

Revisiting *Plato's Pharmacy*

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Abstract In this essay, one of Derrida's early texts, *Plato's pharmacy*, is analysed in detail, more specifically in relation to its reflections on writing and its relation to law. This analysis takes place with reference to a number of Derrida's other texts, in particular those on Freud. It is especially Freud's texts on dream interpretation and on the dream-work which are of assistance in understanding the background to Derrida's analysis of writing in *Plato's pharmacy*. The essay shows the close relation between Derrida's analysis of Plato's texts and Freud's study of the dream-work. The forces at work in dreams, it appears, are at play in all texts, which in turn explains Derrida's contentions in relation to the *pharmakon* as providing the condition of possibility of Plato's texts. The essay furthermore points to the continuity between this 'early' text of Derrida and his 'later', seemingly more politico-legal texts of the 1990s. A close reading of *Plato's pharmacy*, with its investigation via 'writing' of the foundations of metaphysics, and thus also of the Western concept of law, is obligatory should one wish to comprehend how Derrida attempts to exceed the restricted economy of metaphysics through his analysis of concepts such as justice and hospitality.

Keywords Writing – Dream-work – Freud – Pharmakon – Death – Pleasure - Pharmakos

1 Introduction

In his famous early essay stemming from 1972, *Plato's pharmacy*, Derrida makes the contention that philosophy, characterised by rational thinking, and therefore also law, as one of its offshoots, are founded on sorcery [18, pp. 69-186]. Derrida's essay with its seemingly outrageous contention, has, as could perhaps have been expected, received a mixed response from legal scholars. On the negative side, the essay has been viewed as a good illustration of Derrida's use of irritating, punning, irrationalist, and self-defeating arguments, followed by the conclusion that deconstruction is clearly irrelevant for law. Those more favourably inclined towards Derrida have mostly read this text, specifically because of the seemingly double meaning of *pharmakon* which Derrida exploits there, as pointing to the multiple meanings which a text can possibly convey. In what has probably become the most-cited essay on the relation between law and deconstruction, deconstruction is, inter alia based on *Plato's pharmacy* and the speech/writing opposition enquired into there, presented as a tool for purposes of legal argumentation, a method in other words, for the temporary reversal of conceptual oppositions in law with the aim ultimately of showing that they are mutually dependent. After Derrida's *Force of law: The "mystical foundation of authority"* [16, pp. 230-298] interest in *Plato's pharmacy* in

the legal context has waned significantly. Because of a wide-spread belief in Derrida's 'ethical turn', *Plato's pharmacy* is no longer viewed as of much importance in understanding Derrida's thinking in relation to law and justice. The present essay will argue for the continuing importance of *Plato's pharmacy* in the legal context. Through a detailed analysis of the main 'themes' of *Plato's pharmacy*, it will furthermore be contended that although this text can indeed be read as 'textbook example' of a deconstructive reading, much more is at stake than what at first meets the eye. In this respect, the influence of Freud on Derrida's reading will specifically be enquired into. As we will see by enquiring into the relation between texts, dreams and the laws applicable to their construction; the speech/writing opposition; the *pharmakon*; imitation in general; the *pharmakos*; the move from *mythos* to *logos*; and the 'notions' of general writing and the trace, Derrida's seemingly arbitrary and haphazard playing with words in *Plato's pharmacy* involves a specific and very rigorous 'application' of Freud's insights in relation to the interpretation of dreams, to texts in general. Texts are, like dreams, not controlled by the intentions of their authors. This should not lead to the simplistic conclusion that texts therefore mean whatever Derrida (or anyone else) wants them to mean. *Plato's pharmacy*, as is the case with many other texts of Derrida, enquires into the foundations of metaphysics (and therefore also of law) through a rigorous reading of philosophical texts. In going beyond the intentions of the author, Derrida's readings are motivated by and point in each instance to what can be referred to as a 'desire' that goes beyond philosophy; a 'desire', as we will see, that makes philosophy possible and which, as the concluding paragraph will make clear, poses a radical challenge to law. This 'desire' moreover informs Derrida's understanding of justice in *Force of law* [16, pp. 230-298].¹

2 Texts and the construction of dreams

In the introductory paragraph, the notion of a 'text' was referred to a few times. Because of its importance for our reading of *Plato's pharmacy*, it requires further elaboration here. In the first few pages of *Plato's pharmacy*, Derrida invokes the notions of weaving, fabric (textile) and a web, as synonyms for the notion of a 'text' [18, pp. 69-71].² It is noteworthy that Freud uses similar terminology in the context of dreams, speaking of the 'material' or fabric (*Stoff*) of a dream which is transformed by the dream-work into the manifest dream [21, vol XV p. 223]. Freud also refers to the 'material out of which the dream was woven' (*Material, aus dem der Traum gesponnen ist*) and to the 'texture' (*Gewebe*) of the dream [21, vol IV pp. 194, 310].

¹ This aspect can for reasons of space not be explored in the present essay in detail. This has been done elsewhere.

² See also Derrida [5, pp. 111-112]. Gasché [22, pp. 95-105] points out that in Plato, weaving (*symploke*) plays an important dialectical role, whereas in Derrida, especially in *Plato's pharmacy*, weaving is generalized so as to show the relation of dialectics to an alterity which is its condition of possibility as well as impossibility. The other of dialectics, that which was understood to be negativity, is shown to no longer be *its* other, to no longer belong to it, to not even be a negative. The other in Derrida's thinking 'is irretrievably plural and cannot be assimilated, digested, represented, or *thought as such*, and hence put to work by the system of metaphysics' (at p. 103). The *pharmakon* is one of the names for this otherness. The reading of *Plato's pharmacy* presented in the present essay ties in closely with that of Gasché, although here the other will be explored in closer relation to a certain thinking of Freud; see also Kamuf [26] where the same theme of weaving is at stake in an analysis of *Plato's pharmacy*.

Insofar as the production of the manifest content of the dream is concerned, this occurs through censorship or repression of what Freud refers to as the latent dream-thoughts or unconscious mental acts [21, vol V p. 514; 5, vol XV p. 183]. The production of a dream, Freud furthermore points out, is not an arbitrary process, but proceeds according to certain rules or mechanisms, the most important of which are (1) *condensation*, the manifest dream consisting of an abbreviated ‘translation’ of the latent dream-thoughts,³ and (2) the *displacement* of energy along chains of association involving contiguity or similarity.⁴ One can in addition, because of their importance in the present context, mention the importance in dream-work of (3) *considerations of representability*, that is, the selection and transformation undergone by latent dream-thoughts to enable them to be represented, preferably towards pictorial substitutes) as well as (4) *secondary revision*, so as to enable the dream to be presented in a relatively coherent manner.⁵ Freud does not restrict the application of these mechanisms to the production of dreams. They apply also in the case of slips of the tongue (or pen) and other ‘faulty acts’, in jokes, in works of art, in scientific research, in religion, and in culture in general.⁶ This is because unconscious processes always remain at work, also in wakeful life, and are not restricted to neurotics. Freud’s analysis of these manifestations of the unconscious, however predominantly remained occupied with the effect of early childhood memories and the Oedipus complex. Derrida’s contention in *Plato’s pharmacy* that these mechanisms apply to ‘texts’ in general therefore finds direct support in Freud’s writings. Derrida’s extended notion of a ‘text’ takes on board almost all of the above ideas in relation to the construction of dreams, and includes within it ‘all the structures called “real,” “economic,” “historical,” socio-institutional, in short: all possible referents’, which ties in with his remark that ‘there is nothing outside of the text’ [10, p. 148; 6, p. 158]. For Freud, dream interpretation, as well as the interpretation of manifestations of the unconscious in wakeful activities, is about the disentanglement of their texture [21, vol V p. 515]. Derrida’s reading of texts has a similar concern [5, pp. 111-113; 18, pp. 69, 72], albeit with a slight but important difference, which Freud already anticipated.

The way in which the dream-work proceeds is nonetheless not fully explained by the mechanisms described above. In his *Revision of dream theory* Freud somewhat modestly, but significantly, remarks in this regard that ‘we have not yet understood’ the ‘rules’ according to which the manifest dream is constructed [21, vol XXII pp. 12, 13]. This remark appears to tie in closely with a passage from *The interpretation of*

³ According to Freud [21, vol XV p. 171], this takes place inter alia ‘by latent elements which have something in common being combined and fused into a single unity in the manifest dream’; see further Freud [21, vol IV pp. 279-304].

⁴ See in general, Freud [21, vol IV pp. 305-309; vol V pp. 514-515; vol XV pp. 170-183; vol XIX pp. 12-13].

⁵ See in general, Laplanche and Pontalis [28, pp. 125, 389-390, 412] and Freud [21, vol V pp. 339-349, 488-508].

⁶ See inter alia Freud [21] vol VI (The psychopathology of everyday life); vol VIII (Jokes and their relation to the unconscious); vol IX pp. 1-95 (Jensen’s Gradiva); vol XI pp. 57-137 (Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood); vol XIII (Totem and taboo); vol XXI pp. 1-56 (The future of an illusion); vol XXIII pp. 1-137 (Moses and monotheism).

dreams [21, vol V p. 525] which in turn echoes well with *Plato's pharmacy* and requires quotation here in full:

There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out off its mycelium.⁷

This passage together with the remark of Freud referred to above, could be read as an acknowledgement that what is at stake at the 'origin' of the formation of dreams and texts is not something which is capable of being grasped by knowledge or concepts, and is therefore heterogeneous to signified sense.⁸ This limit or resistance to dream interpretation seems to be a result of a difference within the exertion of forces [14, p. 13; 7, pp. 201, 211], which in turn motivates partially the introduction by Derrida of the 'concept' of *différance* [5, pp. 148-152]. The latter 'concept', apart from alluding to the deference and delay of unreserved expenditure, points at the same time to differences in force, and more specifically to what could be referred to as the 'weakest force' which remains beyond knowledge, that is, Freud's death drive [5, pp. 150-151].⁹ *Différance*, which can, as we will see, also be named the *pharmakon*, dissemination, the trace, general writing, etc, in other words points to the representation of that which cannot be represented as such. This 'notion' lies at the heart of *Plato's pharmacy* and Derrida [18, p. 69] introduces it on the first page when he remarks on this law – the law of the composition of texts. In 'untangling' Plato's texts, this law will compel him to point to that spot in the texts, which, as in the case of dreams, cannot be untied, which resists analysis and an identifiable meaning.

3 Speech and Writing

An analysis of the *Phaedrus* [36] and other texts seems to suggest that Plato, through the mouth of Socrates, has an aversion to writing, that he prefers the living, breathing purity of speech. Plato seems to have a similar prejudice towards painting and the other imitative arts such as poetry and sculpture. Even though a painting seems alive,

⁷ See also Freud [21, vol IV p. 111 n 1].

⁸ This is explored by Derrida [14, pp. 1-38], where he points to the weaving metaphors employed in the passage quoted above and brings this 'resistance' to analysis in relation to Freud's elaboration of the repetition compulsion and death drive, inter alia in *Beyond the pleasure principle* [21, vol XVIII pp. 1-64]. *Plato's pharmacy* and the figure of the *pharmakon* are incidentally also referred to here (at pp. 30-31).

⁹ In devising this neologism, Derrida was presumably not unaware of Freud's remark in *The interpretation of dreams* [21, vol V pp. 356-357] that '[i]n the case of unintelligible neologisms...it is worth considering whether they may not be put together from components with a sexual meaning'. The analysis which follows seems to confirm thus postulation.

when one questions it, it remains silent, Socrates notes, just like writing [36, p. 275d].¹⁰ Plato elsewhere also records his opposition to sorcery, prophetic powers, magic, and the casters of spells, calling for harsh punishment, including expulsion from the social arena for those who engage in these activities [18, pp. 99-100]. Writing is denigrated by Plato as a fallen kind of speech, as a mere aid, dangerous and secondary to living memory; as corrupting originary meaning; as dead or empty repetition; as dead and rigid knowledge. Compared to writing, speech involves living memory, remembering the *aletheia* of the *eidos* before the fall of the soul into the body. It thus also involves repetition, but the repetition of truth which presents the *eidos* [18, pp. 135-136]. This distinction does not however as yet explain fully Plato's seemingly negative views on writing. Plato's relation to the sophists casts somewhat more light on this. As is well-known, Plato finds the views of the sophists objectionable [18, p. 108]. It is the sophists who wrote speeches for use by litigants rather than relying on living discourse (*logos*). The further problem with these speeches, as with the one of Lysias (a sophist) which Phaedrus reads to Socrates (and that Phaedrus is attempting to learn by heart) is according to Socrates that they have no head or tail; the parts of the speech appear to have been thrown together at random; they are in other words not organised like a living being; they also repeat the same thing over and over again without being concerned with the truth.¹¹ When one asks a sophist a question, Socrates comments, he will be unable to give you an answer, similar to what happens when you read a book [18, p. 137]. This is because the sophists do not rely on living memory (*mnēmē*), but trade in mere repetition (*hupomnēsis*). Plato's condemnation of writing does not however appear to be consistent. At other points in the dialogue, which will be discussed in more detail below, he points to the necessity, value and importance of writing. Informing this contradiction in the *Phaedrus*, which according to Derrida is not due to an oversight, but strictly regulated [18, p. 72], is the analogy which Freud uses to explain the way in which contradictions are dealt with in dreams, what is sometimes referred to as kettle-logic: A man who is charged with having given back a borrowed kettle in damaged condition argues firstly that the kettle was not damaged when given back; secondly, that it was already damaged when he borrowed it; and thirdly, that he never borrowed the kettle [21, vol IV pp. 119-120; 18, p. 113]. There is in other words an a-logic at stake in *Plato's pharmacy*, which nevertheless takes place according to strict rules. Before we enquire further into this strange contradiction, it is first necessary to turn to the *pharmakon* which as we will see, contains contradictions within itself.

4 The *pharmakon*

One of the focus points of Derrida's analysis in *Plato's pharmacy*, and which as mentioned above has caught the attention of legal (and other) scholars, is the word *pharmakon* which appears a number of times in the *Phaedrus* as well as other texts

¹⁰ Page number references in Plato's texts will be to the page numbers indicated in the margins of these texts.

¹¹ The *Phaedrus* has incidentally been criticised in similar terms for many centuries. It has, specifically because of the inclusion of the Egyptian myth on the invention of writing which we will discuss below, been regarded as either the work of a young, immature Plato or an old Plato, close to senility [18, pp. 71-72].

of Plato and which can be translated as remedy, poison, drug, medicine, recipe, perfume, paint (an artificial tint), and as philter (a love or magic potion, a charm) [18, pp. 98-118, 132, 142]. At stake in the *pharmakon* is clearly something analogous to the mechanisms of dream-work, and more specifically of condensation or the characteristic of over-determination, that is, an element in the content of the dream 'is not derived from a single element in the dream-thoughts, but may be traced back to a whole number' and vice versa [21, vol V pp. 652-653]. The different elements out of which the *pharmakon* is constituted seem more specifically to include allusions to life, death, and (sexual) pleasure.¹² It is of great importance to note that for Derrida these different possibilities of translation are not simply a matter of ambiguity or polysemy, but of a word with no self-identical meaning.¹³ It is moreover, as will become clear, 'the prior medium in which differentiation in general is produced' [18, p. 129]. As we will see, and as one could expect with a word having no self-identity, it will be impossible for Plato to control the meaning of the *pharmakon* in the different contexts he uses the word. The attempts by translators of the *Phaedrus* and other texts of Plato to give to the *pharmakon* a specific meaning within a certain context (either remedy or poison) is no doubt legitimate within metaphysical logic, but it also closes down the playfulness of this word, the link it establishes between an 'inside' and an 'outside'.¹⁴ Translations of this word tend to confirm the boundary between an inside and an outside, thereby confirming the power and logic of metaphysics without concerning themselves with what makes this tradition possible. For Derrida [18, p. 77], the difficulty in tying down the meaning of *pharmakon* lies not so much in the translation from one philosophical language (here, Greek) into others, but in transferring what is actually a non-philosopheme into a philosopheme.

The importance of the *pharmakon* within the context of a discussion of the speech/writing distinction lies in the fact that Plato specifically refers to writing as a *pharmakon*. It is more specifically because of the *pharmakon* of a written text (the written speech of Lysias about love which Phaedrus - the young man Socrates is attempting to convince to become his lover [37, p. 72] - hides under his cloak) that Socrates is charmed or seduced into leaving the shelters of the city walls, the proper place where he usually learns, teaches, speaks and engages in dialogue, and which

¹² In relation to the *pharmakon*, it is worth mentioning Freud's 'The antithetical meaning of primal words (*Urworte*)' [21, vol XI pp. 155-161; vol XV pp. 179-180] as well as his expression of agreement in *The interpretation of Dreams* with Hans Sperber that 'all primal words referred to sexual things but afterwards lost their sexual meaning through being applied to other things and activities which were compared with the sexual ones' [21, vol V p. 352]; see further Freud [21, vol XV p. 167]. One of Derrida's texts which come very close to, but nonetheless goes beyond this Freudian analysis is 'A number of yes' where he analyses the boundless 'yes' at the 'pre-origin' of language, through a reading of Michel de Certeau [20, pp. 231-240]. The latter text ties in with the analysis in par 8 below.

¹³ See also Meyer [32, pp. 503-504], Brogan [2, pp. 8-13], Naas [34, pp. 44, 49], and Hobson [23, pp. 64-65]. The early commentaries on *Plato's pharmacy*, by Norris [35, pp. 28-45], Culler [4, pp. 142-144] and Johnson [24] which were relied on by legal scholars, may have contributed to the many misunderstandings surrounding this text. Although these latter commentaries show a great deal of insight in relation to Derrida's texts, they can and have been read to suggest that what is at stake in the *pharmakon* is simply a double meaning, that is, remedy and poison.

¹⁴ See further par 5 below.

lies, as Derrida argues, at the ‘foundation’ of the *Phaedrus* [18, p. 76]. As Socrates says to Phaedrus –

But you, I think, have found a potion [*pharmakon*] to charm me into leaving ... you can lead me all over Attica or anywhere else you like simply by waving in front of me the leaves of a book containing a speech [36, p. 230e].

The *Phaedrus* weaves together the themes of writing, truth, love,¹⁵ seduction, desire, pleasure, and death. As Socrates and Phaedrus are on their way to the place next to the river Ilissus where their dialogue about love and writing will take place, Socrates recounts the legend of Boreas’s abduction of the virgin Orithyia. This is said to have happened close to where Socrates and Phaedrus will recline under a tree. The relation between the flowing water of a stream, fabric, and sexual desire is hinted at here, as well as elsewhere in Plato’s texts [36, pp. 251d, 255c; 18, pp. 74-75].¹⁶ Socrates at this point mockingly refers to the *sophoi* (wise) who would have attempted to give a learned, rationalist explanation of the myth by contending that it was while she was playing with Pharmacia¹⁷ that a gust of the North Wind blew Orithyia over the rocks and that after having been killed in this way she was seized by Boreas.¹⁸ When asked by Phaedrus whether he believes in the truth of this legend,¹⁹ Socrates responds that he does not have time to concern himself with questions such as these; of much greater importance is the Delphic inscription instructing one to know oneself. Before

¹⁵ Socrates in the *Phaedrus* incidentally defines love as ‘a kind of madness’; Plato [36, p. 265a].

¹⁶ See also Plato’s *Cratylus* at pp. 400d and 419e-420b. Derrida [18, p. 75] refers in this context to the ‘diaphanous purity’ (in the sense of a texture so fine to permit seeing through) of the waters, which must have welcomed and drawn Orithyia and Pharmacia like a spell, where Socrates and Phaedrus are reclining. It is furthermore interesting to note at this point that Lévi-Strauss [30, pp. 378-405] detects a close relation in myth between weaving and pubic hair.

¹⁷ The word Pharmacia (*Pharmakeia*), Derrida [18, p. 75] notes, is also a common noun used to refer to the administration of the *pharmakon*, or drug: poison and/or medicine, hinting that it was through poisoning (or perhaps the pleasurable or blind use of a drug that she lost her life (at 78)). See also Derrida [11, pp. 236-237, 240-241] for a reflection on the reasons for society’s condemnation of the drug addict.

¹⁸ In what has up until now been the most detailed discussion of *Plato’s Pharmacy* in the legal context, Brosnan [3, pp. 365-376] contends (at 366) that Derrida’s remark that ‘[t]hrough her games, Pharmacia has *dragged down to death* a virginal purity and an unpenetrated interior’ [18, p. 75] is ‘somewhat illogical’ (the words italicized by me is the only part of the sentence quoted by Brosnan), in view of the *Phaedrus* suggesting instead that Boreas was the one responsible. Brosnan’s assessment is another indication (together with his view that Derrida’s word-play and reversals of oppositions are simply *techniques*, or ‘an intensely skeptical method’ (at 371), and his implication that Derrida seeks to convince us of some kind of *truth* in a way similar to a work of modernist art (at 370-371)) of the carelessness with which he reads *Plato’s pharmacy*. According to Brosnan (at 366), Derrida’s ‘ultimate conclusion’, which ‘is not clearly stated in so many words’ is that the privilege of speech in the speech/writing opposition ‘is wrong’. Both speech and writing, he contends, instead share the trait of being distanced from immediate truth or presence. The perplexity of the author faced with this text appears further from the rhetorical questions posed at the end of his analysis of Derrida’s essay (at 372): ‘Where do you go with an insight or claim that two things conventionally viewed as opposites are “in a sense,” the same thing? That is what is most conspicuously absent from Derrida’s account of the *Phaedrus*, a sense of just what is at stake if you choose to accept this view. What does it matter if, as Derrida claims, the entire history of Western philosophy can be re-explained as a meta-conflict of speech vs. writing? We are left to guess what, if anything, would be different’ (footnote omitted). It is remarkable that this acknowledged lack of comprehension does not reduce the author to silence, but (revealingly) rather seems to incite him into making the accusations against Derrida referred to above. In this regard the remarks of Freud [21, vol XI p. 39] in relation to resistance to psychoanalysis appear apposite.

¹⁹ In other accounts Boreas is furthermore said to have raped her and she, having become an immortal goddess, to have borne him a number of children.

the reading by Phaedrus starts, there is therefore at first a welcome and then a sending-off or dismissal of myth in the name of truth [18, pp. 73, 74, and 77].²⁰ It is moreover on the basis of a written text which instructs Socrates to attain the truth of self-knowledge in the name of which the dialogue in the *Phaedrus* will take place and not in the name of the transparent immediacy of self-presence as one would perhaps have expected in light of Plato's philosophy. As Derrida [18, p. 74] furthermore points out, a similar role is played by the fable of the origin of the cicadas which Socrates recounts later in the dialogue. The cicadas, it is said, were at first people who when singing was invented by the Muses were so overwhelmed by the pleasure thereof that they did not eat or drink anymore but kept on singing until they died, without even realising it. The gift the Muses gave them was that they would not need to eat or drink, but immediately after birth would start singing until they die. After death they would go to the Muses and inform them of those who honoured them, either through dance, love or philosophy. It is for this reason, Socrates says, that they should not fall asleep by the river like slaves or sheep while the cicadas sing, but should engage in discourse (*logos*). We find here another allusion to the dissolution of identity, of death and absolute pleasure as the conditions of possibility of dialogue (and truth).

The *pharmakon* again comes to the fore in the myth of the god Theuth concerning the value of writing which is told by Socrates [18, pp. 78-79]. Theuth wanted to introduce the art of writing to the Egyptians as a *pharmakon* (usually translated here as potion or remedy) for both memory and wisdom, but Thamus, the King of Egypt (also the sun-king, the father of the gods, and Ammon) thought of it as a useless art which would have the opposite effect (a poison) for the reasons indicated above. The king, presented as the father of the living *logos* (speech, reason, argument), thus refuses the offering or gift of writing [18, p. 81]. The king, Derrida notes, treats writing as if it is something outside of him and beneath him; he cannot write, and this ignorance confirms his sovereign independence. He regards writing not only as useless, but as a mischief and as a menace. After having noted the prophetic judgment of the King, Socrates proceeds to translate the prophecy into reason, in order to, as Derrida [18, p. 135] puts it, 'uphold ... the divine, royal, paternal, solar word', to transform *mythos* into *logos*. Metaphysics, it therefore appears, shares with myth this prejudice against writing. The same family-structure and the resulting prejudice against writing also emerges from Plato's description of *logos* as a living being (*zoon*), similar to other living beings [18, p. 84].²¹ *Logos* consequently has to 'properly' submit to the laws of life just like any other living being. To be what it is, *logos* also requires the attendance and presence of its father. Without the father (the paternal presence), as Socrates and Derrida [18, p. 82] both note, *logos* would share the features of writing (a son, an

²⁰ The invocation and dismissal of the myth in relation to *Pharmaceia*, with the latter's allusion to the *pharmakon* ties in with Plato's analogous treatment of writing. Myth and writing share the same fate in Plato's texts insofar as both are in opposition to *logos*. They are furthermore both orphans: whereas *logos* has a father, writing has been abandoned by his father and the father of myth is almost impossible to find; Derrida [18, pp. 145, 183 n. 69]. Their invocation and dismissal is, as should slowly become clear, what provides the condition of possibility for the dialogue.

²¹ Writing on the other hand is not a being (*on*). At the same time it is not simply a non-being either (*meon*). The danger of writing lies exactly in this ability to slip out of the simple opposition or alternative between presence and absence [18, p. 111].

orphan, without being able to defend himself or attend to his own needs). Such an orphan-son is not however only regarded with pity; he is also accused for achieving emancipation and self-sufficiency. The king thus appears to realise in rejecting the gift of writing that what is actually offered here by Theuth, either by ruse or through naivety, is not a good remedy or potion, but poison; that behind this gift lies a desire for orphan-hood and patricidal subversion. This is because writing can signify on its own, not needing the presence of the father-author. *Logos* on the other hand is a well-behaved, sane, sensible and grateful son [18, p. 163].²²

5 Imitation and the *pharmakon*

As we saw earlier, Plato condemns both writing and painting for their silence when questioned. They simply repeat the same thing over and over again. Plato's model for painting is representation, a drawing of the living [18, pp. 137-138]. In order to explain the extent to which painting is removed from the truth, Socrates in the *Republic* [36, pp. 596-598] revealingly invokes the example of tables and beds.²³ Socrates then proceeds, with reference only to a bed, to explain the difference between God, the carpenter and the painter of a bed, the latter being a mere imitator [18, p. 139)]. Writing is similarly supposed to paint a living word. Derrida [18, p. 137] contends that this common silence, this inability to communicate, when measured against the demands of the *logos* arises from the fact that they (writing and painting) are interrogated as presumed representatives of the spoken word. When interrogated in this vein they are clearly good for nothing. This view on writing (and painting), Derrida [18, p. 138] asserts, stems directly from the phonetic writing system that existed in Greece in terms of which writing was viewed as representing the signs of voice. Kamuf [25, p. 31] furthermore points out in this regard that writing is viewed -

as deriving from speech because it is thought of as purely phonetic transcription. It mirrors speech but is less apt than speech to restore the "thing itself," the referent, idea, or signified which, in one way or another, occupies the place of a pure intelligibility that has never "fallen" into the sensible realm of the exterior sign or symbol, and that therefore always remains present to itself.

Although writing is similar to the other forms of mimesis in that it is a representation of something living, writing is regarded as the worst form of representation. Painting and sculpture are silent arts, but their silence is 'normal'. Writing denatures to a

²² There is clearly a similarity between the familial scene depicted here and Freud's Oedipus complex as well as its ideal resolution; see further par 6 below.

²³ Freud [21, vol V p. 355; vol XV, p. 158] points out that wood in general and tables specifically stand for women in dreams, whereas a bed alludes to sexual intercourse: 'Tables, tables laid out for a meal, and boards also stand for women – no doubt by antithesis, since the contours of their bodies are eliminated in the symbols.... Since 'bed and board' constitute marriage, the latter often takes the place of the former in dreams and the sexual complex of ideas is, so far as may be, transposed on to the eating complex.' See also Derrida [8, pp. 315-317] on the symbolic meaning of the bed in Ernst's fort/da game; and further Derrida [18, pp. 205, 210, 231, 233]. Freud's insight that matter (Latin: *material* from *mater* (mother)) or wood/board/plank represents women in dreams, furthermore tells us something of the limit/border (brothel/French: *bordel*; German *Bordell*) in Derrida's thinking and specifically in this context, the limit between inside and outside; see further Derrida [9, pp. 54-55].

greater extent that which it represents. It aims at representing living speech, but does so without providing an image. It simply substitutes the living act of speech and its inner truth with dead letters inscribed in space [18, p. 138]. Derrida is of the view that this approach to writing tells us something important about philosophy and its origins. It is in other words not by accident that writing receives this harsh condemnation. Plato's *Republic* provides a further insight into what lies behind this devaluation of writing. In this text, as noted above, Plato [36, p. 595a] denounces all imitators and says that poetry is likely to distort the thought of those who hear it *unless*, and this is important for the rest of our discussion, one has ontological knowledge as a drug (*pharmakon*) in order to counteract it [18, pp. 138-9]. Derrida does not regard Plato's choice of words as merely accidental. Although this may not have been Plato's intention, the specific choice of the word *pharmakon* in this context indicates that the order of knowledge does not simply consist of the transparent order of forms and ideas, but is in the first place a drug or an antidote (*pharmakon*) which serves to oppose another *pharmakon*. It is here that Derrida [18, p. 139] mentions undecidability, which as we can clearly see from the passage that follows, does not simply entail the impossibility of deciding between two determinate meanings:

Long before being divided up into occult violence and accurate knowledge, the element of the *pharmakon* is the combat zone between philosophy and its other. An element that is *in itself*, if one can still say so, *undecidable*.

We will return to this suggestion of philosophy as *pharmakon* and its implications after we have discussed the rest of Derrida's text. We will see that it ties in closely with what was said earlier about the truth and its relation to, or rather *its condition of possibility being located in*, the seduction of Socrates by the written speech which Phaedrus hides under his cloak, the Delphic inscription, as well as the mythical abduction of Orithyia and the origin of the cicadas.

Let us now discuss in more detail the question of the inside/outside which has been briefly referred to a few times already, as this will assist us in understanding the rest of Derrida's analysis. As we saw, for Plato writing is a *pharmakon*, both remedy and poison. It is not effective as a remedy (as Theuth contended) and it is in addition a poison. According to Derrida, it appears from Plato's texts that he, in addition to the prejudice against writing, has a general suspicion of drugs or remedies, irrespective of the intention with which they are applied.²⁴ This is firstly because of the ambivalent nature of remedies. Plato in *Protagoras* [36, p. 354a] for example views the treatments by doctors (*pharmaka*) as never simply beneficial. Some treatments also involve pain and thus entail a kind of painful pleasure. Another example of such a painful pleasure mentioned in the *Philebus* [36, p. 45e] is *hubris* or 'the excesses of the pleasures of foolish people and those given to debauchery' which 'drive them near madness and to shrieks of frenzy' [18, p. 102]. Secondly, and more importantly, the *pharmakon*, in the sense of a drug or medicine, goes against natural life. One should,

²⁴ See also Derrida [18, p. 78].

according to Plato, not interfere with natural life, with the fixed span of life. One often simply makes things worse by using medicine, by applying something from the outside of the living body in the case of disease [18, pp. 102-104]. When Plato refers to writing as *pharmakon*, both these reasons seem to be playing themselves out. Derrida [18, p. 105] contends that this distinction between an inside and an outside informs Plato's attempt in the *Phaedrus* and elsewhere (as well as of his translators) to force the *pharmakon*, which as we saw cannot be tied down to any one meaning (and by implication death, which is on the 'inside' as well as 'outside' of life), into a metaphysical opposition: remedy versus poison, good versus evil, inside versus outside, essence versus appearance, true versus false. This structure also informs Plato's view of writing: writing as *pharmakon* gives the appearance of being good, of being able to assist living memory (*mnēmē*) from within, but actually, in truth (*aletheia*), it is evil, an external aid to memory (*hypomnēsis*) and leads to forgetfulness (*lēthē*). Derrida [18, p. 107] in other words attributes the oppositions Plato imposes to a prior matrix, that is, the opposition between inside and outside, which as we saw hangs together with the definition of the living being Plato subscribes to. Derrida [18, p. 111] summarises Plato's complaint against the sophists (and writing, which the sophists incidentally also sometimes condemned [18, pp. 84, 111, 116-117] as follows:

What Plato is attacking in sophistic, 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.

This classical (metaphysical) inside/outside logic is not without its difficulties.²⁵ In explaining how the human body as well as disease works, Plato interestingly mentions the finitude of human life, of death as already inscribed within the 'constituted triangles' of life. As Plato notes in the *Timaeus* [36, p. 89c], we are all born with an 'allotted span of life, barring unavoidable accidents'. A human being can thus be said to have a relation with its absolute other, that is, death. God is different in this respect: as a perfect and immortal living being he has no relation to any outside as he does not get sick and does not die. Memory, which Plato also refers to in terms of life, is itself finite in nature. Like all living organisms, it has certain limits and, as Derrida [18, p. 111] notes and Socrates later also confirms in the *Phaedrus*, it is therefore necessary to make use of signs.²⁶ If it was not, if memory was unlimited, it would no longer be memory, but like God, amount to infinite self-presence. Memory is thus in need of signs to recall that which is not present. Plato nonetheless seems to

²⁵ See also the discussion of Staikou elsewhere in this Issue on the metaphysical desire for the intact kernel (which does not exist) that lies behind this inside/outside logic.

²⁶ This can be explained with reference to the Freudian death drive which will be referred to again below. In *Archive fever* [12, p. 11] Derrida comments in this respect that 'the death drive is also...an aggression and destruction (*Destruktion*) drive' which inter alia 'incites forgetfulness, amnesia, the annihilation of memory, as *mnēmē* or *anamnēsis*'. It is because of death as interior to life (which forgetfulness, here not limiting itself to repression (at 19), points to), that signs are needed as an aid to memory; see also Derrida [18, pp. 108 and 113].

dream of a memory without the need for signs or supplements [18, p. 112]. The phonic signifier (*logos*, speech) is therefore preferred, because it appears to stay close to living memory, whereas the graphic signifier (writing) moves one step further away; falls outside of life. Writing, Thamus points out, 'will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing' [36, p. 275a)]. Derrida [18, p. 113] however notes that 'writing', which is here invoked in a special 'sense' that will be clarified later, cannot be purely external because if it was it would not have been able to affect living memory in the way Plato sets out, that is, leading to *lēthē* (forgetfulness). In spite of this seeming ability of 'writing' to penetrate the inside, Thamus/Socrates/Plato insists, in kettle logic, that writing is purely external to living memory and therefore cannot affect it. Furthermore: when one does make use of writing, Socrates says, it is because living memory is finite and thus in need of supplementation (the kettle had holes in it when I borrowed it) [18, p. 113].

6 The *pharmakos*

Closely related to the inside/outside logic is Derrida's analysis of the *pharmakos* which, similar to the *pharmakon*, is associated with evil and death, repetition and exclusion [18, pp. 130-135]. Although this word does not appear in Plato's text, the *pharmakos* was part of Greek culture and politics at the time. Should Plato's text(s) be viewed as 'closed', with a pure inside and an external outside, it would of course be illegitimate to read it into Plato's text. If one however, especially in light of Freud's thinking, understands the 'notion' of a text as indicated above, taking account for example of forces of association within a particular language, one can, according to Derrida, within certain limits, invoke this word in analysing Plato's text. The word *pharmakos* is furthermore a synonym for *pharmakeus*, a word we do find in Plato's text, which can be translated as wizard, magician and poisoner.²⁷ It also refers to a scapegoat.²⁸ In Athens, the festival of Thargelia (existing in Plato's time) involved the expulsion of two men (sometimes said to have been a man and a woman) to purify the city. The city would feed within its walls a number of these 'outcasts', often chosen because of their 'unsightly' appearance, who would then at the appropriate time be expelled. These scapegoats would be led through the city whilst being beaten, primarily on their genitals (by a plant used to manufacture a magic potion) in order to chase out evil from their bodies. The deaths that sometimes followed upon these beatings were not the primary aim of the operation [18, p. 133]. A similar ritual was followed in the case of a calamity, such as a plague, drought, or famine overtaking the city. The *pharmakos* in other words represented the evil inside the city (harmful and therefore feared and treated with caution) that is nonetheless cared for and revered (because of its healing and purifying powers); it is both sacred and accursed [18, p. 134]. These expulsions can be said to have taken place with the primary aim of confirming or reconstituting the unity of the city by casting out the representative of an unpredictable external threat that could affect or that has affected the inside of the

²⁷ The mechanism of *displacement* in dreams, which was referred to in par 2 above is clearly of relevance here.

²⁸ See in general, Bremmer [1].

city. The invocation of the *pharmakos* is important for Derrida in various respects. As indicated above, the expulsion at stake here repeats the same procedure as is involved in the expulsion of writing, and furthermore shows a relation between this expulsion, death and sexual pain/pleasure. Secondly, there is an association with Socrates, whose death resembles that of a *pharmakos* [18, p. 135].²⁹ Plato, Derrida notes, writes from out of Socrates' death. [18, pp. 147-148]. Thirdly, seeing that Oedipus was, after the discovery of his 'crime', treated in a way similar to the *pharmakos*, the invocation of the latter makes it possible to rethink the founding nature of this 'complex', as for example set out by Freud in *Totem and taboo* [21, vol XIII]. The exclusion of the *pharmakos*, that is at stake here, 'precedes' the Oedipus complex and provides its condition of possibility [18, p. 179 n 56; 8].³⁰ Lastly, it illustrates very clearly the political stakes of what is at issue in the metaphysical inside/outside logic³¹ which is undergoing deconstruction today.³²

7 *Mythos and logos re-examined*

From the discussion above of all the myths referred to in the *Phaedrus*, an interesting connection appears between *mythos* and *logos*, in relation to their shared 'origin'. It is usually said that the early period of Greek thinking is characterised by the move from *mythos* to *logos*. This is indeed the case, but things are also somewhat more complex. *Logos*, even today, still appears to share a number of ideas or rather 'truths' with myth, specifically in relation to writing [18, p. 78]. *Logos* has at the same time attempted to discard some more dangerous mythological ideas it was uncomfortable with. We can see this clearly when we return to the fable told by Socrates of the origin of writing. Theuth is presented here as a subordinate character, a technocrat, a clever servant. He presents as we saw a *tekhne* and *pharmakon* (writing) to the king after having been granted an audience. The king speaks and rejects the gift offered. Theuth is silent thereafter. He is not permitted to respond to the King's judgment [18, pp. 91-92]. In Egyptian mythology, Thoth and Ra (Ammon) have similar characteristics as presented here in Plato's philosophical text. Plato nonetheless chooses to leave out a number of other important features, no doubt for good reason.³³ Let us first look at

²⁹ Socrates was born on the sixth day of the month Thargelion, the day the city is purified [18, p. 135]. Socrates furthermore died from drinking hemlock (*pharmakon* – at 129) after having been sentenced to death for offending the gods and misleading the youth, and as we will see in par 7 below, he is sometimes referred to in Plato's dialogues as a *pharmakeus* (magician).

³⁰ This also explains Derrida's remark that the discourse he engages in here is not strictly speaking a psychoanalytical one [18, p. 179 n. 56].

³¹ Plato incidentally does not stop with the condemnation of writing (and painting), but as Derrida [18] points out, proceeds to condemn through reliance on the same structure pederasty and prostitution which involves a wasteful scattering of sperm (at 151-152), the planting of seeds that do not bear proper fruit (at 150), democracy which is at the disposal of everyone (at 144-145), the festival which subverts the order of the city (at 142), as well as the outlaw, the pervert, and the vagrant (at 144). Writing is therefore tied to immorality, to a perverted politics, to pleasures without paternity (at 151). This natural tendency, of for example sperm to disseminate, must according to Plato be tied down, submitted to the law of the *logos*. This can happen only when the father remains present; otherwise 'nature' takes its course.

³² See in general Derrida [13; 19].

³³ Derrida, in pointing to other versions of the myth, follows the example of Lévi-Strauss [29, pp. 216-217] who convincingly advocates an approach which does not seek for the most authentic or earliest version of a myth, but takes account of all versions of a myth in reading it; see also Derrida [7, pp. 286-287].

the similarities. In these myths Ra/Ammon (the hidden, the concealed) brings the world about through speech. Thoth is also sometimes depicted as a secondary god, as the son of Ra. He is the moon, created by Ra and takes the place of Ra at night, when Ra makes his journey back through the underworld. Like Hermes in Greek mythology, he is sometimes the messenger of the gods. He does not bring language into the world, but merely the differences in language or between languages. Thoth is however not only depicted as a peaceful and secondary god in Egyptian mythology. Just like the moon in an eclipse takes the place of the sun, Thoth sometimes openly revolts against Ra to usurp the throne. As in Freud's primal horde [21, vol XIII pp. 125, 141-146], he conspires with the sons to get rid of the father as well as with the brothers to get rid of the brother who has become the new king [18, p. 94]. He also tricks Ra by adding five extra days to the calendar (the epagomenic days) so as to assist Nout, who was cursed by Ra, in bearing children. Thoth sometimes even becomes the creator. He is simultaneously the god of calculation, arithmetic, rational sciences, occult sciences, astrology and alchemy. He is also the inventor of play and of games. The god of writing is, self-evidently as Derrida notes, also the god of death [18, p. 95]. He determines the length of the lives of men and gods, determines the weight of dead souls, and is in charge of dressing the dead [18, pp. 95-96]. He can thus put an end to life as well as heal the sick and even the dead; he is the god of the *pharmakon*, which explains Thamus's reticence in accepting the gift he offers. Thoth is even more importantly sometimes depicted as the Ibis (his sacred bird which is also the shape of his face) that lays the egg from which Ra is born. Thoth, because of his role of substitution and replacement, can be said to be the god of non-identity [18, p. 96]. He does not have a proper place and also no proper name. He is the father's other and also the other of the sun and of the Good. He is both other and the same. As Derrida [18, pp. 96-97] notes, the god of writing is 'at once his father, his son, and himself' and likens him to a joker in a pack of cards which has the role of a floating signifier, a wild card that 'puts play into play'. Implicitly invoking (and subverting) first Hegel and then Heidegger, Derrida [18, p. 97] notes that Thoth -

would be the mediating movement of dialectics if he did not also mimic it, indefinitely preventing it, through this ironic doubling, from reaching some final fulfilment or eschatological reappropriation. Thoth is never present. Nowhere does he appear in person. No being-there can properly be *his own*.

Let us now enquire in more detail into the notion of the father of *logos* (Ra/Ammon) who is referred to in the above myth [18, pp. 80-89]. This will give us greater insight into what Derrida understands under the metaphysics of presence and what inspires it. In Plato's other texts, *pater* (the father) is also, in line with its possible meanings, the chief, the capital and the Good. Interesting about these father analogues is that according to Plato they cannot be spoken of directly, just as one cannot behold the sun³⁴ directly.³⁵ The Good, Plato notes in the *Republic* [36, p. 509b], 'is not being but

³⁴ Plato in the *Republic* [36, p. 508c] refers to the sun in the visible realm as an analogy to the Good in the intelligible realm. The sun, itself an offspring of the Good, in other words 'stands in the visible world in the same

superior to it in rank and power'. One can consequently not use *logos*, rational thinking, to address that from which *logos*, which in turn assembles and distinguishes all *onta* (beings), originates, that to which reason must account [18, pp. 87-88].³⁶ The difficulty with this inability to speak directly of the origin, this fear of being blinded by the origin, is that it creates the risk of deception, of bad faith. Socrates [36, p. 507a] consequently also warns his audience to be careful that in speaking about the father he does not deceive them unintentionally. Because the Good cannot be known, because it absents itself, becomes invisible, the possibility always exists that when one speaks of its offspring, its supplements (such as *logos*), one may, albeit unintentionally, deceive the audience. The likelihood of this happening increases due to the fact that, as Socrates points out in the *Phaedo* [36, pp. 99d-100a], the construction of *logos* is aimed at protecting one from the danger of directly looking at the sun. It is therefore possible that *logos* could be very different from the way in which Plato depicts it. We saw earlier that the sophists also sometimes condemned writing, not because it corrupts memory and the truth, but because of its breathless impotence to adapt itself to the particular situation as compared to speech [18, pp. 116-117]. Gorgias, regarded as one of the founders of sophism, then also presents to us an alternative view of *logos* which is not from the outset associated with truth. *Logos* here bears a very different, more indeterminate meaning, with Gorgias calling *logos* a *pharmakon* – both good and bad, a seductive, disproportionate power akin to witchcraft and magic that can be used to persuade someone of anything. According to Gorgias, this happened against her will to Helen, who is usually blamed for causing the Trojan War. *Logos* is because of what happened to Helen indicted by Gorgias because of its capacity to lie. Only after having pointed to the indeterminate nature of *logos* does Gorgias proceed to posit the order of truth as a counterpart of *logos*, in this way anticipating the Platonic gesture, that is, of deriving the truth from the *pharmakon*. Before being tamed to become the loyal son and the truth by Plato, *logos* is thus a wild ambivalent creature which can enter and bewitch the soul with 'the power to break in, to carry off, to seduce internally, to ravish invisibly' [18, p. 118].³⁷ If *logos* is viewed thus, it would of course make of Socrates (the spokesman of the father, the one who does not write) a magician and a sophist, a *pharmakeus* par excellence, something which he shares with Thoth, and as we will see now, also with *Eros* [18, pp. 94, 119, 147]. In the *Symposium* Socrates

relation to vision and visible things as that which the good itself bears in the intelligible world to intelligence and to intelligible objects' [18, p. 87].

³⁵ Freud in *Totem and taboo* [21, vol XIII, pp. 41-51] discusses the appearance of this feature in archaic communities where the chief is regarded as being taboo in the sense that he cannot be approached and viewed directly, but only through intermediaries. This is because of the mysterious and dangerous magical power that is believed to emanate from him and corresponds with the belief of a boy in the excessive powers of his father. There is nonetheless ambivalence in this relation because of a simultaneous distrust of the father, and which finds expression in the practice that the chief must be guarded, but also guarded against. Freud is of the view that remnants of this belief still persist in modern societies (at 43). See furthermore Freud [21, vol XII p. 54] on the sun as 'nothing but another sublimated symbol for the father'. Derrida [18, p. 88] seems to allude here to these texts of Freud.

³⁶ As clearly appears from these passages, the question of the origin of reason has been a topic of discussion since the dawn of philosophy. One should therefore be careful not to assume too quickly that Derrida's enquiry into reason's origin (which is to be clearly distinguished from an opposition to reason) amounts to a 'performative inconsistency' as contended for example by Solum [38, p. 484].

³⁷ Socrates was as we saw, similarly seduced out of the city, but by 'writing'.

recounts the (necessarily) contradictory terms in which Diotima (an Athenian priestess) explained to him the nature of *Eros* (claiming that he does not have knowledge of *Eros* himself). *Eros* is a demonic species as he is neither mortal nor immortal, he springs to life and dies again on the same day, he is never without resources, nor is he ever rich:

[Eros] is always poor, and he's far from being delicate and beautiful (as ordinary people think he is); instead he is tough and shrivelled and shoeless and homeless...always living with Need[He is however also] a schemer after the beautiful and the good; he is brave, impetuous and intense, an awesome hunter, always weaving snares, resourceful in his pursuit of intelligence, a lover of wisdom [a philosopher] through all his life, a genius with enchantment, potions [*pharmakeus*] and clever pleadings [sophist] [36, p. 203d-e].

As noted earlier, Socrates is in the *Symposium* as well as in *Meno*, referred to by Plato's other discussants as a magician because of his use of *logos*, in similar terms as described by Gorgias [18, pp. 119-121]. He fights one *pharmakon* by invoking another. *Eros*, Socrates, writing and even *logos* (speech) all seem to share the characteristics of the *pharmakon*, being able to enter and seduce the body and the soul. What is this other *pharmakon* that is fought against?³⁸ Derrida [18, pp. 123-124] contends, quoting from Plato's the *Laws*, that the power of witchcraft and occult medicine lies in the fear of death of the child within us. The father, the sun, and the Good, it appears, are invoked in light of the fear of death, which is like the *pharmakon* without self-identical meaning and can neither be possessed nor known. Plato and philosophy after him seek to efface this fear through turning by means of sorcery (dialectics) that which is indeterminate, that which shares the characteristics of *Eros* and the *pharmakon*, that which is without fixed identity, into the easy-to-handle metaphysical oppositions of good/evil, proper/improper, *logos*/mythos. Law has a similarly important and contributory role in this respect. As Plato points out, and Derrida reminds us, it is not by accident that the two words for law (*nomos*) and intelligence or mind (*nous*) are so similar [18, pp. 124-125]. Plato, in spite of his denigration of writing elsewhere, points out that to ensure its permanence, law must be written down. It furthermore has to be internalised by the good judge as an antidote (*alexipharmaka*) against other forms of corruptive discourse such as poetry and prose. The function of a judge as preserver of the state furthermore sometimes necessarily involves prescribing death as a cure (*iama*) for those who engage in folly, cowardice and immorality. Dialectics, law, self-knowledge and self-mastery, Derrida [18, p. 125] notes, all share the same function of exorcism against the fear and desire of the child within us. With Plato, this is effected through the notion of an immortal soul tied to a metaphysics of constant presence, the presence of the father, the sun. Plato therefore posits, for example in the *Phaedo*, the *eidōs* (the ideas of the True, the Beautiful and the Good) that is invisible, that always remains the same, uniform by itself, never tolerates any change and that can be grasped only through the reasoning

³⁸ As should already be clear, the question 'what is?' is strictly speaking inappropriate in relation to the *pharmakon* as it has no identity.

power of the mind [36, pp. 78d-79c]. The *eidōs* can in other words, like law, be repeated as the same, as compared to the particulars that constantly change, as compared to the inevitable fate of mortal beings [18, p. 126]. In the *Crito*, Socrates is then also asked to accept (his sentence of) death as well as, and in the name of, the laws of the city. The *eidōs* and the laws, the *pharmakon-logos* that need to oppose the *pharmakon* of the sophists as well as the bewitching fear of death, are also called by the names of truth, the *epistēmē*, dialectics, and philosophy [18, p. 127]). *Logos*, functioning as we saw, as an antidote, is thus ‘inscribed within the general alogical economy of the *pharmakon*’ [18, p. 127].

The origin of philosophy, what is usually said to involve the movement from *mythos* to *logos* thus entails a more complex manoeuvre. Derrida’s contention is that we have been deceived up until now by philosophy, which is ultimately a metaphysics of presence. An enquiry into the notion of the father will clarify this further. The notion of a father (of a child, a son, a daughter) is of course a construction based on rational argumentation, calculation, inference. For this, language or living discourse (*logos*) is required. The (notion of a) father thus in a strange sense ‘originates’ in *logos*. The son (*logos*) is, like Thoth, thus actually the father of the father; the father is an effect of the son [33, pp. 12-13]. As we furthermore saw above, *logos* itself is inscribed in the alogical economy of the *pharmakon*, which it seeks to hide from itself. This ties in with what happens in the *Phaedrus* when Socrates recounts the myth of the origin of writing. Derrida [18, p. 79] points out in this regard that the truth of writing is not presented by Socrates through rational, living discourse or *logos*. It is instead presented through a fable, the truth concerning which Socrates notes that it cannot be discovered in oneself by oneself as compared to the knowledge which one *can* find in oneself by oneself [18, pp. 79-80]. This truth, or rather the non-truth of writing is then told by Socrates by repeating a fable. Socrates thus repeats without knowing whether it is actually true, a myth about writing, thereby doing exactly what writing is itself accused of (that is, repeating without truth) and in this way installs the primacy of *logos*. In constituting itself, philosophy thus has to invoke the *pharmakon* of ‘writing’ to cast it out.³⁹ Philosophy can be said to involve an exorcism, a magic incantation against ‘writing’ as *pharmakon*, a counter-poison against the effects of poison, against the fear of death. In contrast to the *eidōs*, the *pharmakon* has -

no stable essence, no “proper” characteristics, it is not, in any sense (metaphysical, physical, chemical, alchemical) of the word, a *substance*. The *pharmakon* has no ideal identity; it is aneidetic.... It is ... the prior medium in which differentiation in general is produced [18, pp. 128-129].⁴⁰

The *pharmakon* of ‘writing’ is already lodged inside of philosophy and what philosophy constantly attempts to do is exorcise it. Philosophy does this by invoking

³⁹ The ‘writing’ that is invoked is as we will see in par 8 below not to be equated with writing in the usual sense and is closely associated with death.

⁴⁰ Derrida [18, p. 130] similarly describes the *pharmakon* as ‘the differance of difference’. See further *Philosophy in a time of terror* where Derrida [17, p. 124] remarks on the similarity between the autoimmunitary logic which he explores in his later texts and the *pharmakon*.

the presence of the father to cast out death. It makes death acceptable by annulling it through the idea of the immortality of the soul [18, p. 126]). It doubles or catches the *pharmakon*, erects the *eidos* to ensure itself of the presence of the father and simultaneously turns the *pharmakon* into the other of the metaphysical opposition. The latter is then presented with its two opposing sides being unaffected by each other – a pure inside with an external outside. At the same time, as we saw above, the outside affects and remains a threat to the purity and essence of the inside [18, pp. 130-131]. Philosophy thus still trades in mythology: a mythology of a pure origin, a living organism, to which its other was added only afterwards, thereby distorting the purity of the inside. But as we saw now, this purity is bought through subterfuge, through myth, through magical incantation. This incantation, which can be detected only in its margins, is repeated in all philosophical texts since Plato. Only in this way can what should be on the outside be kept out, and the purity of the inside, the self-identity of that which is, its being, be restored.

8 ‘Writing’ as pre-origin

We still need to enquire in detail into the kettle logic Plato uses in referring to writing in order to understand something more of the ‘other sense’ of writing which is at stake in *Plato’s pharmacy*. We already saw above that in Derrida’s reading, kettle logic (here the exclusion of writing and its simultaneous invocation) happens for fundamental reasons [18, p. 157]. In Plato’s texts this kettle logic finds expression inter alia as follows: ‘Writing’ is valued ‘positively’ in the implicit references to ‘origin’: the seduction effected by a written speech, drawing Socrates out of the city to engage in discourse (*logos*) as well as in the Delphic inscription to know the truth which Socrates takes to heart. At a certain point in the *Phaedrus*, writing however becomes the illegitimate, bastard brother of *logos*. *Logos*, the legitimate brother, is at this point nonetheless remarkably introduced as in itself a form of writing, more precisely, as an inscription of truth in the soul [18, pp. 148-149].⁴¹ In order to justify Plato’s own writing, Socrates furthermore notes in the *Phaedrus* [36, p. 226d] that it is acceptable to write as an amusement to oneself, as a reminder to oneself for when one reaches a forgetful age as well as for those who wish to follow in one’s footsteps on the path of truth [18, pp. 153-154]. Plato moreover invokes the letters of the alphabet (that is, writing) when he tries to explain the differences between good and bad in music and poetry. He does the same when in the *Timaeus* he goes beyond the usual conceptual opposition between the sensible and the intelligible and defines the origin of the world in terms of a trace, a receptacle, an originary inscription, a nurse, a mother [18, pp. 158-159].⁴² Plato in the *Philebus* furthermore invokes Theuth in a more ‘positive’ sense, as the inventor of grammar as a science of differences.

These invocations of writing point, Derrida [18, p. 149] suggests, in addition to writing in the usual sense, also to writing in a different ‘sense’, even though all Plato may have wanted to do was to distinguish between writing and speech. This is a

⁴¹ See further Derrida [7, p 227] where he reads this as a reference to the ‘psychical trace’; see further below.

⁴² Plato incidentally invokes dreams in the same context to further explain this idea [18, p. 159]; see also at 168.

reference to what Derrida calls general writing or the arche-trace. The way in which ordinary writing and general writing relate to each other, can be explained by again referring to ‘psychic’ or dream writing [7, pp. 209-210].⁴³ In ‘Freud and the Scene of Writing’ Derrida [7, p. 207]⁴⁴ describes ‘psychic’ or dream writing with reference to Freud as ‘[n]ot a writing which simply transcribes, a stony echo of muted words, but a lithography before words: metaphonetic, non-linguistic, alogical’.⁴⁵ Dream writing is in other words not transcribed or translated from an already existing or past present unconscious text, but is originary in nature [7, pp. 210-213]. At this point we furthermore need to recall our earlier discussion of the text of dreams being woven around a point which cannot be untied, or what Derrida refers to in ‘Freud and the scene of writing’ as a trace left behind which has never been perceived or lived consciously [7, p. 214]. In *Différance* the trace is similarly, shortly after a discussion of Freud’s death instinct, which as Derrida points out involves an expenditure without reserve, said to be ‘of something that can never present itself; it is itself a trace that can never be presented, that is, can never appear and manifest itself as such in its phenomenon’ [5, pp. 150, 154]. The arche-trace, which effaces itself in its appearance [5, pp. 154-156], is in other words left by that which Derrida in *The post card* [8, pp. 397-399] in his reading of Freud’s *Beyond the pleasure principle* [21, vol XVIII pp. 1-64] refers to as the desire for unlimited pleasure, a desire in other words for death (a kind of painful pleasure similar to the *pharmakon*).

As we saw in the preceding discussion, and as *Plato’s pharmacy* illustrates, this desire as well as the process involved in dream writing finds expression in texts in general. In ‘Freud and the scene of writing’, just after analysing the process of ‘psychic writing’, Derrida [7, p. 213] describes the process through which language and meaning is produced as follows:

Force produces meaning (and space) through the power of “repetition” alone, which inhabits it originarily as its death. This power, that is, this lack of power, which opens and limits the labor of force, institutes translatability, makes possible what we call “language”.

Language, not only in the form of writing, but also in the form of speech (both making use of signs which can be repeated) must in other words be understood as similar to ‘psychic’ or dream writing. With reference to the passage quoted above, language involves a ‘translation’ of the arche-trace or of general writing which strictly speaking cannot be translated, as the arche-trace effaces itself in its appearance and is therefore nowhere present. This ‘secondariness’ does not however affect the originary nature of the ‘translation’ [7, p. 212; 6, pp. 44-73]. We saw how this ‘translation’ takes

⁴³ Derrida [7, pp. 219-220] points out in this regard that Freud came to realise to an increasing extent that the process of dream-work can be better expressed by writing with its relations to space, time and difference, than through speech, and through hieroglyphic writing perhaps best of all.

⁴⁴ In this text, Derrida [7, pp. 196-231] incidentally makes reference a number of times to the *Phaedrus* (at 221-222, 227).

⁴⁵ The term ‘psychic’ must be qualified as the ‘writing’ which is at stake here actually precedes the distinction between the physical and the psychic.

place in the *Phaedrus* by way of all the mechanisms which are similar to those which usually operate in dream-work. These mechanisms, we now see, are set in motion by a certain ‘desire’ as well as by the movement of *différance*, which in itself refers to this ‘desire’. In *Plato’s pharmacy* Derrida hints at this ‘desire’ with his analysis of the treatment which ‘writing’ receives from Plato, as well as in the analysis of Eros, Theuth, Socrates, seduction, death, pain and pleasure in the *Phaedrus*. Writing here represents death as well as *jouissance*, that is, extreme pleasure or sexual orgasm, which of course shares the features or rather lack of identity of Eros, Thoth and Socrates.⁴⁶ Death can consequently no longer be viewed as it usually is in metaphysics as in opposition to life, that is, as life’s other. Life instead amounts to *an economy of death* [8, p. 359].⁴⁷

Through the ‘notions’ of absolute pleasure and the trace, the kettle logic which Plato and others employ, can now be understood, specifically through the ‘notions’ of ‘general writing’ and the ‘arche-trace’. As we see at the start of the *Phaedrus* with Socrates being seduced out of the city walls, it is a written text which provokes ultimate desire, erotic madness, absolute pleasure.⁴⁸ This ultimate pleasure, which is given expression to in ‘general writing’ or the arche-trace, is positioned on the ‘inside’ and is appealed to by Plato in certain instances (albeit not intentionally) because of the inability of the idea of self-presence to give a full account of origin. That which is associated with non-truth, here specifically writing, myth (Boreas and Orithyia, the cicadas, the origin of writing) and mere repetition without knowledge (Diotima’s account of the madness of Eros) therefore need to be invoked to give an account of the origin of metaphysics with its dialectic and hierarchical oppositions.⁴⁹ The positioning of ‘writing’ on the ‘inside’, is at times implicitly acknowledged by Plato, for example with reference to the finite nature of memory and the threat which writing poses, thereby referring to the force of forgetting that is constantly at work on the ‘inside’.⁵⁰ At stake here is no longer an ‘origin’ in the metaphysical sense, which as we saw, is always tied to purity and self-presence, but rather a pre- or non-origin.

9 A ‘politics’ beyond metaphysical logic

Philosophical discourse has, for the reasons indicated, been constructed in terms of a living being with an inside and an outside. This Platonic system has informed and constituted legal discourse in the West with its historical exclusion and condemnation of others. *Plato’s pharmacy* shows that what is ultimately feared in effecting these exclusions is death, resulting in a turn towards that which provides security, that is, a

⁴⁶ Derrida [7, pp. 229, 231; 6, p. 88] derives this relation between writing and sexuality inter alia from Freud [21, vol XX, pp. 89-90] and Melanie Klein’s *The role of the school in the libidinal development of the Child* [27, pp. 66, 71].

⁴⁷ See also Derrida [18, p. 97; 6, p. 69].

⁴⁸ See also Derrida [6, p. 312].

⁴⁹ Referring here again to the mechanism at stake in dreams, we can say that fiction in the form of myth as a rule lends itself better to the ‘representability’ of the unknown, of death. Derrida’s reading of writers such as Maurice Blanchot is of relevance here. See furthermore Lévi-Strauss [31, pp. 45, 54] on the novel as the successor of myth in the Western world.

⁵⁰ See above.

privileging of the home, the authentic, the true, reason, the proper, and/or the subject. In analysing the forces at stake which produce these effects, *Plato's pharmacy* amounts in a certain sense to a 'psychoanalysis' of Western philosophical thinking.⁵¹ This is so in a 'certain sense' only, because the conceptuality of psychoanalysis is itself caught within metaphysics [7, p. 197]. The metaphor of writing which haunts Western discourse nevertheless ties in closely with some aspects of Freud's thinking.⁵² Writing is of course not condemned or degraded by all philosophers, but as neurotic patients with their unsuccessful repressions revealed to Freud the unconscious forces at work in everyone, the unsuccessful 'repression' of writing by Plato (as well as Rousseau and Saussure) points for Derrida to that which conditions all philosophy. This is because of what writing represents: death, which is both feared and desired, as Freud contended. It is in other words Freud's thinking, amongst others, which enables Derrida to enquire into the conditions of possibility of the Platonic system and to establish its inscription within *différance*. The latter at the same time makes the Platonic system with its hierarchical oppositions following its inside/outside logic, strictly speaking impossible, or in simpler terms, points to its unfounded nature. This allows us to contend that the *subject* who in legal discourse posits reason and law cannot provide the system with a foundation or an origin as it professes to do, but is itself an effect of *différance*. *Plato's pharmacy* - and the same applies to all of Derrida's texts - thus goes far beyond providing legal scholars with an illustration of the multiple meanings underlying texts, or with tools for overturning hierarchical oppositions in law. These readings of *Plato's pharmacy* essentially keep the metaphysical concepts of subjectivity and truth in place. *Différance* instead shows that law, like philosophy, has installed itself through a dissimulation of its pre-origins. The origin of self-present subjectivity upon which modern law erects itself so as to construct democracy as a return to the self, reason as calculation in terms of a restricted economy, and the sovereignty of the nation-state, serve as an anti-dote to the fear and desire of death, to the a-logical economy of the *pharmakon*. In his later texts on hospitality, which tie in closely with *Plato's pharmacy*, Derrida shows that this a-logical economy calls for absolute hospitality, for the subject, in both its individual and collective sense, to become a hostage [15, pp. 55-57]. Because of the withdrawal of the idea, or the 'parricide' referred to above, hospitality is no longer a concept in the strict sense (a signified or idea, tied to a signifier), but a concept which autodeconstructs [16, p. 362], similar to the *pharmakon*. Hospitality, like law, thus has no essence, and need to be thought of in terms of its inscription within *différance*, as a tension between unconditional and conditional hospitality. Perhaps only in this way, metaphysics and its manifestations in the legal context such as subjectivity, sovereignty, reason, calculation, legality and legitimacy, can be exceeded in a mad a-temporal moment of suspension.

⁵¹ See similarly Derrida [7, pp. 196-197] on *Of grammatology* [6]. One of the very few secondary texts which show an appreciation of this, as well as of the importance of Freud's thinking in the development of the 'notion' of general writing is Spivak's Preface to *Of grammatology* [39, pp. xxxviii-xlvi].

⁵² See further Derrida [6, pp. 159-161].

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