being from completely manifesting its ideal Form, although this is the direction living be-

⁹ *Republic*. W. H. D. Rouse (trans.). In Eric Warmington and Philip Rouse (eds.), *Great Dialogues of Plato*, 174-75. When Platonism was Christianized, the *Good* became *God*; the *Sun* became the *Son*.

¹⁰ *Phaedrus* 247c. R. Hackforth (trans.). In Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (eds.), *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, 494.

ings move in during their life—to actualize their potential (to use the Aristotelian terminology¹¹). An acorn grows into an oak, but dies and never fully achieves its perfect form. Substance is itself unstable; it is capricious/not eternal.

This bifurcation of Being into two realms—one “sensible” and the other “eternal”—is the action of binary opposition. The logic of true identity—that is, of identifying what things *are*—is based on binary opposition, the principle of which is non-contradiction. A thing is either true or false, this or that, real or artificial, present or absent, immaterial or material, but never both at once.

Logocentrism based on non-contradiction.

This logic sets the stage for Western thought as a whole. As Barbara Johnson comments, the two terms resulting from the dichotomy “. . . are not simply opposed in their meanings, but are arranged in a hierarchical order which gives the first term priority, in both the temporal and qualitative sense of the word.”¹² Thus the antinomies are positioned consistent with the teleological structure. Earth is inferior to Heaven, representation to actuality, falsity to truth, play to seriousness, writing to speech.

Logocentric dichotomies arranged hierarchically.

Implicit in this system is a scale for determining truth-value. Beings higher in the hierarchy have a higher truth-value than beings lower down. The Form of Table is more true than corporeal renditions of tables; the Form sets the ontological standard for Tableness. Worldly representations are *less perfect, less true* in terms of tableness than ideal incorporeal Tables. In turn, a painting of a table is ontologically lower than the physical table itself; namely, since it is a lower-order representation of Table, it has in turn less truth-value than the table itself. The painting is merely an image of a table, a third-order table.

We must understand that to the Greek mind there was a close relationship between “presence” (*ousia*) and “truth” (*aletheia*) in the sense of being “opposed to lie, mere appearance.”¹³ *Logos* is living speech¹⁴ that discloses truth, in the presence of other orators and the subject being discussed, say, a work of art or table. So, within the logic of binary opposition, things that are present have a higher truth-value than things that are absent.

¹¹ *Metaphysics*, especially Bk. Q.

¹² “Translator’s Introduction.” *Dissemination*, viii.

¹³ *Plato’s Pharmacy*. *Dissemination*, 64-65.

¹⁴ *Liddell-Scott Greek-English Lexicon*, 1057.

This ontological framework is quite amazing, since it identifies an eternal realm which is beyond our (sensible) perception. How can such a metaphysical realm be delineated? By rigorous dialectic ratiocination, by adhering to the logocentric belief that if we think hard enough we can always comprehend the “answer,” the “origin,” the root of things, the *telos*. No wonder ‘logos’ has an apophyseal connotation; it means “discourse discloses.” A discussion of some topic will reveal true answers about that topic.

All this has profound effects when contrasting “speech” with “writing” (*grammata*) which is adumbrated in the fact that ‘logos’ and ‘speech’ are synonyms. In terms of logocentrism, spoken “words” are present whereas written words are only representations of absent speech; speech (*logos*) has a higher truth-value than its representation—writing. Writing’s truth-value is diminished by a lack of presence, origin, of the authority of its antecedent speech.¹⁵

In Platonic metaphysics, logos (speech) has higher truth value than writing (grammata).

Therefore, in the framework of Platonic metaphysics, *logos* provides the ontological antecedent for *grammata* as required by teleology. Writing’s low position on the Platonic totem-pole results from the possibility that it can *represent* artifice as truth, absence as presence, fraud as authority, the unreal as real. Indeed, Plato has Socrates throw the stories (the books: *bibliois*) of Hesiod and Homer out of his utopian *Republic* because of their “incorrect” portrayals of the gods. According to Socrates, seduction, lechery, debauchery, horse-play, etc., are not ways “true” gods behave: “we must set up a censorship over the fable-makers, and approve any good fable they make and disapprove the bad; [t]hose which Hesiod and Homer have told us, and the other poets, for these have told us, and still tell us, false fables which they composed.”¹⁶ With this background of Platonic metaphysics (that is, the *Pharmacy*), let’s begin again and pay close attention to Plato’s notion of “writing.”

¹⁵ This ideal permeates Western thought. Plato’s writings are accounts of dialogues, which perhaps in his mind might give them a little higher truth-value than if they were straight monologues. Milton also reflects a logocentric attitude when he writes, describing Heaven, “The Portal shone, inimitable on Earth/By Model, or by shading Pencil drawn.” *Paradise Lost*, Bk. III, lines 508-9. In Douglas Bush (ed.), *The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton*, 269.

¹⁶ *Republic* 377c-d. In Eric Warmington and Philip Rouse (eds.), *Great Dialogues of Plato*, 174-75.

2. Writing as Pharmakon

Turning to the *Phaedrus*, we see that Plato describes writing as a φάρμακον (*pharmakon*). What is a “pharmakon”?

The connotations Plato gives ‘pharmakon’ fit conveniently into binary opposition: something in its essence *bad*, a kind of deluding drug, an “*enchanted poison, philtre*: hence, *charm, spell*,”¹⁷ something related to artifice, to excess, to dark powers. According to Derrida, “Plato thinks of writing, and tries to comprehend it, to dominate it, on the basis of opposition as such[.]”¹⁸ by its relation to its rival sibling, speech.

In the Phaedrus, writing is described as a deluding drug (pharmakon).

Let’s look at the moment when Plato, through the mouth of Socrates, explicitly correlates the identity of writing with the pharmakon. Sitting on the river’s edge, Socrates recounts for Phaedrus the myth of Theuth, the story behind writing’s *origin*:¹⁹

The story is that in the region of Naucratis in Egypt there dwelt one of the old gods of the country, the god to whom the bird called Ibis is sacred, his own name being Theuth. He it was that invented number and calculation, geometry and astronomy, not to speak of draughts and dice, and above all writing [*grammata*]. Now the king of the whole country at that time was Thamus[.] To him came Theuth, and revealed his arts, saying that they ought to be passed on to the Egyptians in general. Thamus asked what was the use of them all, and when Theuth explained, he condemned what he thought the bad points and praised what he thought the good. On each art, we are told, Thamus had plenty of views both for and against[. W]hen it came to writing, Theuth said, ‘Here, O king, is a branch of learning that will make the people of Egypt wiser and improve their memories; my discovery provides a recipe [*pharmakon*] for memory and wisdom.’²⁰

Theuth’s claim is that writing is a mnemonic crutch, a drug that can help people remember more and become wiser. But there is something peculiar about writing; it is a recipe, something mysterious, something potentially unpredictable. Many recipes fail and go awry. As such the King’s reply is decisive; writing is a bad recipe for improving memory: “‘O man full of arts . . . by reason of your tender regard for the writing that is your offspring, have

¹⁷ Liddell-Scott *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1917.

¹⁸ *Plato’s Pharmacy. Dissemination*, 103.

¹⁹ This is characteristic of Western thinking: to delineate a *beginning* and an *end*.

²⁰ *Phaedrus* 274c-e. In Hamilton and Cairns (eds.), *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, 520.

declared the very opposite of its true effect. If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of *external marks*. What you have discovered is a recipe [*pharmakon*] not for memory, but for reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer disciples, but only its *semblance*."²¹ In terms of content, writing only offers a *semblance* of true wisdom, a reminder. Writing is merely a reminder of wisdom. The kind of memory writing provides "substitutes mnemonic devices for genuine, living wisdom," memory "that simulates knowledge by a crafty resort to the short-cut remedy of writing," as Christopher Norris observes.²² Writing is a recipe which will actually create the opposite effect it intends. Being mere *external marks*, writing as *pharmakon* "affects memory and hypnotizes it in its very inside,"²³ causing people to think they remember wisdom when in reality they forget truth, turning their eyes from the Form to the script.

Writing, as *pharmakon*, has the power to drug and seduce. This Platonic effect is not affirmative Nietzschean intoxication, but delusion and disorientation. Lysias' written speech which Phaedrus brings along with him has drugging effects powerful enough to draw Socrates *outside* of the city walls. As Derrida notes, "Socrates compares the written texts Phaedrus has brought along to a drug (*pharmakon*)."²⁴ As Socrates explains to Phaedrus, "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 recipe [*pharmakon*] for getting me out."²⁵ Of this Derrida says: "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

²¹ *Phaedrus* 274e-275a. Ibid. Italics mine.

²² *Derrida*, 31.

²³ *Plato's Pharmacy. Dissemination*, 110.

²⁴ Ibid., 70.

²⁵ *Phaedrus* 230d-e. In Hamilton and Cairns (eds.), *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, 479. N.B. Socrates' anthropocentric epistemology.

out, even at the end, to escape the hemlock."²⁶ "Already: writing, the *pharmakon*, the going or leading astray."²⁷

Although it is later in the dialogue that writing is explicitly associated with *pharmakon*, the *pharmakon* has been lurking below the surface throughout, woven by Plato into the fabric of the text in such a way as to emphasize its "bad" characteristics. This thread is visible when Socrates and Phaedrus are walking to their shady refuge from the noonday sun, and Phaedrus asks Socrates if this is the place where the boreal wind swept Orithyia to her death "while at play with Pharmacia."²⁸ What is the significance of this ". . . brief evocation of Pharmacia at the beginning of the *Phaedrus*—is it an accident?" Derrida wonders: "Let us in any case retain this: that a little spot, a little stitch or mesh . . . woven into the back of the canvas, marks out for the entire dialogue the scene where that virgin was cast into the abyss, surprised by death while playing with Pharmacia."²⁹ Derrida suspects this is no accident, no mere compositional flaw in the *Phaedrus*. Is there more to writing as *pharmakon* than is present on the surface of the text? Are some of the threads partially frayed, partially torn, partially obscured, necessitated by design?

Yes. By way of grammatology, Derrida discovers that the *pharmakon*'s essence defies the non-contradictory logic of logocentrism. By grasping *pharmakon*'s essential polysemy, we can see how some of its full meaning extends beyond the Procrustean bed into which Plato struggles to fit it. As we have seen, *pharmakon* is "enchanted poison, philtre: hence, charm, spell," but also, more inclusively and ambiguously, Liddell and Scott tell us, "drug, whether healing or noxious: . . . healing remedy, medicine, . . . a medicine for it, remedy against it, . . . generally, remedy, cure."³⁰

Connotations of pharmakon defy non-contradictory logic.

This second group of connotations manifests the difficulty in translating 'pharmakon' from Greek. Johnson points out that in translating the *Phaedrus*, Hackforth uses "recipe," Helmbold and Rabinowitz use "remedy,"³¹ and Derrida uses the more inclusive

²⁶ *Plato's Pharmacy. Dissemination*, 70.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁸ *Phaedrus* 229c. In Hamilton and Cairns (eds.), *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, 478.

²⁹ *Plato's Pharmacy. Dissemination*, 70.

³⁰ *Liddell-Scott Greek-English Lexicon*, 1917.

³¹ *Plato's Pharmacy. Dissemination*, n. 8, 71.

(and ambiguous) “drug,” for example, where Derrida translates Socrates’ comment to Phaedrus “you seem to have discovered a drug for getting me out.”³²

How can the word ‘pharmakon’ translate from Greek into English as such qualitatively different words as “poison,” “philtre,” “recipe,” “remedy” and “drug”? Derrida claims the *pharmakon* is correctly all these qualities at once. Such discrepancies are not due to mistranslation: “In this way we hope to display in the most striking manner the regular, ordered polysemy that has, through skewing, indeterminateness, or overdetermination, but without mistranslation, permitted the rendering of the same word by ‘remedy,’ ‘recipe,’ ‘poison,’ ‘drug,’ ‘philter,’ etc.”³³ This over-determination (which results in a certain indeterminateness) of *pharmakon* is the result, as Jasper Neel says, of “both a history and a sediment of prior meanings.”³⁴ As the *Phaedrus* is linguistic fabric, “[t]herefore the dissimulation of the woven texture can in any case take centuries to undo its web.”³⁵ The *pharmakon*, with its colorful philological history, “. . . introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence.”³⁶

One of the central lessons of deconstruction is that no text is “closed” upon itself. Meaning always filters or seeps in from “outside” the text: Derrida says: “we do not believe that there exists, in all rigor, a Platonic text, closed upon itself, complete with its inside and its outside.”³⁷ This heightens the challenge for the exhaustive, thorough reader. In the case of the *Phaedrus*, the word ‘pharmakon’ derives meanings from other “pharmaceutical” words *even if they do not actually appear in the text*: “‘pharmakon’ is already in communication with all the words from the same family, with all the significations constructed out of the same root, and these communications do not stop there.”³⁸ (We will treat this point in greater detail below when we consider the word

No text is “closed” upon itself; meaning always seeps in from “outside.”

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *Plato, Derrida, and Writing*, 140.

³⁵ *Plato’s Pharmacy. Dissemination*, 65.

³⁶ Ibid., 70.

³⁷ Ibid., 130. Cf. Hélène Cixous’s notion of a “feminine text:” “A feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there’s no closure, it doesn’t stop.” “Castration or Decapitation?” *Signs* 7 (Autumn 1981): 53.

³⁸ *Plato’s Pharmacy. Dissemination*, 130.

‘pharmakos.’) Derrida is interested in finding out how the meaning of ‘pharmakon’ is not closed in upon itself, but is connected through lexical similarity with other words in the pharmaceutical family, words that might be *absent* in the *Phaedrus* but are nevertheless semantically *present*!

This lack of full “presence” is the concept behind Derrida’s neologism *différance*, a process of interminable semantic deferral and substitution. “Meaning” does not emanate from a “transcendental signified,” i.e., there is no metaphysical bond between a word’s meaning and an absolute meaning. Whatever “meaning” we can infer from language is the result of *differences* between words (an idea Ferdinand de Saussure elaborated as part of his *semiotics*); ‘table’ means ‘table’ because it is not ‘fable,’ ‘cable,’ or ‘label.’ Derrida expands upon this idea by emphasizing that ‘table’ is not ‘table’ in and of itself.³⁹ Any meaning instantly contains a lack of meaning in that meaning emanates from a word’s difference from and deference to another word or words. As Terry Eagleton puts it, “you will never arrive at a final signified which is not a signifier in itself[.] Meaning, if you like, is scattered or dispersed along the whole chain of signifiers[.]”⁴⁰ Signifieds are palimpsests for other signifiers. For example, ‘pharmakon’ has meaning because it is different from ‘pharmakeus’ and ‘pharmakos’ and because the connotations of the latter two defer to ‘pharmakon,’ and vice versa. Part of the meaning of ‘pharmakon’ is erased and rewritten by the connotations of other pharmaceutical words (such as ‘pharmakeus’ and ‘pharmakos’).

Words lack an absolute meaning.

Thus, through the action of *différance*, ‘pharmakon’ also connotes *pharmakeus*, a “poisoner, sorcerer.”⁴¹ Writing as *pharmakon* in the *Phaedrus* tacitly implies that it is a drug—*alternately or simultaneously beneficent and maleficent*⁴²—used by a wizard, a magician, a poisoner, an alchemist. Writing is something practiced by degenerated, deformed people, by beings who fall outside the teleologi-

³⁹ Johnson elaborates: “language is a system of differences rather than a collection of independently meaningful units. [L]anguage as such is already constituted by the very distances and differences it seeks to overcome. To mean, in other words, is automatically *not* to be . . . Derrida’s word for this lag inherent in any signifying act is *différance*, from the French verb *différer*, which means both ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer.’” “Translator’s Introduction.” *Dissemination*, ix.

⁴⁰ *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 128.

⁴¹ *Liddell-Scott Greek-English Lexicon*, 1917.

⁴² *Plato’s Pharmacy. Dissemination*, 70. Italics in original.

cal hierarchy (and the logic of logocentrism). A *pharmakeus* is, in other words, a perversion of nature, estranged from its eschaton, from any justification for existence. Plato tells us a *pharmakeus* is “A being that no ‘logic’ can confine within a noncontradictory definition, an individual of the demonic species, neither god nor man, neither immortal nor mortal, neither living nor dead, he forms ‘the medium of the prophetic arts, of the priestly rites of sacrifice, initiation, and incantation, of divination and of sorcery.’”⁴³ *Pharmakeuses* can never be explicitly welcomed into the polis, into the Pharmacy; they are agents of chaos; their spell-binding drug threatens teleological integrity and strains binary logic.

There is more: Derrida shows that the *pharmakon* also implies φαρμακος (*pharmakos*)⁴⁴—a synonym for ‘*pharmakeus*’: “one sacrificed or executed as an atonement or purification for others, scapegoat,”⁴⁵ hence *rascal*.⁴⁶ Writing in the *Phaedrus* is presented as something practiced by beings who exist outside or on the fringes of the teleo-ontological structure, but who at the same time constitute an intrinsic part of that structure! In the *Republic*, “The city’s body *proper* thus reconstitutes its unity, closes around the security of its inner courts . . . by violently excluding from its territory the representative of an external threat or aggression[.] 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[.] The origin of difference and division, the *pharmakos* represents evil both introjected and projected.”⁴⁷ The *pharmakos* is a necessary evil. Quoting J. G. Frazer, Derrida illustrates: “The Athenians regularly maintained a number of degraded and useless beings at the public expense; and when any calamity, such as plague, drought, or famine, befell the city, they sacrificed two of these outcasts as scapegoats.”⁴⁸ The *pharmakos* is concomitantly shunned and cared for, “Beneficial insofar as he

⁴³ *Symposium* 202e. Quoted in *Plato’s Pharmacy, Dissemination*, 117.

⁴⁴ The word ‘*pharmakos*’ never appears in the *Phaedrus*. Grammatology, however, in questioning the ubiquitous priority given to presence in Western thought, tells us that a word can be *absent* or *present* in a text such as the *Phaedrus*. ‘*Pharmakos*’ is absent in the text of the *Phaedrus* yet critically present in meaning.

⁴⁵ *Liddell-Scott Greek-English Lexicon*, 1917. Italics omitted.

⁴⁶ *Plato’s Pharmacy, Dissemination*, n. 59, 132.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

cures—and for that, venerated and cared for—harmful insofar as he incarnates the powers of evil—and for that, feared and treated with caution.”⁴⁹

The fog thickens and clears; writing, as *pharmakos*, is a scapegoat, a necessary evil, of logocentrism. Writing is teleologically lower-order than speech, but at the same time a necessity for sustained philosophical debate to even take place. Without written texts, in order to hear Derrida’s speculations I would likely have to travel to L’Ecole des Hautes Etudes to hear Derrida speak in person, and I, Derrida, and Western society as a whole would never have been able to know of Plato’s elaborate and perplexing theories. Writing is demeaned in Platonic thought but is nevertheless essential to doing Philosophy. Texts are, like Socrates (who drank the hemlock and became a scapegoat for democracy),⁵⁰ scapegoat victims, a remedy for societies’ illnesses.⁵¹

Plato has to flatten the meaning of the word ‘*pharmakon*’ in order to plug writing and speech into binary opposition, which is to say, he has to dub *pharmakon* as bad, inferior etc. “Plato had to make his tale conform to structural laws.”⁵² Inevitably, however, the *pharmakon* cannot be flattened; to the deconstructive eye it disseminates vertically and horizontally throughout the text, springing up in several “certain discoverable *points of presence*”⁵³ in full retention of its polysemy. As Derrida says in the first sentence of *Plato’s Pharmacy*, “A text is not a text unless it hides from the first corner, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game.”⁵⁴ Writing as *pharmakon* causes us to suspect that the laws of the *Phaedrus*’ composition and the rules of its game are somewhat other than Plato discloses.

Plato’s attempt to flatten meaning of ‘pharmakon’ unsuccessful.

How then does the polysemous character of the *pharmakon* act to deconstruct logocentrism inherent in Platonic metaphysics?

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 145.

⁵¹ Like writing, Socrates is at once a scapegoat and a poisoner; “Socrates in the dialogues of Plato often has the face of a *pharmakeus*” (ibid., 117); “Socrates, affectionately called the *pharmakeus* in the dialogues of Plato” (ibid., 134).

⁵² Ibid., 85.

⁵³ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁴ Op. cit., 63. Italics omitted.

3. Deconstructing Logocentrism

By carefully pulling on threads of *différance* from the layers of the *Phaedrus*' rhetorical fabric, we now can see the full identity of the *pharmakon*; not only is its identity ambiguous, not only is the *pharmakon*'s identity not non-contradictory; *the pharmakon is self-contradictory*. The *pharmakon* reminds us of Friedrich Nietzsche's *primal unity*, "eternally suffering and contradictory."⁵⁵ "The *pharmakon* would be a *substance* . . . if we didn't have eventually to come to recognize it as ant substance itself[,] indefinitely exceeding its bounds as nonidentity, nonessence, nonsubstance."⁵⁶ Again, as Derrida points out, the "'essence' of the *pharmakon* lies in the way in which, having no stable essence, no 'proper' characteristics, it is not, in any sense (metaphysical, physical . . .) of the word, a steady *substance*."⁵⁷ It is fluid, like water; "In liquid, opposites are easily mixed. Liquid is the element of the *pharmakon*."⁵⁸

Thus the *pharmakon* derails the logocentric logic of binary opposition. It is not either *this* or *that*, *bad* or *good*, *false* or *true*. It is both: all of them. Each (side) repeats (itself). Each binary quality becomes its antithesis. The opposites of *pharmakon* are neither poison nor remedy. They are (n)either. *Pharmakon*'s linguistic content is never static. It is perpetually and incessantly changing its essence. The *pharmakon* is the precise entity which Plato is not equipped to identify:

Within the thick, cloudy liquid, trembling deep inside the drug, the whole pharmacy stood reflected, repeating the abyss of the Platonic phantasm.

The analyst cocks his ears, tries to distinguish between two repetitions.

He would like to isolate the bad, the true from the false.

He leans over further: they repeat each other.⁵⁹

The *pharmakon* defies identification, glaringly exposing the *interval* between binary antipodes. Grammatology acknowledges a *third term* not considered by logocentrism. As Derrida remarks in *Positions*: "in order better to mark this interval . . . it has been necessary to analyze, to set to work, *within* the text of the history of

⁵⁵ *The Birth of Tragedy*. In Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *The Portable Nietzsche*, 45.

⁵⁶ *Plato's Pharmacy*. *Dissemination*, 70.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 125-26.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.

philosophy, as well as *within* the so-called literary text[,] certain marks . . . I have called undecidables, that is, unities of simulacrum, 'false' verbal properties (nominal or semantic) that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, but which, however, inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, *without ever* constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics (the *pharmakon* is neither remedy nor poison, neither good nor evil, neither inside nor outside, neither speech nor writing . . .)."⁶⁰ This interval marks out a new space from which Derrida is able to do metaphysics, a place where there is no ontological origin, no terminus.⁶¹

From this new viewpoint, how does writing appear? What about its origin and end? "*Where and how does [writing] begin . . . ?* A question of origin. But a meditation upon the trace should undoubtedly teach us that there is no origin, that is to say, simple origin; that the questions of origin carry with them a metaphysics of presence."⁶² The lesson of grammatology is that meaning is the result of *différance*, and *différance* is social/cultural/political/historical. Meaning does not have a specific Origin, a Transcendental Signifier, God, Form, Idea, or any *telos*; "*différance* is incompatible with the static, synchronic, taxonomic, ahistorical motifs in the concept of *structure*."⁶³ Centrism and structures are idealisms. Insofar as *différance* and dissemination can be thought of as laws governing the structure of a text, they dictate "the law of its composition and the rules of its game."⁶⁴

If there is no transcendental signifier, there can be no "objective," unconditionally "right" or "correct" interpretation (both in the sense of phenomenology and literary theory. This latter implication, is, of course, quite unnerving for traditional Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian critics). There is no *préface*, no antecedent *before* nor absolutely correct reading *after* writing. Language (i.e., the

⁶⁰ Op. cit., 42-43.

⁶¹ Derrida: "I have attempted more and more systematically to find a non-site, or a non-philosophical site, from which to question philosophy. My central question is: from what site or non-site can philosophy appear to itself as other than itself, so that it can interrogate and reflect upon itself in an original manner?" Kearney, *Dialogues*, 108.

⁶² *Of Grammatology*, 74.

⁶³ *Positions*, 27.

⁶⁴ *Plato's Pharmacy. Dissemination*, 63.

lexical system) is the beginning and end of writing; discourse (spoken or written) is thus the beginning and end of Western Philosophy. As Gayatri Spivak writes in his translation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, "The deconstructive reader exposes the grammatical structure of the text, that its 'origin' and its 'end' are given over to language in general, by locating the moment in the text which harbors the unbalancing of the equation, the sleight of hand at the limit of a text which cannot be dismissed simply as a contradiction."⁶⁵ What appears to be contradiction in the *Phaedrus* regarding the *pharmakon's* identity is in fact necessitated by the disseminating action of *différance* inherent in language. The *pharmakon* simply manifests where logocentrism fails. What this means is that the *Phaedrus's* seemingly disjointed construction (the mixture of Lysias' speech on love, the myth of Theuth, Socrates' own speech, etc.) is not the result of bad composition resulting from, as Norris suggests, "Plato's mythical excursion into the origins and dangers of writing." The Theuth episode "fits in with the local context of the argument . . . it follows of necessity from Plato's governing system of assumptions[.]"⁶⁶ i.e., logocentrism. Plato must use myth to talk about something non-logocentric (the *pharmakon*).

So we can now see that "[o]nly a blind or grossly insensitive reading could indeed have spread the rumor that Plato was simply condemning the writer's activity." Plato, "in his own writing, plays at saving writing."⁶⁷ *Someone* had to *write down* what Socrates said.

4. Conclusion: Deconstruction as Philosophy

Success usually comes at a cost. A profound insight, as it passes in discourse from its inventor through the public arena, invariably becomes distorted, its meaning eventually straying far and wide from its initial formulation.

Like other great neologisms—ones *we* wish we would have thought of but didn't—deconstruction has suffered the fate of its own ascendancy. Those who have not taken the time to *read* Derrida and devoted considerable effort to understanding the

⁶⁵ "Translator's Preface," *Of Grammatology*, xlix.

⁶⁶ *Derrida*, 28.

⁶⁷ *Plato's Pharmacy. Dissemination*, 67.

metaphysical, epistemic, and semiotic nuances of deconstruction often treat it—in a dismissive way—as vague rhetoric, once in vogue in smoky Parisian cafés. Deconstruction, in these sorts of conversations, is assumed to be a nihilistic and radically relativistic theory about the ultimate meaninglessness of texts, in which any interpretation is as good as the next.

Such characterizations of deconstruction couldn't be more shallow. Upon close scrutiny, deconstruction turns out to be a rigorously and carefully constructed philosophical theory which asserts that any text's meaning is overlaid with a complex constellation of social innuendo, explicit or not. Derrida has made a genuine contribution to the Humanities by emphasizing the fact that the savvy reader must read between the lines, remaining sensitive and responsive to a text's cultural context. The activity of reading is not depreciated or demeaned on the deconstructive model; rather, the challenge of being a *good* reader is heightened. Deconstruction is thus an *affirmation* of reading, of writing, of the love of language.

In my view, Derrida's reading of the *Phaedrus* is one of the best examples of thorough, rigorous, systematic Philosophy. Derrida is a master of ontology, of epistemology, of semiotics, of language, of historiography, of hermeneutics. To obfuscate the philosophical foundations of deconstruction is to malign the thought of one of the finest and most fascinating Philosophers in the Western tradition of the last century.

Appendix

A Basic Derridean Glossary

Binary Opposition—The principle of logocentrism which bifurcates a phenomenon and prioritizes one opposition over the other, for example, good/evil, true/false, presence/absence, man/woman, human/nature. Binary opposition is the very foundation of dialectical ratiocination.

Deconstruction—Properly speaking, Derrida's critique of Platonic metaphysics, with corresponding ramifications for epistemology, semiotics, hermeneutics, and ethics.

Différance—The French word Derrida uses to describe the process by which words obtain meaning(s) based on a word's difference from other words, rather than reference to a non-temporal transcendental signifier.

Grammatology—The method of deconstruction aimed at revealing aesthetic meanings not amenable to logocentrism.

Logocentrism—The metaphysics and corresponding epistemology which characterizes the Western tradition. Based on the ancient Greek word *λογος* (*logos*), the conclusions of logocentrism are unequivocal and non-contradictory. According to logocentrism, words have meaning by virtue of referring to a transcendental signifier (i.e., a Platonic Form). Logocentrism is a method of rigorous dialectic thinking which calls for unequivocal, non-contradictory conclusions, for example, “scientific” investigations such as geology, psychology, biology, etc.

Phonologism—The logocentric concept which prioritizes speech (*logos*) over writing (*grammata*) based on the allied prioritization of presence over absence.

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