Chapter 5

Writing the Subject

Derrida Asks Plato to Take a Letter

Is it not first of all a significant fact that the truly new aspect that the dialectic takes on in the Phaedrus, with the preponderant importance of the method of division, in spite of certain anticipations in the Republic, is precisely what the Sophist and the Statesman develop, and what the Philebus insists on with so much force, concerning its profundity? (Robin 1985: xii)

What is called “deconstruction” is undeniably obedient to an analytic demand, which is simultaneously critical and analytical. It is always a question of the undoing, unsedimenting, decomposing, deconstituting of sediments, artefacts, presuppositions, institutions. And the insistence on disaggregation, disjunction or dissociation, on being “out of joint” as Hamlet would have said, on the irreducibility of difference is too overwhelming to need to be insisted upon. Insofar as this analytic dissociation should in deconstruction, at least as I understand and practice it, also be a critico-genealogical return to first principles, then we appear to have [in it] the two moments of any analysis [. . .]: the archeological or anagogic moment of the return to a prior state [l’ancien] as the arché-original; and the philo-lytic moment of dissociative—one could almost say dis-social—disaggregation. (Derrida 1996a: 41; emphasis in original)

The Platonic corpus, particularly dialogues such as the Phaedrus, the Symposium, the Lysis, and the Philebus that interrogate the relationship between desire and truth, love and transcendence, and pleasure and knowledge, are a central concern for all the major figures in poststructuralism. These texts, along with those of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud, and Saussure, constitute if not a grid of intelligibility, then at least a finite set of philosophemes, out of which the interventions that we know today as postmodern theory emerged. Lacan’s readings of the Antigone and the Symposium helped inaugurate a dialogic space that not only made poststructuralism possible but also anticipated the later investigations of antiquity that characterized the

1. As the context makes clear, “psycho-analytic.”
works of Derrida and Foucault, as well as Gilles Deleuze, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous.

In this light, it is unsurprising that the *Phaedrus* was a crucial text for Derrida, who was not only a frequent auditor of Lacan’s seminars but also a student of Foucault’s at the École Normale Supérieure (Schneiderman 1983: 28). Derrida’s and Lacan’s readings of Plato are, to be sure, hardly identical. With Derrida, the lens through which Plato is read is no longer in the first instance psychoanalysis as a clinical practice, but philosophy as the formal possibility of thought, as the inauguration of the *logos*. And while these two disciplines’ respective ventures are, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, inextricably intertwined, neither can ever be simply reduced to the other (Plotnitsky 2000: 275). Derrida’s vocabulary and set of concerns are, as we shall see, far more conceptual than experiential. Unlike Lacan, his task is not to train the next generation of analysts, but to analyze the possible formations of the psyche and reason per se as they are instantiated in the textual tradition that constitutes western philosophy and that is formally inaugurated by those transmitted under the name of Plato. How are these terms inscribed? To whom are they addressed? And what are the assumptions they entail? These are Derrida’s central questions.

Thus, in Derrida’s 1972 essay on the *Phaedrus*, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” the ambiguous figure of the *pharmakos/pharmakon* functions as the instantiation of the problematic status of writing, intentionality, and meaning that Derrida sees as structuring the subsequent western metaphysical tradition. Plato’s aversion to writing is here interpreted as symptomatic of a more general tendency in philosophy to banish the external and the material from the essence of meaning and value, to posit a realm of pure presence, an absolute origin (Derrida 1972a: 182–83).

This Platonic attempt at metaphysical closure, at the creation of a finite system of fixed meanings beyond the contingencies of the merely material letter, has its parallel in the system of preexisting interpretations and conventionally recognized goods that Lacan views as the antithesis of both the ethics of psychoanalysis and a truly psychoanalytic ethics. Both the potted analytic interpretation and the attempt to establish a closed logocentric universe are, in the last analysis, designed more to limit the realm of possible meanings than to create new possibilities of self-creation and understanding.² The fully present subject

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2. Although, as we shall see, the question of to what extent this metaphysical closure is an actual product of the Platonic texts, and to what extent it is the product of the abstraction known as Platonism remains an open question.
is one without a history, a pure cogito that is always already given. Derrida and Lacan turn to Plato as a way of calling this subject into question by reexamining the inaugural gestures of western reason, and thereby making possible new forms of experience, new constructions of the subject, and new modes of enjoyment. The deconstruction of the closure of western metaphysics aims, then, at nothing less than a radical desedimentation and archeology of thought itself and hence of the logics by which we define ourselves, our relations with others, and our forms of collective engagement (Derrida 1994: 127–28; 1996a: 41–42). The axis defined by Plato and Freud (particularly in Lacan’s reading of them both) is central to this project.

Nonetheless, despite these clear connections, on an initial examination, there is no obvious relation between Derrida’s engagement with the *Phaedrus* and his readings of Freud and Lacan. Indeed, Lacan’s name is never used in “La pharmacie de Platon.” Yet, if the relation between Derrida’s reading of Plato and his conversation with psychoanalysis is less than fully explicit in “La pharmacie,” such is not the case with Derrida’s next extended engagement with the figures of Plato and Socrates in *La carte postale: de Socrate à Freud et au-delà*. The latter contains both Derrida’s most extended response to Lacan, “Le facteur de la vérité,” and an investigation of the debt owed by Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (*Au-delà du principe de plaisir*) to Plato’s *Philebus* in “Spéculer—Sur «Freud».” This latter essay, as Derrida acknowledges, is both central to his own preoccupations and directly engages Lacan (Derrida 1980: 402–3; 1996a: 38–39; 1996b: 59).

By the same token, it would be a mistake to see “La pharmacie” as less than fully implicated in the problematics that would bring Derrida into dialogue and dispute with one of his most powerful interlocutors. Indeed, this is explicitly acknowledged in the epistolary novel that makes up the first part of *La carte postale*. Here, a semi-fictional Derrida imagines a book he will write entitled *Legs de Freud* (*Legacy of
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Freud,7 which, suspiciously like La carte postale, will feature Socrates and Plato on its cover. The content of that book, and hence the scene of this legacy—which concerns both Plato’s bequest to Freud and Freud’s “bequest” to Plato—is, as “Derrida” notes, merely a repetition of that already played out in another fashion some twelve years before in “La pharmacie de Platon” (Derrida 1980: 59). The comment may be rather cryptic, but for Derrida, as we shall see, the problem of writing, of material inscription, is inseparable from both the constitution of the unconscious in the Freudian sense and the institution of philosophy in the Platonic sense. Freud and Plato, and particularly the Plato of the Phaedrus and the Philebus, cannot, he argues, be thought separately from one another, and each in turn is central to the Derridean conception of power.

1. Nabel Gazing: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Deconstruction

First of all, there is the inexhaustible insistence of the text [The Interpretation of Dreams] on the texture of the interwoven threads, on the inseparable skein of knots: the Geflecht, the interlacing, a word whose warp and weft Heidegger followed through some of thought’s decisive places; the netzartige Verstrickung [the tightly woven entanglement], the Knäuel [knot], the Nabel [navel], etc. This density of the rhetoric of thread and knot interests us because what it calls for, and defies, is precisely analysis as a methodical operation of untying and as a technique of disaggregation. it is a question of knowing how to pull the strings, to pull on the strings, following the art of the weaver, whom Plato’s Statesman casts as the royal paradigm: for analytic division (diairesis), for dialectic, for the royal science (e basilikè tekhnè, 311C) of politics. (Derrida 1996a: 28)

The symbiotic or parasitic relation between Plato and Freud is first explicitly noted by Derrida in “Freud et la scène de l’écriture,” a lecture given in 1966 and published in Tel Quel that same year, before being republished in 1967’s L’écriture et la différence (1967a: 293–340), the year before “La pharmacie de Platon” (1972a) first appeared in Tel Quel (1968). In this lecture, Derrida examines Freud’s image of the “magic writing pad”8 as an illustration of the way in which “memory

7. But also an explicitly acknowledged pun on Les Deux Freud, which in the context could refer to Freud’s own self-division, Freud and Lacan, or Socrates and Plato.
8. The “magic writing pad” is a common children’s toy that consists of a piece of cardboard spread with a thin layer of dark wax, two semi-transparent covering sheets one
traces” are inscribed in the unconscious. He draws an explicit connection between Freud’s image of the wax tablet of memory and the *Phaedrus*’s contrast between philosophy’s attempt to write on the soul and the more superficial and externalized inscriptions of sophistic rhetoric. The passage repays quotation, since it contains *in nuce* all the fundamental elements that will be explored in this chapter: writing, memory, the *psychê* or soul, the trace, the limit, and its beyond:

A pure representation, a machine, never functions on its own. Such, at least, is the limit that Freud recognizes in the analogy of the magic pad. . . . [T]he gesture is very Platonic. Only the writing of the soul, the *Phaedrus* said, only the psychic trace has the power to reproduce and represent itself spontaneously. [ . . . ]

“The analogy of such an apparatus must encounter at some point a limit. The magic pad is not able to ‘reproduce’ from its interior writing that has been effaced; it would be a truly magic pad if it were able to do this as our memory does.” The multiplicity of the layered surfaces of the apparatus is left to itself, a dead complexity without depth. Life as depth only pertains to the wax of psychic memory. Freud, like Plato, continues to oppose writing as *hupomnêsis* [external reminder] to writing *ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ*, itself woven from traces, empirical memories of a truth present outside of time. (Derrida 1967a: 336)

Thus, two years before its initial publication, the basic theme of “La pharmacie de Platon” makes its first appearance in the context of Derrida’s reading of Freud. Freud, like Plato, he argues, sees writing as something external and alien to true memory, a kind of auxiliary technique, an imitation that constantly threatens to be mistaken for the original (Derrida 1967a: 328).

True memory, however, as Plato and Freud both define it, is in fact never the pure recall of past perceptions, but the product of a forming of the soul from the disorganized heterogeny of those perceptions (*Theaetetus* 185c–e), and hence of difference.⁹ It is a process of editing,

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9. i.e., a synthetic memory is by definition different from the set of perceptions to which it makes reference. There is no recall, no repetition that is not fundamentally different from the original. We leave aside for the moment the Kantian question of whether perception is not itself always already mediated, and hence synthetic.
inscription, and reformation that produces meaningful recollection from the flux of brute experience. Memory, thus, already contains the principle of its own necessary self-alienation,\textsuperscript{10} and it is this fact that makes possible wrong opinion (\textit{doxa pseudê}), and hence philosophy as its opposite (Gadamer 1991: 167–68): for if the soul, as both Plato and Freud claim, can be compared to a block of wax receiving impressions (\textit{Theaetetus} 191c–e), that wax will be written over numerous times. Moreover, it will receive impressions from near and far, thus multiplying the possibilities of error and the need for therapeutic intervention (\textit{Theaetetus} 193b–d; \textit{Philebus} 38c–d; Oudemans and Lardinois 1987: 207). At the same time, the wax that some people possess will be more malleable and less subject to corruption than that possessed by others (\textit{Theaetetus} 194c–d). Moreover, like Freud, Plato too recognizes that mere passive impressions cannot account for the spontaneous moment of recollection and synthesis that constitutes memory and consciousness, as well as the possibility of misprision that that moment necessarily brings with it. To accommodate this possibility, the model of the wax tablet, which Plato puts forward in the \textit{Theaetetus}, is later in that same dialogue replaced by the more dynamic model of an imaginary aviary housing the \textit{rarae aves} of knowledge that we capture over the course of our life and later attempt to retrieve, with all the attendant possibilities of reaching for a “pigeon” but grasping a “ring dove” (\textit{Theaetetus} 197c–199b). As Plato makes clear, knowledge and memory are active processes in which the traces of past impressions must be transformed through the labor of the psyche into a writing of the soul and the creation of \textit{logoi}—both “arguments” and “accounts”—that then require testing in the crucible of the dialectic, i.e., that demand analysis (\textit{Philebus} 38e–39a).\textsuperscript{11}

10. As Derrida notes in the following very dense opening observation from the lecture on the magic writing pad, the difference between the pleasure and the reality principles, which is fundamental to \textit{Beyond the Pleasure Principle}, and hence to his reading of that text in \textit{La carte postale}, represents the institution of the possibility of difference in life and hence inaugurates the economy of death (1967a: 295):

\textit{Différance, the pre-opening of the ontico-ontological difference [ . . . ] and all the differences that furrow Freudian conceptuality, such as they are able to be organized—and it's only an example—around the difference between the “pleasure” and the “reality” principles or derive from them. The difference between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, for example, is not only nor primarily a distinction, an exteriority, but the originary possibility, in life, of a detour, of \textit{différance} (\textit{Aufschub}) and of the economy of death.}

For the definition of \textit{différance}, see note 16.

11. Derrida observes in part 2 of \textit{La carte postale}, “Spéculer—Sur «Freud>,” that the repetition compulsion, which forms Freud’s object of investigation in \textit{Beyond the Pleasure Principle},
We are not simply passively written by our experience, then, but actively writing it. Yet, it is precisely this moment of internal spontaneity, which distinguishes genuine memory from its externalized, scriptural imitation, that always eludes representation, comprehension, and intelligibility, and thus transforms itself into a realm of absolute externality.\textsuperscript{12} In addition, that moment when the absolute inside becomes the opaque, becomes that which eludes the snares of analytical reason, like the \textit{Nabel} that Freud posits at the center of the dream (1965: 143n.2, 564), is also the moment when any concept of the fully present subject is itself \textit{subjected} to the dictates of the intimate Other. Thus, every moment of writing is also one of being written. It too is inscribed, dictated. This doubly contradictory movement is the moment of undecidability—of Platonic, Derridian, and psychoanalytic \textit{aporia}—from which the possibility of error, deviation, and wrong opinion, but also of \textit{philosophia} (the love/desire for wisdom), is sprung (Derrida 1994: 21; Gasché 2002). Thus, even a Platonic writing on the soul is always the inscription of a trace, a moment of otherness, rather than of simple self-presence:

The subject of writing is a system of relations between layers: of the magic writing pad, of the psyche, of society, of the world. Inside this scene, the punctual simplicity of the classical\textsuperscript{13} subject cannot be found. To describe this structure, it does not suffice to recall that one always writes for someone. [ . . .] One searches the “public,” in vain for the first reader, that is to say the first author of the work. And “the sociology of literature” completely misses the conflict and the ruses—whose stakes are the origin of the work—between the first author who reads and the first reader who dictates. (Derrida 1967a: 335)

This last image of a first reader who dictates, of a primal receptor who precedes the author who reads, is not only a wonderful description of the dynamic of the intimate Other—of the origin of meaning as always different, deferred, alienated from itself—but it is also precisely that

\textit{Principle}, is the effect of memory traces that can only be enacted not remembered, and hence seem to come from nowhere, unbidden like the Socratic \textit{daimón}. Compare Lacan on the structures of unconscious memory in the “Seminar on the Purloined Letter” (1966b).

\textsuperscript{12} Spontaneity is a word freighted with philosophical consequence and history. Derrida prefers the concept of the “decision,” which he contends can never be accounted for by any theory of the subject, and which by definition is radically heterogeneous to all factual or theoretical determination (1994: 86–87, 247).

\textsuperscript{13} I.e., Cartesian.
duality captured in the reproduction of the frontispiece of a thirteenth-century fortune-telling book from the Bodleian Library that graces the cover of La carte postale. There, Plato dictates to a clearly labeled Socrates who writes, thus reversing the classical opposition between these two figures who stand at the origin of western philosophy.

What, however, does this mean? Is Derrida merely being perverse and promoting a bit of late medieval fantasy to the status of an interpretive concept? Or is there not a sense in which Socrates, at least the Socrates of the Platonic tradition, has always been taking dictation? For, in a real sense, Socrates is only who he is because he in fact figures forth Plato’s image of him. He thus takes dictation from his disciple, even as he writes, inscribes, and produces that disciple. This is not only true because the Socrates we know in western philosophy is by and large the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues and hence the literary creation of Plato (Hadot 1995b: 70; Zuckert 1996: 26; Nehamas 1998: 7), but it is also true on a more profound level. To the extent that Plato could ever be the disciple of Socrates he must have already in some sense been dictating who Socrates was; he must have been creating (and supplanting) a Socrates who was nonetheless already there, already forming Plato in his own self-relation (Blondell 2002: 110–11).

Example: if one morning Socrates had spoken for Plato, if to Plato, his addressee, he had addressed a message, it is also that p. would have had to be able to receive, expect, desire, in brief, called for in a certain manner what Socrates will have said to him; and therefore what S., under dictation, seems to invent—writes, in fact. p. sent himself a post card (legend + image), he sent it back to himself from himself, or even he sent himself Socrates. (Derrida 1980: 35)

This first reversal of the relation between Plato and Socrates, master and disciple, writer and reader, is in turn also the image of Freud’s relation to Plato as explored in Derrida’s reading of the Philebus. Here not only is Freud’s debt to his great predecessor plumbed, but we also come to the recognition that Freud’s debt to Plato cannot but be read in terms of Freud’s own argumentative and discursive structures. We come to recognize that Freud too is a reader who dictates, and hence that Plato owes a debt to Freud (Derrida 1980: 120). Each discourse supplements the other and, therefore, simultaneously figures its own excessive character and the other’s radical incompleteness. For Derrida, then, there is

14. Compare the very different image found in Xenophon’s Socratic writings.
no point of pure origin from which meaning, memory, and consciousness flow in a unidirectional, univalent, or totalizable movement. There is no classical subject, but rather an endless series of contingent constructions: momentary gatherings and dispersions of meaning across time and between texts.

The Freudian unconscious on Derrida’s reading is a text woven from “pure” traces. It unites the immanence of meaning (re-ferring) with the externality of force in an unstable, undecidable whole, like a stylus applied to the wax tablet of the Platonic soul. Psychic life begins precisely with these traces, with re-production, with the remembrance of things past. It is thus always already a deferred origin. The trace necessarily precedes the presence to which it refers. Without memory and its necessary repression, there can be no unconscious, no subjective depth, and no consciousness as the presence of self to self (Freud 1965: 575–607). There is only a pure and meaningless, undifferentiated immediacy. Thus past and present, auditor and receptor, reader and writer, inside and outside are constantly switching positions: each one necessarily positing, making room for, bearing the trace of, supplementing, and subverting the other (Derrida 1967a: 302, 314; 1972b: 45–46; 1980: 373; Kittler 1999: 33; Zuckert 1996: 213–14).

At the center of every psychic text, including that which marks the royal road to the unconscious, the dream, there is what Freud calls the “navel,” the place where the tissue of meanings, the interweaving of trace upon trace, becomes so dense as to be unanalyzable. And yet it is this navel, the mark of psychic birth, which, as the principle of irreducible difference, articulates the weave of the text, its spacing and coherence, and therefore makes meaning, re-ferring, and hence analysis and interpretation, possible (Derrida 1996a: 23–24; 1972b: 38–39). Deconstruction, like psychoanalysis, is a form of archeology or genealogy (two terms that loom large in Foucault’s historico-analytical lexicon). It institutes an interminable analysis that seeks not to destroy, but precisely to touch the indestructible, the unanalyzable, from which analysis and interpretation necessarily begin and with which they invariably end (Derrida 1980: 249; 1996a: 48).

Thus, as Derrida notes, the basic methodology of Freudian analysis, like that of deconstruction, is the heir to two Greek terms that form the etymological and conceptual underpinnings of all modern concepts of the analytic per se: analuein, a return from the multiplicity of phenomena to that which is indivisible; and lysis, a simultaneous dissolution

15. See chapter 1.
of all aggregates into their component unities and subunities (1996a: 33). This double movement is, of course, exactly what Plato refers to in both the *Phaedrus* and the *Philebus* as the method of collection (*suna-gógeh*) and division (*diairesis*). Unlike either its Freudian or Foucauldian analogues, however, deconstructive analysis according to Derrida presents a radicalization of this philosophical dialectic by not only calling into question the possibility of an original indivisibility, but also by subjecting “the desire or phantasm” of such an originary moment to this same double demand:

It is a question in deconstruction of not only a counter-archeology, but also a counter-genealogy: the “genealogy” of the genealogic principle is no longer a matter of a simple genealogy. . . . What is the deconstruction of presence except the experience of this hyperanalytical dissociation of the simple from the originary? The trace, writing, the mark is at the heart of the present, at the origin of presence, a movement of return to the other, to some other, a reference as difference\(^{16}\) that would resemble an *a priori* synthesis if it was of the order of judgment and the thetic.\(^{17}\) But in a prethetic and pre-judgmental order, the trace is in fact an irreducible link (*Verbindung*). (Derrida 1996a: 41–42; emphasis in original)

Deconstruction is conceived of as an analytic genealogy and archeology that has been radicalized to the prethetic moment beyond all recognizable simples, that is precisely to the Platonic level of the unlimited or indeterminate (*apeiron*), which the *Philebus* posits.

Thus, for Derrida, the reading of Plato is not only a necessary moment in any archeology of western metaphysics, but also there can be no reading of Freud, Lacan, and Foucault that does not necessarily entail a response to Plato, and no response to Freud, Lacan, and Foucault that is not always already a reading of Plato (Derrida 1967a: 294; 1992: 266–67).

16. *Différance* is Derrida’s term for the simultaneous movement of difference and deferral that makes signification, and hence consciousness as articulated experience, possible. To re-fer is to point to that which is other (the movements of referring to and of being referred to are always, at least analytically, separable) and to that which is not immediately present (even the statement, “I think,” is always separated from the act to which it points by a necessary, if infinitesimal, interval).

17. The thetic is the moment of positing in which the undifferentiated continuum of experience is broken as consciousness and its object simultaneously come into being. It is thus analogous to the imposition of the limit (*peras*) on the unlimited (*apeiron*) described in the *Philebus*, which will be examined in more detail later in this chapter.
In this context, it is no surprise that Derrida in “La pharmacie de Platon” follows his reference text for the *Phaedrus*, Leon Robin’s Budé with its monumental two hundred-page introduction, and sees an intimate connection between the *Phaedrus* and the *Philebus* (Derrida 1972a: 74n.3, 80).\(^{18}\) In both of these dialogues, he observes, there is not only a focus on the relation between the dialectic of collection and division in relation to the cognate problems of Eros/desire and pleasure, but also each of them prominently features the Egyptian god Theuth (who appears nowhere else in the Platonic corpus). In both, he appears as the inventor of the alphabet. He is the divine figure who first imposed a limit (*peras*) or mark upon the undifferentiated continuum (*apeiron*) of sound and thereby made it possible to analyze language into letters that combine first into syllables and from there produce the signifiers that constitute the ground of consciousness, the signifiers that trace their way in the wax tablet of memory and so write us in the moment of our writing (Derrida 1972b: 187–88, citing *Philebus* 11d, 16c–17b, 18b–d).\(^{19}\)

Thus from the essay on the magic writing pad (1967a), to “La pharmacie de Platon” (1972a), to *La carte postale* (1980), and to such late works as *Khora* (1993b) and the three essays on Freud (1996a), Lacan (1996b), and Foucault (1997) collected in *Résistances de la psychanalyse*, the problematic of the Platonic trace, mark, and limit has been integral to Derrida’s conception of the possibility of thought in relation to both history and the unconscious, and hence to the ongoing dialogue he maintained with such contemporaries as Lacan and Foucault. The remainder of this chapter will consist of three movements. The first will examine Derrida’s articulation of the relation of Plato’s conception of writing in the *Phaedrus* to the history of western metaphysics. The second will explore the *Philebus* in relation to Derrida’s reading of Freud and Lacan. The last section will consider how these two movements relate to Derrida’s ongoing debate with Michel Foucault, which began with a 1963 lecture delivered by Derrida on Foucault’s *Histoire de la Folie*, and which specifically engaged the question of whether the Socratic *logos* knew any opposite.

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\(^{18}\) Derrida (1972a: 100 n.19, 191n.76) also displays a clear knowledge of the works of Festugière (1950) and Goldschmidt (2003) respectively.

\(^{19}\) In addition, as Peponi has demonstrated (2002: 143–44, 156–58), there is an elaborate system of erotic, medical, and lyric intertexts linking the *Phaedrus* and the *Philebus*. 
2. *Pharmakon/Pharmakos*:

“Take two and call me in the morning.”

For Plato, writing is a part of the wider sphere of imitation, because it is only a copy. It is a copy of the word of the soul which is silent in the case of thought and vocal when the voice is used as a medium. In this case, as in all others, imitation tends to transgress its limits by presenting its copy as a complete reality. Thus Plato often goes to great lengths not to discredit writing completely—which would be a paradoxical attitude on the part of someone who makes such an important and remarkable use of it—but to remind us of its ambiguity. (Brisson 1998: 37)

Derrida’s analysis of the *pharmakon* avoids valorizing one “side” of this term against the other; writing—the *pharmakon* of Plato’s *Phaedrus*—is not just a “poison” as such, and for that reason cannot simply be affirmed in the face of the phonocentric and logocentric “truth.” Instead, it is the stability or the coherence of the very borderline between writing as poison and writing as cure that is seen as possible only through the intervention of the dead, external supplementarity of writing. (Stoekl 1992: 201)

The Derridean reading of the Platonic text is a multifaceted enterprise. On one level, Derrida sees in Platonism, and more specifically in the *Phaedrus*’s attempt to expel writing and imitation from, or at least strictly contain it within, the realm demarcated by the *logos*—i.e., by a finite, totalizable set of meanings, essences, and *eidi*—the chief instantiation of logocentrism. This in turn is the main dividing line between many contemporary interpreters of the *Phaedrus* and Derrida himself: for, where, on this view, Derrida sees in the *Phaedrus* a necessarily failed attempt to create a closed system, many critics see a self-conscious acknowledgment of the necessity of that failure (Shankman 1994b: 8; Mara 1997: 246–51). In place of an unfulfilled monological striving for metaphysical closure, they see the dialogue’s multileveled deployment of Socratic irony as a recognition of the ultimate openness of the dialectical process. Thus, while the basic logic of Derrida’s reading of the dialogue as exemplifying the impossibility of metaphysical closure is hardly ever called into question, the real bone of contention is over whether Plato, in the words of David Halperin, can be viewed “as a kind of deconstructionist *avant la lettre*” (1994: 62; see also Ferrari 1987: 207, 220).

In point of fact, however, the issue is somewhat miscast since, as

20. At least those who are committed to a hermeneutic or textual reading of Plato, as opposed to those who would take a more strictly analytic approach that would seek to reduce the text to a finite set of argumentative propositions.
Berger and others have pointed out, Derrida’s interest in making this claim is less in Plato the writer than in Platonism as a system (Berger 1994: 76, 97). His focus is on the role of the Platonic texts in the establishment of systematic western philosophy (Derrida 1972a: 182–83; Ferrari 1987: 214); the argument is that, if we are to grasp the subsequent history of occidental thought, we must first understand how the logos is constituted at philosophy’s beginnings. Hence, whether or not the historical Plato was aware of the contradictions of reason in ways that his successors were not is from one perspective irrelevant. Indeed, as we shall see, it is precisely Foucault’s failure to recognize the determining influence of the tradition of post-Socratic philosophy on the understanding of the nature of reason that constitutes one of Derrida’s major critiques of *Histoire de la folie*.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to cast Derrida as a vulgar reader of Plato who naively assimilates the texts of the Platonic dialogues to the history of their reception and hence to the creation and consolidation of Platonism as a guiding force in the history of metaphysics. His position is far more nuanced. Indeed, by his own logic, the recognition of Platonic textuality forbids that it be reduced to a transcendental signified, to a regulative system of meaning that writes but is never written. Rather the deconstruction of Platonism occurs precisely by understanding it as a textual system, by foregrounding the Platonic text as text (Alliez 1992: 226; Derrida 1972a: 71). The self-subverting nature of the pharmakon (drug/poison) does not escape Plato on Derrida’s reading—which is not to say Plato completely masters it either—but rather Socratic irony consists precisely in the self-conscious deployment of the pharmakon’s double-sided nature:

Socratic irony precipitates out one pharmakon by bringing it into contact with another. Or rather it reverses the pharmacon’s powers and turns its surface—thus taking effect, being recorded and dated, in the act of classing the pharmacon, through the fact that the pharmacon properly consists in a certain inconsistency, a certain impropriety, this nonidentity-with-itself always allowing it to be turned against itself. (Derrida 1981: 119; 1972a: 136; emphasis in original)

The deconstruction of Plato and Platonism is neither an assault against nor an exclusive valorization of the Platonic text. Rather it is a strategic operation that takes place on the undecidable border between the Platonic project’s self-conscious textuality and its equally self-conscious
desire for closure, certainty, and transcendental guarantees (Derrida 1996a: 45).

Platonism as a system of metaphysical postulates and as a discourse of authority grounded upon them is neither an alien graft onto the open and free play of the Platonic text, nor is it its necessary and logical extension. Rather Platonism, according to Derrida, is something that haunts the Platonic/Socratic project: a somewhat sinister body, which is neither wholly foreign nor completely at home in the text of the dialogues. Like the “nocturnal council” of the Laws, it seeks to establish philosophy as a form of law whose function is to dominate other modes of discourse present in the text (Derrida 1993b: 83; Alliez 1992: 221). It posits a privileged experience of absolute presence, of access to a higher intelligible world that is both the double of the sensible and its ontological superior (Vlastos 1991: 78; Festugière 1950: 210). For Derrida, then, philosophy’s first chapter is called Plato (Wolff 1992: 235), and Platonism itself is a force that infinitely continues, repeats, and disseminates itself across both the Platonic text and the history of philosophy, even in the moment of its transgression and negation (Loraux 1996: 169).

Yet, as the dialectical formulation of the last sentence indicates, Platonism as a metaphysical system is at most only half the story. It is in fact an abstraction from the Platonic texts, a logocentric reduction that seeks to deny their “written” quality and therefore the considerable energy deployed by them against any monolithic domain of sense separate from the sensibility, from the force of the material letter (Derrida 1993b: 81–82; Wolff 1992: 241–42; Berger 1994: 97). It is no accident that Plato never accepted the treatise as a mode of philosophical thought (Diès 1941: xvi). The love of wisdom was never reducible to a straightforward exposition of his thought as a set of abstract propositions on the world. Instead, Plato experimented relentlessly with a variety of narrative frames and forms of dialectical exchange, from the crisp question and answer of the Ion, to the alternating speeches of the Symposium, to the synthetic structure of a recited written dialogue within a framing oral dialogue of the Theaetetus, to the mixture of all these modes of exposition and argumentation found in the Phaedrus itself (Hunter 2004: 22–23).

There is, in fact, no stable place of truth within the Platonic text from which clear and unproblematic propositions can be deduced: each text is instead a place of dialectical tension, contradiction, negotiation, and exchange. As Nicole Loraux observes:

In Plato everything is played out between khôra and khôris. Between
khôra, neither sensible nor intelligible and, hence, the principle of
undecidability, and khôris, that which separates and isolates. It
happens—and it’s no mere hazard—that khôris is found in etymo-
logical dictionaries sub verbo khôra, which already suggests that
the game will be endless but ought not authorize any reader to read khôra in Plato as “that which separates,” but always as “that which receives”—and the tension between dekhomai and khôris, which develops for example in the Phaedrus between the soul that sees the beautiful object, receives it, and opens out, and the isolated soul, subject to pain, can be considered as constitutive of the Platonic concept of place. (1996: 169–70)

It is the great merit of Derrida’s reading of the Phaedrus and of the figure of the pharmakon as the remedy/poison of writing, rhetoric, and the exteriorized material letter, to follow out these tensions in minute detail. Derrida deftly limns the dialectic of Platonism and textuality that constitute the Platonic corpus as we have received it and as it continues to structure the basic concepts and tropes of our entire philosophical and theoretical tradition.

Derrida begins his reading of the Phaedrus in an eminently philo-
logical fashion. He notes that the dialogue has been the topic of much debate concerning both its date and quality. The final disquisition on the origin and history of writing, he observes, has often been felt to be extraneous to the main argument of the dialogue and has hence been taken as a sign of either juvenile ineptitude or creeping senescence. Thus the traditional understanding of both the quality and the date of the dialogue are shown to be dependent on the relationship of the final characterization of writing to the body of the work as a whole. Derrida’s thesis is that this final section forms a crucial part of the dialogue and that writing and its metaphorical representation in the figure of the pharmakon represent the key philosophemes that simultaneously hold the dialogue together and divide it against itself (Derrida 1972a: 74–75; Halperin 1994: 66–67; Clarke 1995: 3).

The word pharmakon is first used to describe writing in the Phaed-
rus in reference to the copy of Lysias’ speech that Phaedrus uses to lure Socrates beyond the walls of Athens (230d8; Derrida 1972a: 78–79). Pharmakon is also the term used by Theuth at the dialogue’s end to

21. These two terms are comparable to the Philebus’s master terms, peras and apeiron, “the limit” and “the unlimited.”

22. For more on the history of this debate and the issues involved, see Robin (1964: 53–55) and Santas (1988: 58–59, 64).
describe to Ammon his invention of writing (274e7) and again by Ammon in his reply (275a7). Derrida notes that Plato deliberately plays upon the inherent ambiguity of the word: for while Theuth presents writing as a remedy or beneficial drug, one meaning of pharmakon, Ammon says it is in fact just the opposite (tou’nantion, 275a2) and thus deploys the equally common meaning of poison or harmful drug. This play on the different senses of the word, as Derrida observes, is almost always lost in translation, where a choice must be made either to translate the same word two different ways, in which case Plato’s “anagrammatic” jest is lost, or to accept only one of the two possible meanings, in which case the point of the repetition is lost (1972a: 109–11).

The use of the term pharmakon (poison/remedy/charm) to describe both Lysias’ speech, which is an example of dishonorable writing, and the invention of the technology of inscription itself is, Derrida notes, not an accident. It shows that the same basic suspicion not only envelopes both writing and medicine, but also that the fundamental ambiguity denoted by the equation of writing and the pharmakon is one of the most basic philosophemes structuring the dialogue (Derrida 1972a: 77, 81). Indeed, Plato’s punning use of the word pharmakon is an illustration of the fundamental problem he is addressing in the Phaedrus: the divorce between the external inscription of the signifying substance in writing, rhetoric, and seduction and the presumed internality of meaning and love in relation to the logos itself. The final discussion, then, on the origin, history, and value of writing is not merely an extraneous excrescence, or a mark of the dialogue’s imperfection, but rather its fitting climax. In this context, Derrida observes that the question of what exactly is the nature of logographia or “speech-writing”—a term whose combination of logos with graphê neatly sums up the issues

23. As Nightingale has shown (1995: 135, 150–53, 163–66), Ammon/Thamus’ speech is itself an intertextual rewriting or parody of a speech or speeches by Palamedes in Sophocles’ and Euripides’ tragedies of the same name (frgs. 479 Radt and 587 Nauck, respectively). Thus the “anagrammatic” jest Derrida perceives is raised to the second power, and Ammon’s charge that writing is not a “remedy” (pharmakon) but a “poison” (pharmakon) for memory because it relies on eternalized and alien discourses, such as the speech of Lysias that Phaedrus carries with him, is itself shown to be predicated on an alien discourse that Plato has incorporated into his own. Thus Szlezák (1999: 29–30, 41) is correct when he argues that the Phaedrus’s critique of writing applies to Plato himself, but clearly oversimplifies when he and others posit a body of esoteric doctrine that would be purged of all such ambiguity, of externality, of writing as the presence of the material letter. Rather the Phaedrus itself recognizes the impossibility of such a discourse even as it imagines its desirability and, from a certain perspective, its necessity.

evoked by the dialogue as a whole—is posed at the exact mathematical center of the work in terms of its total number of lines (257c–e; Derrida 1972a: 76).

These formal considerations are not the only indication of the importance of the figure of the pharmakon to the institution of the Platonic logos. Derrida remarks that in Socrates’ jesting, rationalist accounting of the myth of the abduction of Oreithyia by Boreas, Oreithyia is said to be playing outside the city walls with another young girl named Pharmakeia, or “poisoner,” at the time she is swept into the abyss (229c10; Derrida 1972a: 78). Thus, Derrida notes, the motifs of the pharmakon, externality, and death, as well as the opposition between a traditional muthos and a rationalizing logos, are in play from the moment Socrates is enticed by the lure of Lysias’ speech to come out of Athens into the Attic countryside. Socrates’ humorous account of the myth, which he himself promptly rejects, is reminiscent of the probabilistic manner of argument typical of the sophists. And they, like Lysias, are subsequently stigmatized as dealing only with the externalities or appearances of knowledge, in the same way that writing is criticized by Ammon as a mere simulacrum of the logos (Ferrari 1987: 10, 234n.12; Halperin 1994: 52–53). Yet Socrates, as he proves in the great second speech, is himself an inveterate mythmaker, and frequently uses myth throughout the dialogues in places where the dialectic itself cannot produce certainty or at least where its mortal practitioners would be unable to follow it: i.e., those dealing with the nature of metaphysical reality and with the verities of the world beyond death (Brisson 1998: 129–30; Goldschmidt 2003: 104–6). As such, muthos designates the realm of discourse that has both yet to reach the scientific regularity of the logos and simultaneously transcends it. It is at once infra- and supralogical, like writing itself (Brisson 1998: 73–74, 103–4; Robin 1985: xcvi). Plato seeks not to do away with muthos but to break the monopoly of mythic discourse on the public consciousness. For this reason he strives to introduce a rigorous distinction between muthos and logos, writing and speech, even as he simultaneously demonstrates that in the last analysis each presupposes and depends upon the other (Derrida 1972a: 98; Brisson 1998: 87–88; Zuckert 1996: 218).

25. For a deconstruction of (and homage to) Vernant’s reading of this opposition in Greek culture, see Khôra, Derrida’s reading of the Timaeus (1993b).
26. “[J]ust this, I believe, is Plato’s point in ‘doing philosophy’ in this dialogue through two distinct and strikingly juxtaposed verbal paths of myth and dialectic. He allows neither path to reach a satisfactory goal; rather one leads only to the other” (Ferrari 1987: 34).
27. On the sophists, like writing and the pharmakon, as being both inside and outside the charmed circle of Platonic philosophy, see Derrida (1972a: 123).
The nymph Pharmakeia, however, is not the only potential poisoner on the Platonic scene of writing. Pharmakeios, the masculine form of Pharmakeia, is applied to Eros in the Symposium (203d8). Elsewhere in the same dialogue, the verb pharmattein is used by Agathon of Socrates’ attempt to charm, bewitch, or seduce him with the promise of the audience’s expectations concerning the former’s speech in praise of love (194a5; Derrida 1972a: 134–35). Writing, rhetoric, and the pharmakon in the Platonic corpus are clearly portrayed as simultaneously seductive and dangerous, attractive and disruptive. In the Republic, the word is used by Socrates of lies (pseudê) or fictions (muthologiai) that he qualifies as both potentially dangerous to the polis and useful (khrêsimos) when dealing with enemies or educating the young (382a–d, 387a–d; Berger 1994: 83; D. Allen 2000: 267). But, while Plato, according to Derrida, strives in the Phaedrus to create a clear opposition between writing and the Socratic dialectic of truth, the very ambivalence of the pharmakon and Socrates’ status as mythologizing pharmakeios show this opposition in constant danger of collapsing. Socrates’ speech both is and is not of the order of the pharmakon (Derrida 1972a: 105, 142–43; Oudemans and Lardinois 1987: 88; D. Allen 2000: 85), just as Plato both is opposed to writing and the author of beautifully crafted works.

What writing and the pharmakon have in common is that both belong to the realm of externality. They are supplements to the logos and the body respectively and as such represent their contamination by forces that are properly outside them (Derrida 1972a: 112–17; Stoekl 1992: 201). Like the pharmakos or scapegoat, they are the foreign agents that must be expelled if a realm of internal purity is to be established in both the person and the polis (Derrida 1972a: 149; Stoekl 1992: 204). Writing does not, Ammon responds to Theuth, actually improve memory but rather degrades it by substituting a mere facsimile of knowledge for its vital presence. In place of mnêmê, active recollection, we have hupomnêsis, the dead letter of the passive reminder (274e–275b3). In place of the living logos, we have the mindless repetition of muthos (Derrida 1972a: 84, 98, 122, 126). Thus, as in the case of the pharmakon, what on one level appears to be a remedy, on another proves to be a poison.

28. On the homology of these two terms with the opposition between rhetoric and dialectic and their subsequent deconstruction in the dialogue, see Halperin (1994: 72n.18). On memory (especially of past lives) as an ascetic, purifying practice in the doctrines of Empedocles and the Pythagoreans, and a reading of the Phaedrus’s condemnation of writing as a threat to these practices, see Vernant (1965: 1.94–115).
Yet the externality of writing is ultimately indissociable from knowledge and memory per se (Stoekl 1992: 202). This is perhaps nowhere clearer than at the end of the Phaedrus when Socrates concludes that what dialectic demands is not the dead letter of logographoi [speech writers] like Lysias but a kind of writing on the soul, a direct interaction between, in the words of Robin, “master and student” (276a6–11, 278a3; Robin 1985: lxiv, lxvii; Halperin 1994: 51, 61–62). “After he complains at some length of the inferiority of the written word to the best kind of speech, he goes on to speak of the good discourse as ‘another sort of writing’ in which the dialectical speaker directly inscribes his auditor’s soul [or psyche]” (Berger 1994: 76). The metaphor here is telling because, even at the level of the most profound internality, the presence of the logos in the soul can only be conceived of as a form of otherness or externality that has penetrated it (Derrida 1972a: 105). It alienates the soul from itself at the moment of its constitution. If that were not the case there would be no need for philosophy and dialectic, since the logos would be fully present to each and all of us, rather than a palimpsest that philosophy needs to uncover. A supplement is always required to realize the logos. It is for this reason, Derrida suggests, that épistémè or knowledge of the order of the logos is itself described as a pharmakon in both the Critias and the Charmides (106b5–6, 155d–157a; Derrida 1972a: 142–43). The status of the logographoi, whether writing on paper or the soul, is thus shown to be the central problem in the inauguration of western reason, and the subject it posits.

3. Beyond the Pleasure Principle: The Apeiron

Part of the self-understanding of a life that is directed only at enjoyment is to set no limits and, for just that reason, to have to accept no end of pain, as well, which results in its necessarily failing in its own intention and not being able to be. So “measurelessness” is not, as Philebus thinks, the character of pleasure which positively enables it to be good but (on the contrary) a negative characteristic of it: that which makes it impossible for pleasure, on its own, to fulfill itself and to be an unvarying perspective from which to understand existence. (Gadamer 1991: 145; emphasis in original)

The three terms—two principles plus or minus différance—are in fact one, the division of the same, since the second principle (that of reality) and différance are only “effects” of the modifiable pleasure principle.

But by whatever end you take this structure in one-two-three terms, it’s
death. In the end, and this death is not opposable, it is not different from, in the sense of being opposed to, the two principles and their différance. It’s inscribed, although not inscribable, in the process of this structure [. . . .]

If death is not opposable, it is already life, death. (Derrida 1980: 304–5; emphasis in original)

In *La carte postale*, Derrida argues that Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the central text in Lacan’s reading of the *Antigone*, owes an unacknowledged debt to Plato’s *Philebus*. Indeed, any reader of the *Philebus*’s account of physical pleasure as the restoration of harmony in the psyche after a period of lack or disruption (31c–32b), and of Freud’s description of the pleasure principle’s being founded on the restoration of equilibrium after a period of heightened excitation cannot help but notice the resemblance (1961a: 1–5). More specifically, Derrida contends that Plato establishes the centrality of the concept of limit to the calculus of pleasure, and so also makes possible the envisioning, or the positing, of a beyond of that limit (Derrida 1980: 425). In the same book, Derrida also contends that Lacan’s reading of Poe’s “Purloined Letter” founders on the psychoanalyst’s logocentric claim that the “letter” is both material and ultimately indivisible, that it is possessed of an absolute limit of divisibility (Lacan 1966b: 23–24; Benstock 1991: 98–99). Moreover, he observes, Lacan owes to this his ability to claim that “the letter always arrives at its destination,” that there is always the possibility of reconstructing its itinerary, if only as an absence and after the fact. In this section, I will claim that the *Philebus*’s complex meditation on the relations between pleasure and limit as well as between the good life and the dialectical method of collection and division is central to understanding Derrida’s arguments. I shall also offer the subsidiary thesis that the *Philebus* has the potential to mediate between Derrida and Lacan through its own overdetermined vision of the relation between the competing claims of the dialectic and of practical ethical life, that is, between the philosopher as therapist and the therapist as philosopher.

*La carte postale*, in fact, stages a genealogical inquiry into the history of western thought as a series of passing-overs, transferences, letters, and estrangements to itself. The formation of the subject and the questions of origins, address, and identity are what’s at stake in this inquiry. In this text, Derrida interrogates both Freud’s debt to Platonc

29. This is especially the case if one is relying on Festugière’s account of the *Philebus* (1950: 297–98), which reads as a virtual paraphrase of Freud and with which Derrida was familiar (1972a: 100n.19).
reason, and Plato’s debt to Freud, in terms of both writing and a set of relays and mediations that he ironically dubs the “postal system” (1980: 190–91). A crucial passage for understanding this Platonic reading of psychoanalysis and its relation to “postality” is the following:

Any history of postal tekhnè tends to join destination with identity. For a subject to arrive is to arrive at a self. Now a mark, whatever it may be, is coded to make an impression, be it only a scent. As soon as it is divided, it is the equivalent of several instances in any one instance: thus no more unique destination. That’s why, on account of this divisibility (the origin of reason, the mad origin of reason and of the principle of identity), the tekhnè does not arrive at language—at that which I sing for you. (Derrida 1980: 207; emphasis in original)

The “techniques” of the postal system join destination with identity in a system of transmission and mediation. The postal system also constitutes the series of relays and points de repères whereby the potentially infinite dissemination of meaning at any given point is gathered up into an ostensibly coherent system of communication, of literal tradition, traditio, or handing from one point to the next. Postality is not a transcendent system but the very possibility of the transference of meaning from one relay point to the next. It is “a fold” or “crease” in signification, an endless series of substitutions that “re- ply to” or “fold back against” one another in a complex and endless network of transmissions, “sendings across,” metaphors, transferences (Derrida 1980: 206). “The postal system is no longer a simple metaphor, it is also, as the site of all transfers and correspondences, the ‘proper’ possibility of all possible rhetorics” (1980: 73). It is from this perspective that Derrida argues for a double debt: of Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle to Plato’s Philebus and of the Philebus to its temporally subsequent, but logically prior, Freudian reading.

The claim is at least a paradox. Traditional western reason assumes a univocal, irreversible system of transmission in which the subject is produced in a stable order of knowledge with a discernible origin. Socrates teaches Plato. Plato teaches Aristotle. Jesus teaches the disciples. The disciples and the church fathers found the church. And the western logos is established and handed down to us: a divine mixture of Hellenic wisdom and Hebraic faith, in which Freud, Matthew Arnold, and Charles Maurras all play their parts. Platonism’s function has been to anchor that system of knowledge. Derrida’s interrogation of Plato
in relation to Freud and Lacan, however, serves to show not simply the debt of Freud to Plato, but the way in which debt per se is the condition of possibility for any investment, the way in which each step forward must recreate its own past in a movement of double conditioning that is always already decentered. Thus any given relay in the system of transmission of meaning that constitutes western reason must be radically historicized not only in terms of its debt to the past, but also in terms of the way that that past itself becomes an object of transmission and hence potentially of appropriation and misappropriation as a condition of entering that system, of becoming a project.

Moreover, every mark, every letter, to the extent that it is capable of being addressed to a specific identity, must be able to be reproduced, and hence to be divided from its originary unity: a fact that of necessity undermines that letter’s relation to a unique destination. This divisibility is the origin of reason as demonstrated in the Philebus’s exposition of the “divine method” of collection and division as the foundation of philosophical dialectic. It is also the origin of writing itself. As Plato points out, it was only by analyzing words into their component sounds, their ultimately meaningless phonemes, that the Egyptian god Theuth was able to develop the art of writing (Philebus 17a–b, 18b–d).

Division is also the origin of madness: for there must be a limit to divisibility if reason is to produce intelligible language, if the letter is to arrive at its destination. Yet that limit cannot be stated as a principle separate from the process of division per se, outside of the categories of thought that division itself makes possible. Sense, then, depends on that very institution of difference or literal nonsense, and hence potential plurivocity, that Lacan labeled the insistence of the letter and origin of the Freudian unconscious (1966d). The mark of division that makes transmission, mediation, meaning, and transference possible is also that which necessarily derails both it and subjective identity. This is what Derrida means when he speaks of Freud’s (and hence Lacan’s) unacknowledged debt to Plato (Derrida 1980: 36, 70 180–81; Zuckert 1996: 233). 30

The addressee and addressee of communication in Derrida’s postal system represent positions in an infinitely disseminated web of significations, whose very constitution under the images of law and limit we see first elaborated in the Platonic corpus (1980: 60). The Philebus, inasmuch as it founds true knowledge on the dialectic of collection and

30. Derrida, far from contesting Lacan’s basic reading of Beyond the Pleasure Principle, acknowledges it as “le plus intéressant et le plus spectaculaire” (1980: 402–3).
division (14a–20a), and inasmuch as the burden of Socrates’ argument is to demonstrate the superiority of knowledge to pleasure, must also posit a world beyond limit, beyond all division, and hence beyond all meaning, mixture, and exchange. The unlimited, *apeiron*, is that which does not contain any quantity, that which can never be reduced to a unity and hence to an entity that might be measured against another (24a–d; Gadamer 1991: 131). The limit, *peras*, then, is the marker of division. It makes the delimitation of discrete logical or material entities possible and thus opens the world to exchange and classification, and hence to knowledge and culture (Lacan 1973: 169). Logical categories and rational entities are predicated on the concept of limit (25a; Boussoleas 1952: 171; Festugière 1950: 230). The conjunction of the limit and the unlimited, of continuity and its determinate negation, make possible, as Plato notes, rhythm, music, mathematics, and signification. This is the realm of the mixed (26a; Frede 1992: 428; Gadamer 1991: 138).

The pleasure principle in Freud, inasmuch as it represents the pursuit of the object of desire as delimited by the reality principle, which is itself a reflex of the pleasure principle and not its beyond, always operates within the realm of the mixed, of entities defined by the limit (Freud 1961a: 4; Lacan 1986: 29; Zuckert 1996: 233). It is for this reason that the Law, substitution, and transference are possible. The division of the subject instituted by its submission to the realm of law and language are the founding moments of desire, as recognized by both Aristophanes’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium* and by Lacan himself. This division is also the object of Derrida’s own inquiry (1980: 36, 60; Ragland-Sullivan 1986: 270; Julien 1990: 151–52, 176, 231):

La «détermination» c’est la limite—et d’abord du plaisir (du *Philèbe* au *Au-delà . . .*), ce qui lie l’énergie; elle identifie, elle décide, elle définit, elle marque les contours, et puis c’est la destination (*Bestimmung*, si on veut s’appeler comme ça), et la loi et la guêpe.

31. He ultimately shows knowledge to be a superior kind of pleasure, or more properly part of a mixed entity in which knowledge brings pleasure, since a life of knowledge without pleasure would offer no attraction (20b–23b; Frede 1992: 427–28). See also 66a8 in Diès’s text along with the accompanying note. There he prints the marginal gloss in B, τίνα ἀθέσον found in the vulgate. His explication of the passage and defense of the reading in the introduction to the Budé edition both anticipates Derrida’s (and Plato’s) deconstruction of the opposition between pleasure and knowledge and provides a plausible rationale for this rather speculative piece of textual reconstruction (1941: lxxxix).

32. See Frede’s helpful introduction and notes (1993).

33. A punning allusion to Aristophanes’ *Wasps*, a satire on the law, and to the “gap.”

34. In the context of the *La carte postale* uppercase S normally refers to Socrates
quand elle est pas folle, qu’elle veut savoir de qui de quoi: et moi donc qu’est-ce que je deviens dans cette affaire, faudrait encore que ça me fasse un peu retour, que la lettre revienne à sa destination, etc.

“Determination” is the limit—and first of all of pleasure (from the Philebus to Beyond [the Pleasure Principle]), it is what binds energy: it identifies, it defines, it marks the contours, and finally it’s the destination (Bestimmung [regulation, purpose, destiny, setting, classification], if you want to call it that), it’s both the law and the gap/Wasp (Sp), when it’s not mad, that wants to know of whom and of what: and for me then, whatever I become in this affair, it will still be necessary that there be some small return for me, that the letter comes back to its destination, etc. (1980: 65)

Deconstruction, as Derrida defines his own project, seeks to touch upon the same space beyond the limit, beyond the pleasure principle, that Freud limns in his Phileban investigation of the pleasure and reality principles as relative goods. It does not seek to destroy this Platonic-Freudian opposition between desire/pleasure and knowledge/reality, but to move beyond it to the indestructible, which, as Lacan’s reading of Antigone and Freud show, is indistinguishable from death (Derrida 1980: 249, 304–4, 425–27). It is also precisely this space beyond the oppositions of change and rest, which embraces both being and becoming, that the Eleatic stranger in the Sophist denotes as the ultimate object of philosophical pursuit: “that which is” (249c–250c).

Freud’s position as a psychoanalyst and scientist, rather than as a philosopher, is not, however, to embrace the beyond or death, but

and lowercase p to Plato. Printing them together treats them as a unit in reference to the law, its sting, and the “gap” or limit it imposes. Of course, Sp is also an English editorial abbreviation for spelling, thus drawing attention to the punning nature of the word guêpe.

There is, however, a deeper Freudian sense to all this. As Micaela Janan points out to me (per litteras), the letters Sp also refer to the Wolfman’s Dream. “The Wolfman . . . tells Freud of having dreamed of a wasp (Wespe) that was missing its wings—and thus was ‘truncated’ into, he joked, an ‘espe.’ Then the Wolfman remarked in a sudden insight, ‘That’s me—S.P.’” His real name was, of course, Sergei Pankeiev, and thus ‘S.P.’ were his initials. The relevance of this incident is that it’s often cited as part of the ‘linguistic’ concentration in Freud’s early work that drew Lacan’s attention: here’s a dream that signifies, not by metaphor . . . but directly with the letter—or rather, the letters, ‘S.P.’ And I think this must have been on Derrida’s mind, because he wrote the preface to Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok’s The Wolfman’s Magic Word.” See Freud (1955: 94).

35. In “La pharmacie,” Derrida suggested that this aporetic space beyond all oppositions can be identified with the khôra in the Timaeus (1972a: 184–86).
rather the realm of the mixed entity defined by the limit. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he struggles constantly to articulate even the most radical of his metapsychological insights within the realm of the Law. For, on the one hand, the Law, as he acknowledges in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1961b),\(^{36}\) is the ultimate cause of our unhappiness; but on the other, it also marks the ground on which the pleasure principle finds its erection. The institution of language and culture constitutes the fundamental delimitation of the subject and the signifier that make transference, treatment, and psychoanalysis possible (Lacan 1966c: 412–18; Kristeva 1987: 21–38; Derrida 1980: 360–61, 409). It is this fundamentally aporetic structure of being both within and beyond the Law that accounts for what Derrida terms Freud’s “athétique” style in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, his constant hesitation before the positing of a potential transgression of the very limits that enable his discourse (1980: 425). As the “Derrida” of *La carte postale*’s opening epistolary novel observes:

Je relis *Au-delà* . . . d’une main tout y est merveilleusement *hermétique*, c’est-à-dire postal et *traînant*—souterrainement ferroviaire, mais aussi boiteux, trainant la patte: il ne nous dit RIEN, ne fait pas un pas qu’il ne retire au pas suivant.

I am rereading *Beyond [the Pleasure Principle]*: on the one hand there is something marvelously *hermetic*, that is to say postal and *meandering*—like a subterranean railway, but also limping, dragging its paw: he says to us NOTHING, doesn’t make one step that he doesn’t take back with the next. (1980: 153; emphasis in original)

Freud, then, even as he searches to articulate its beyond, continues to work within the closure of western metaphysics and the bounded entities it discerns. The logocentric world of western reason that subrends the pleasure and the reality principles constitute a kind of subway on which one can only get transfers from one line to the next but never truly get off. The signifier as it moves from post to post in its infinite path of circulation and exchange traces the path of transferences, substitutions, and displacements that produce the talking cure.

Psychoanalysis consists of a series of relays through which meaning passes. It operates within the field of divisibility and the unit, not in the unmarked realm of the formless and limitless, which, like Plato, it must

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Chapter 5

posit. Through these transfers of meaning, through the delimited places of desire, psychoanalysis continues to function within the postal system of western metaphysics. The repetition of the law and the limit insures that the possibility of meaning always remains, that the letter always arrives at its destination (1980: 50, 73, 190–91).

It is, in fact, Lacan’s decision to continue to operate within this system of meanings that constitutes the burden of Derrida’s indictment of him in the now famous essay also from La carte postale, “Le facteur de la vérité,” or “The postman of truth” (1980: 455). As Derrida observes, the notion that the letter always arrives at its destination, is predicated on its final indivisibility, on there being a limit to delimitation (Lacan 1966b: 23–24). There is always in the last analysis a moment when the address can be reconstructed, even if only after the fact, even if that address is the site of a lack, the constitutive moment of the speaking subject’s desire (1980: 464–65, 469).

Moreover, it is precisely the limits of the dialectic, of the philosophic practice of collection and division, in relation to pleasure and to the ethical question of the good life—that is to say, in relation to the desire of the analyst—that is the subject of the Philebus. The Philebus begins with Socrates advancing the thesis that knowledge is superior to pleasure. Philebus has been Socrates’ eristic opponent but, at the beginning of the dialogue, Protarchus is asked to take over for him (11c). This much-debated move paves the way for the shift from the strict binary opposition between these two perspectives asserted at the dialogue’s beginning to the more pragmatic, mixed position adopted at its end.

Socrates begins his questioning of Protarchus by asking whether the latter will grant that there are different kinds of pleasure or does he contend that pleasure is an undifferentiated unity (12d–13a). When Socrates subsequently concedes that knowledge too is a multifaceted thing, Protarchus becomes willing to admit the same of pleasure. This concession immediately leads into a discussion of the relation of the many to the one and to the introduction of the “divine method” of collection and division. This method, which was first identified as such in the Phaedrus and is explicitly pursued in the Sophist and the Statesman (Diès 1941: xix; Hampton 1990: 26; Brisson 1998: 112–13), represents nothing more than a formalization of the logical procedures already deployed in the dialectic of the Phaedo and the Republic (Gadamer 1991: 80–81). There follows a lengthy exposition (16c–17e) that points to the conclusion that in order to determine the unity of any given form
or abstract universal, such as knowledge or pleasure, one would first need to follow the procedure of division till one reached the smallest possible constituent unit of that universal and from there proceed back through its many genera and species in quest of its universal form: a unity which embraces all possible instances and thus is in itself without any necessary spatio-temporal limit.

Socrates: A gift of the gods among men, as it seems to me, it was snatched from the gods by some Prometheus along with the famous fire. And the men of old, who were greater than we are and lived nearer to the gods, handed down this pronouncement, that those things said to be are of the one and the many and have the limit and the unlimited as constituents of their original nature. And so since things have been arranged in this manner it is necessary that we always put ourselves to searching for one form for each thing at all times—for we will find it being present. And then after one, we should look for two, if that is how things are, but if not, then for three or another number, and the same for each one of these back again in the same manner until we reach the one in principle, not so that someone may see that there is only the one, the many, and the unlimited, but so that he may also know their quantity: lest someone apply the form of the unlimited to the many before he should know their full number as well as the unlimited and the one, then at that point he can bid adieu to each one of all these things, releasing them into the unlimited. (16c5–e2)

37. There is evidence that such exercises in logical division were a regular part of the Academy’s curriculum (Goldschmidt 2003: 20, 95).

38. It is generally agreed that this Prometheus was Pythagoras. The terminology of the peras (the limit) and the apeiron (the unlimited) was a common part of Pythagorean vocabulary and describes the creation of the unit in relation to primal chaos (Gadamer 1991: 129–30). See the fragments 424–26 of Philolaus in Kirk, Raven, and Schofield (1983). As Gosling has shown (1975: xvi, 83, 89, 165–71, 203–4), the basic concept of the limit and the unlimited comes from the problem of incommensurables in Pythagorean harmonics. If we think of a string on a lyre as a continuum of possible sounds, we can then limit or subdivide it into articulated notes. These notes create a scale that can be expressed as set of ratios between whole numbers. But beneath this set of articulated limits or divisions the unlimited continuum of possible sounds continues to exist. Between each set of articulated points on the scale there is necessarily an infinity of other points that cannot be expressed in terms of ratios permitted by the scale. These points could only be represented as irrationals. It is precisely the problem of the irrationals, of those points in space or time that cannot be reduced to a system of articulated limits that requires the positing of the unlimited, of a continuum of existence that persists beneath the ontic. Eudoxus, a member of the Academy and a mathematician interested in the problem of irrationals, argued that pleasure was the highest good, the position advocated first by Philebus and then Protarchus in our dialogue. See also Aristotle, Metaphysics 1, 987b–988a.
All things, then, are of the one, the totality of what is, its unity as a one. And each thing, to the extent that it is that thing, participates in that one (Hampton 1990: 87–88).

Pleasure exists, but it is also many. There are a variety of pleasures: eating, evacuating, sex, listening to Puccini, solving mathematical problems, and pure philosophical contemplation. Yet while these all represent pleasure, it would be a vulgar oversimplification to reduce them to an undifferentiated one. This is what Protarchus must concede before a rational discussion can take place concerning which pleasures are to be preferred and how we should rank them in relation to the various forms of knowledge to create a good life. If we simply say that pleasure is one and many, or even unlimited, then we fall into a facile contradiction (Gadamer 1991: 98–99). This, as Socrates notes, is the error of the clever young men trained by the sophists who mistake the fact that contradictory predicates can be applied to the same entity for an actual, substantial contradiction.

This observation is also the reason for Socrates’ emphasis on the necessity of intermediate quantification. We cannot simply pass directly from the infinity of the concrete to the singularity of the form (Festugière 1950: 165). For each phenomenon, we must first seek its unity, its status as a one, and only then proceed to discover how that one relates to others that can then be synthesized in relation to a more encompassing totality, and from there proceed toward the unity of the One (Diès 1966: xxiv–xxv; Hampton 1990: 31, 34; Gadamer 1991: 120). As Hampton observes, “In the Philebus, the emphasis is on the interrelations between the forms, conceived as wholes composed of parts which constitute a single unified system” (1990: 73). These complex wholes are both many and one without contradiction. Thus in the Theaetetus we find the following exchange:

Socrates: Well now, if the complex is both many elements and a whole, with them as its parts, then both complexes and elements are equally capable of being known and expressed, since all the parts turned out to be the same thing as the whole.

Theaetetus: Yes, surely.

Socrates: But if, on the other hand, the complex is single and without parts, then complexes and elements are equally unaccountable and unknowable—both of them for the same reason.

Theaetetus: I can’t dispute that. (205d–e; Levett 1997: 228)

Form then presents itself in a complex that must be fully analyzed in
order to determine that aspect of the complex that can be qualified as form, i.e., that which harmonizes and coordinates the elements of the complex (Goldschmidt 2003: 82–83). Only once we have fully articulated the relation of these subunits to one another can we proceed to the “One” and release each of these subunities, in the words of the Philebus, “into the unlimited.” The concepts of the universal and the limit in the dialectic of collection and division then serve both to fragment the One as an undifferentiated and eternal whole, an unbroken immediacy, and to reconstitute it as an articulated and intelligible unity (Boussoulas 1952: 98–99; Diès 1966: xxii).

In the Philebus, and in such closely related dialogues as the Parmenides, the Theaetetus, the Sophist, and the Statesman, the forms are less ontologically separate beings than ideal patterns in nature, the conditions of possibility for the intelligibility of the world and human experience (Parmenides 130b–d, 132b–d; Sophist 259e). They do not exist in bounded time and space any more than do scientific laws (where is the second law of thermodynamics?), the concept of the triangle, or causality per se. Moreover, sensible particulars are only intelligible, and hence can be said to exist as identifiable entities, to the extent that they are related to the forms. They are thus strictly relational entities and not things in themselves, and only rise to the level of the ontic to the extent that they can be assimilated to the world of complex and interpenetrating forms that constitute the intelligible world (Festugière 1950: 193; Boussoulas 1952: 8, 92–93; Diès 1966: xcv). A chair is a chair only because there is the idea of chairness, of being a chair, as opposed to being a stool, a table, or a mushroom. It is not a chair because it has four legs and I stumble over it in my dining room (like my cat), or even because I sit on it. The forms are thus ontologically prior to but not separate from their sensibles. The sensibles cannot in fact be recognized without the forms (Sophist 253d–e; Hampton 1990: 92).

From an existential perspective, then, there are indeed two “unlimiteds” or “infinities” operative in the Philebus. There is both that which is beyond the many particular instances, and hence the infinitely large, and that which is not yet limited or below the threshold of the defined entity, the realm of pure continuity, discussed earlier. Both can be characterized according to Frede’s definition as “the kinds of things that have no definite degree in themselves” (1993: xxxiii–xxxiv). We can neither quantify the pure form of harmony in itself and for itself, nor


40. For specific slippages in Plato’s use of the term apeiron, see Frede (1992: 428–29).
the continuum of all possible sounds. Yet the first, the form of harmony, transcends and subsumes the limit. It must presuppose a mixed condition of existence—the continuum of the unlimited as defined by the imposition of the limit and hence the possibility of a quantitative relation—as the predicate of its transcendence of those specific limits per se (Gadamer 1988: 265; Boussoulas 1952: 65). Without the limits, definitions, formalizations imposed upon an undefined continuum, the defined ratios or proportions that constitute a harmonic relation cannot come into existence, but harmony itself can never be limited to any given set of relations occupying a defined moment in space and time. It therefore transcends those limitations precisely insofar as it is a universal. The harmonic, from the Platonic perspective, is both an immutable whole and a totalization of discrete existences that defines those existences as recognizable entities in themselves. In turn, as harmony in and for itself, the harmonic participates in, or enters into a proportional or “harmonic relation” with, the totalizing form of the world as an articulated cosmos, which is known variously as the One or the Good, depending on the dialogue (Boussoulas 1952: 143–44; Hampton 1991: 89–92; Goldschmidt 2003: 79–82).

The second form of the unlimited exists not beyond, but below the limit. This is the realm to which the term apeiron is properly applied in the Philebus:

All unlimited entities consist in a continued flux (24d), so they are motions. These motions terminate when order is imposed; this imposition of a limit leads to the establishment of a definite being, the successful mixture (genesis eis ousian, 26d). Pleasures are motions of filling that are terminated by such an imposed order. (Frede 1992: 439)41

Characteristic examples of the apeiron are such continua as are expressed in concepts like hotter and colder, harder and softer, higher and lower, and bigger and smaller. None of these concepts has meaning in itself, but each instead reflects an endless and fundamentally incalculable oscillation between opposites such that a given point on the continuum can always be both hotter and colder, higher and lower, etc., in relation to two other points.

Even these examples, however, do not do full justice to the dizzying flux of the unlimited, since the moment a point is determined, let alone

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triangulated with two other points, we are already operating within the realm of the limit and of potential quantification. It is for this reason that Plato expresses these continua using the grammatical dual.\(^{42}\) Hot- 
ter and colder are both opposites and thereby emphasize the necessary undecidability of such binary judgments, owing to the lack of a mediator that is able to establish a definitive limit and hence create a stable mixed entity (\textit{Philebus} 24a–d). The limit is precisely what puts a halt to such oscillations and thereby allows the demarcation of commensurable units, the formulation of rational judgments, the institution of fair exchanges, and the creation of a system of determined substitutions (Hampton 1990: 44)\(^{43}\):

Socrates: We already attributed to the dryer and wetter, the more and less, the longer and shorter, and the greater and lesser, and everything that admits of the more and less one single nature.

Protarchus: Do you mean the unlimited?

Socrates: Yes. But mix into these things the coming to be of the limit.

Protarchus: What coming to be?

Socrates: That of the limiting, which we ought to have just now collected into a unity, as we did of the unlimited, but we did not. But perhaps with these two [the unlimited and the mixed] having been collected together, this too will become clear.

Protarchus: What kind of thing do you mean?

Socrates: That of the equal and the double, and however many things stabilize those others that are in opposition to one another, and by establishing a numerical relation render them symmetrical and harmonious. (\textit{Philebus} 25d2–e2)

It will be recalled that in chapter 3 the grammatical dual in the \textit{Antigone} was associated with the incestuous domain of Imaginary identification and with resistance to the imposition of Symbolic law, to the establishment of difference and limit, of relations of exchange and hence the pleasure principle.\(^{44}\) Similarly, the flux of the \textit{apeiron} represents a

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\(^{43}\) Hampton, while a philosophically astute reader of the dialogue, is at times disturbingly sloppy. Among other things, she here refers to 26e when 25e is meant and on page 42 translates \textit{poson} “quality” rather than “quantity.”

\(^{44}\) For more on the duality of the Imaginary as opposed to the ternary or digital structure of the Symbolic, see also Lacan (1966e: 67); Kristeva (1980: 22); Jameson (1981: 
constant alternation between more and less, excess and lack, becoming and dissolution that comes to stability only with the imposition of the law of measure, even as it must simultaneously continue to exist in its own self-same nature below the level of—and as the ground of—determination (Diès 1966: xxviii; Gosling 1975: 200). It is for this reason that the *apeiron* has also been compared by many readers to the *Timaeus*'s *khôra*,\(^45\) which like the *apeiron* is associated by Plato with the formless and maternal, as opposed to the determining paternal impress of law, difference, and the eternal (*Timaeus* 50–51; Derrida 1993b: 30, 37, 95–96; Zuckert 1996: 236; Sallis 1998: 406–7; Copjec 2002: 33).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, however, these two forms of the infinite are ultimately the same. They are both beyond the pleasure principle. The realm of what is before and of what is beyond the law of limit are both worlds of continuity in which the one, the many, and the mixed have either been transcended or not yet come to exist. In such realms, there is possible neither knowledge, in the form of discrete information possessed by a knower, nor individual existence. There is only the pure and meaningless, undifferentiated immediacy of the *tabula rasa* of psychic existence before it has been creased by the least determination, limit, or trace; or the loss of self and hence the effacement of the wax tablet of the psyche that comes with subsumption into the eternal, and hence Symbolic death (Freud 1961a: 2; Bataille 1957: 20–27, 155n.1; Lacan 1991: 174–75; 1973: 159).

Protarchus, unlike Socrates, however, is not interested in the abstract verities of the dialectic of collection and division, nor in its ontological and psychic grounding. His questions are much more practical. The potentially infinite progression and regression involved in the practice of collection and division may be the only method on which true knowledge can be based. Yet how does it lead to a decision on which is the superior good: knowledge or pleasure?

Protarchus: While it is a great thing for the wise man to know everything, the second best is not to be mistaken about oneself. . . . You Socrates have granted this meeting to all of us, and yourself to boot, in order to find out what is the best of all human possessions. . . . Since you . . . committed yourself to us, we therefore insist, like

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45. See Boussoulas (1952: 57–58); Gadamer (1988: 260); Hampton (1990: 43); and their respective bibliographies.
children, that there is no taking back a gift properly given. So give up this way of turning against us the discussion here.

Socrates: What way are you talking about?

Protarchus: Your way of plunging us into difficulties and repeating questions to which we have at present no proper answer to give you. But we should not take it that the aim of our meeting is universal confusion. (19c–20a; Frede 1993: 13)

The result is a sudden shift in direction. Socrates, unlike the philosopher but much like the psychoanalyst, responds to Protarchus’ demand by recounting what may, he says, have been a dream (20b6): in it Socrates had learned that neither pleasure nor knowledge was the highest good, but there was a third unnamed thing. In this way, Socrates undoes the false binary of pleasure and knowledge and relativizes both to an unnamed third object to which each can stand in relation. By the same token, their rapport is now relational rather than oppositional so that pleasure and knowledge are no longer seen as pure unities but are now able to appear together in mixed entities (20b–23b). This last move allows the earlier discussion of the pure dialectic of collection and division to be transformed into the more pragmatic analysis of the unlimited, the limit and the mixed discussed above (23c–27c).

The rest of the dialogue consists, then, of an analysis and classification of the various forms of mixed pleasures and knowledges. It concludes with a series of recommendations on how a balanced life might be pursued. In short, while acknowledging the claims of the dialectic and the search for absolute knowledge, the *Philebus* also grants the existence of another realm of practical ethical action: the philosopher as therapist. True knowledge may be founded upon the method of collection and division, which provides the epistemological foundation for the late doctrine of the forms, but it is a foundation that simultaneously posits its own beyond, the *apeiron* or limitless world of pure continuity in which the law of limit, demarcation, property, and exchange makes its mark (Derrida 1980: 379). It is to this latter world, that beyond the closure of western metaphysics, beyond the field in which unity and the unit can be envisioned, that Derrida seeks the indestructible (Derrida 1980: 249). This, as he notes, is the same realm that Freud locates beyond the pleasure principle (1980: 304–5).

This is also the realm to which he gestures when Derrida argues that Lacan remains within the logocentric realm when the latter contends that the letter is ultimately indivisible and that it thus always arrives at its destination. Therefore, while the Lacanian letter may signal nothing
more than absence or lack, that lack never lacks place. It is always localizable. It always traces a path through discourse and so can be endowed with a meaning and a relation to a speaking subject, even if only in the form of a negation or lack (Derrida 1980: 443, 472, 492–93). The letter always arrives at its destination (Lacan 1966b: 41). It is always decipherable, at least as the symptomatic presence of the indecipherable.

Yet, how can it be otherwise in psychoanalysis (Julien 1990: 147–48; Lacan 1973: 236, 276; Žižek 1989: 72, 174–75; Ragland-Sullivan 1986: 218)? The philosopher may and even must pursue the foundations of knowledge to and beyond the limitless realm in which meaning dissolves. He may and must conceive of the possibility of radical non-meaning, of a pure contingency in which the letter may or may not arrive at its destination (Derrida 1980: 133–35; 1996a: 49). The psychoanalyst, however, is still faced with Protarchus, lying there on the couch wanting to know the value of pleasure. As Derrida himself recounts, when he first met Lacan at a conference at Johns Hopkins in 1967, Lacan remarked to René Girard after hearing Derrida speak, “Yes, yes, that’s very good, but the difference between him and me, is that he doesn’t have to deal with people who suffer” (1996b: 86).46

Lacan was always very clear that he was not a philosopher or literary theorist, but an analyst whose writings and teachings were in the first instance aimed at forming other analysts.47 Derrida, in contrast, says that his goal is precisely to pose the philosopher’s epistemological question to the psychoanalyst (1980: 261). Thus, he and Lacan represent two sides of the same postcard—the readable and the unreadable—that must always co-exist with and condition one another (1980: 88). The Philebus itself, in its very discontinuity between the dialectic and the calculus of pleasure (Gadamer 1991: 9–10; Frede 1992: 430–31), embodies this same double logic even as it offers the possibility of mediating between the needs of the philosopher and the demands of the analyst and his or her analysand.48

46. Derrida’s response that he too has “to deal with people who suffer” hardly seems an adequate acknowledgement of what he admits to be his and Lacan’s different institutional settings and the obligations that come with them.

47. Although as Derrida acknowledges, “Lacan’s philosophical refinement, competence, and originality have no precedent in the tradition of psychoanalysis” (1996b: 65, see also 73–75).

48. The possibility of this mediation is signaled by Derrida’s acknowledgment that some have argued that the Lacanian and Derridian positions are homologous. As both he and others have observed, this is an oversimplification, but not one with no basis (1980: 163). Žižek totally rejects such a move (Hanlon 2001: 13, but cf. Žižek 1992: 102–3), but
4. The Will to Power: Eros, Thanatos, Plato and Foucault

It is by limiting the possible intensity of the pleasure or the displeasure that the PP\textsuperscript{49} conquers its mastery. It only draws its benefits from a certain moderation. The problem for it to resolve—let one trace it back again to the \textit{Philebus}—is that of pleasure’s essential excess. (Derrida: 1980: 427)

As Freud’s writing of the mastery (\textit{Herrschaft}) of the pleasure principle and Ernst’s getting pleasure from mastering his pain indicates, the drive which is irreducible to any other is a drive not for pleasure but for mastery. And that drive is essentially self-referential. “The drive to dominate must also be the drive’s relation to itself: there is no drive not driven to bind itself to itself and assure mastery over itself as a drive.” (Zuckert 1996: 233, citing Derrida 1980: 430)

As noted earlier in this chapter, the dialectic of collection and division is explicitly linked by Derrida both to psychoanalysis and to deconstruction’s own radicalization of the practice of genealogy and archeology, two terms most clearly and commonly associated with the work of Michel Foucault. We shall in the next chapter take up in detail Foucault’s relationship with both psychoanalysis and Lacan in the context of his later work’s exploration of the problematics of power, self-mastery, and the care of the self in Plato and the Stoics. We shall also examine the late Foucault’s own extensive response to and engagement with Derrida’s reading of Plato. What concerns us in the final section of this chapter, however, is the way in which Derrida’s reading of antiquity in general and of Plato in particular was a response not only to Lacan but also to Foucault and his conceptualization of power.

The roots of this dialogue run deep. As was noted above, “Plato’s Pharmacy” was published by the journal \textit{Tel quel} in 1968, four years after Lacan’s revisiting of the \textit{Symposium} in his eleventh seminar. This, however, was not the first time Derrida had raised the issue of the constitution of the interiority of Platonic reason in relation to a fallen, but logically necessary, externality that the \textit{Phaedrus} associates with writing. In 1963, Derrida had addressed the \textit{Collège philosophique}\textsuperscript{50} concerning the recently published \textit{Folie et Déraison, Histoire de la folie à


\textsuperscript{49} Pleasure Principle.

\textsuperscript{50} A philosophical association headed by Jean Wahl.
l’âge classique, by his former teacher at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, Michel Foucault. The lecture, later revised and published as “Cogito et histoire de la folie,” is a searching critique of the basic philosophical assumptions underlying Foucault’s project.

Derrida’s assault was wide-ranging and complex. 51 For our purposes, however, one main aspect of Derrida’s argument is relevant: his charge that Foucault ignores the profound ties between reason as constituted in the seventeenth century—when Foucault argues that the modern concept of madness as rationality’s opposite was first formed—and the logos of Socratic and Platonic philosophy. Foucault’s claim, advanced in his preface, is that the Greek logos knew no opposite. As Derrida notes, such a reading is not only untrue to the text of Greek philosophy but a logical impossibility necessitated by Foucault’s thesis that western reason was produced by the seventeenth century’s mass internment of the mad and the socially marginal (Derrida 1967a: 62–66). In contrast, Derrida’s position, as later elaborated in “La pharmacie de Platon,” is that the history of western reason’s relation to its other can only be understood in terms of its initial constitution from Platonic philosophy’s opposition of muthos to logos—that is, in terms of the opposition of practices of mirroring and imitation to a rational discourse of measure, quantification, and categorical determination (1972a: 98). 52 Derrida’s reading in this early lecture, as in “La pharmacie” and La carte postale, is therefore in accord with the Platonic claim that there is no intelligible realm outside the logos. Below the limit, the trace, the mark of measure—in the virgin wax of Freud’s magic pad—there is no articulation, no regulated Symbolic exchange, no reasoned reflection, no subject.

Thus, Derrida contends that Foucault’s argument that western reason constitutes itself through the exclusion of madness at the beginning of the seventeenth century is incorrect. In particular, he takes issue with Foucault’s statement in the original preface to the book, which was dropped from subsequent editions, that in the Greek world there was no “other” of reason, since hubris was not excluded from but welcomed within the “reassuring” logos of Socratic dialectics. Yet, as Derrida points out, if that were the case, then the other of reason would have already been contained within reason itself, and the great

51. The following paragraphs are based on the account of the debate featured in Larmour et al. (1998b: 6–9).

confinement of the seventeenth century would have represented not
the founding consolidation of western reason, but a historically deter-
mined fold in which a schism between reason and madness was created
within the larger framework of reason as a whole. If, on the other hand,

hubris were not so contained, then neither would the Socratic dialectic
be so reassuring, nor would the split between reason and its other at
the beginning of the modern world be unique or determining (Derrida

Foucault does not respond directly to these charges, except to note
that Derrida’s assertion of the inescapability of the logos is designed
primarily to insure the preeminence of philosophy as the queen of
the sciences and to promote a renewed emphasis on textuality rather
than practical discursivity, with all the necessary archival and historical
research the latter implies (1972). In this response, Foucault has been
largely seconded by subsequent critical opinion.53 Yet, as Roy Boyne
notes, Foucault’s later articulation of the inescapability of power at
once effectively acknowledges “the correctness of Derrida’s formula-
tion” of the omnipresence of the normalizing logos and simultaneously
transforms it into a means of analyzing practical-discursive complexes
beyond the reach of an all-consuming textualism (Boyne 1990: 76,
118). Foucault moves it from the realm of pure philosophical analysis
to that of a practical tool in the micropolitics of everyday life, though
Derrida himself might say that such a move merely reveals the radical
political implications that have been part of deconstruction all along.

It was in the 1970s that Foucault articulated his analytics of power,
first in Surveiller et Punir (1975) and then in La volonté de savoir (1976).
The latter, which was Volume 1 of the Histoire de la sexualité, also
constituted Foucault’s major rejoinder to psychoanalysis. There, Fou-
cault argued that sexuality, far from being repressed in the eighteen-

th and nineteenth centuries, as commonly stated by certain forms of psy-
choanalysis and sexology, was actually formulated, consolidated, and
incited into discourse by those very scientific and therapeutic practices.
These practices were not something external to sexuality, an outside that
came and distorted, perverted, or repressed its intrinsic inner nature.
They were part and parcel of its ontological substance. If, as Foucault’s
genealogy of sexuality sought to demonstrate, sexuality could not be
thought outside the practices that produced the claim of its repression,
if in fact there is no outside of power, then this realization demanded of

us a new understanding of power, one not predicated on a concept of Law, the state, or the sovereign as an external authority imposed upon a preexisting entity, but as immanent to and constitutive of the entity itself. Power is not repressive, but productive. It is for this reason that Foucault proposes that we replace a theory of law and repression with an “analytic of power,” and shift our focus from sexuality to bodies and pleasures.

Such an analytic of power’s self-constitution is reminiscent of the pleasure principle’s own self-limitation and its constitutive relation to the drive for mastery that Derrida and Zuckert outline in the epigraphs to this section. That self-limitation is, in turn, expressly related by both Derrida and Zuckert to the Philebus’s meditation on the constitutive relation of the limit to the ontic and the calculus of pleasure. In this light, it is perhaps less than surprising that at the end of “Spéculer—Sur «Freud»,” Derrida’s reading of Beyond the Pleasure Principle in La carte postale (1980), we find the contention that the Freudian concept of Bemächtigung, “mastery, domination,” actually precedes the death drive, and names that which is truly beyond the pleasure principle. To schematize, Derrida proposes that Thanatos be understood as a drive for domination, a drive for power, which as such knows no outside, no beyond:

Now, if such a power drive exists [. . . ] it is necessary to admit that it plays a primary role in the most “meta-conceptual” and “metalinguistic,” precisely the most “dominant” organization of Freudian discourse. For it is exactly in the code of power—and not only metaphorically—that the problematic is installed. It is always a question of knowing who is the “master,” who “dominates,” who has the “authority,” to what point does the PP exert power, how can a drive become independent of it or precede it, what are the respective functions of the PP and the rest, what we have called the prince and his subjects, etc. “Posts” are always posts of power. And power is exerted by means of a network of posts [positions, relays]. [. . . ] In other words, the motive of power is more originary and more general than the PP, it is independent of it, it is its beyond. It should not be confused with the death drive or the repetition compulsion, it gives us the means to describe them and plays the role of transcendental predicate in relation to them [. . . ]. Beyond the pleasure principle: power. (1980: 431–32)

In the years immediately following the publication of La volonté de
it is hard to believe that either Derrida or his readership could miss the Foucauldian resonances of the claim that power is in fact that which is beyond the pleasure principle.54 He continues:

Au-delà55 de toutes les oppositions conceptuelles,56 la Bemächtigung situe bien l’un des échangeurs entre la pulsion d’emprise, comme pulsion de pulsion, et la « volonté de puissance ».57 (Derrida 1980: 432)

Beyond all the conceptual oppositions, Bemächtigung situates very precisely one of the exchanges between the drive for domination, as drive’s drive, and the “will to power.”

The juxtaposition of Freud, Lacan, and Foucault that we find in the three essays of 1996’s Résistances de la psychanalyse is therefore already present in 1980. Moreover, in a typically Derridian move, the Foucauldian reply to Freud is already found in Freud himself. Their opposition is also a complicity. That opposition/complicity can, in turn, be traced to the originary moments of western reason in Plato, and more specifically to the Φιλήσους. Indeed, it is not without reason that this penultimate section of “Spéculer—Sur « Freud »” is entitled “Platon derrière Freud.”

Nor is this engagement with Foucault limited to this one section of La carte postale, however pivotal these passages may be to Derrida’s reading of Freud, Lacan, and Plato.58 Foucault’s History of Sexuality is also clearly evoked in the context of a discussion by Derrida of

54. Derrida does not of course make direct reference to Foucault. Their relations were very tense after Derrida published his early lecture on Histoire de la folie. Instead, Derrida includes a note pointing to a 1978 work by François Laruelle, Au-delà du principe du pouvoir. Laruelle was hardly a household name in France in 1980, though he is associated with the Non-Philosophie movement and a prolific writer (now better known in French than he is in English). Foucault, however, was already a member of the Collège de France and his lectures regularly drew overflow crowds. He also gave regular interviews on the question of power.

55. Beyond the Pleasure Principle is frequently abbreviated simply Au-delà . . . in La carte postale.

56. The realm of the apeiron.


58. See also the “envoi” of August 25 1977 (1980: 46), where immediately following a discussion of how “Derrida” believes “Le facteur de la vérité” has been misread, we find a very Foucauldian evocation of the ways in which the discourse of desire itself comes to serve as a series of “dispositifs érotiques.” Dispositif is the term Foucault uses in his later genealogical work to replace the earlier épistémé found in the archeologies.
scholarship on the Platonic letters, a reading of which he proposes to use as the introduction to La carte postale’s fictional counterpart, Legs de Freud (1980: 65–66, 95). In this passage, the controversy over the letters’ authenticity is compared to that over whether sexuality per se exists (or whether, à la Foucault, it is a discursive construction and an effect of power).\textsuperscript{59}

A less explicit allusion may also be found in the lengthy “envoi” of September 10, 1977, the day after the discussion of the authenticity of Plato’s letters and their transmission. Here, following a detailed reading of the image on the postcard of Plato dictating to Socrates, the problem of postality is explicitly linked to the problematics of psychoanalysis, sexuality, and power:

La Prospective Postale, voilà le lieu de la problématique psych. et po\textsuperscript{60} désormais (la question des femmes, de la psychanalyse et de la politique, ça ramasse tout); la question de Le Pouvoir, comme ils disent encore, c’est d’abord les postes et télécommunications, bien connu. (1980: 113)

Postal Futurism, this is the place of the psychoanalytic and political problematic henceforth (the question of women, psychoanalysis, politics, it brings together everything); the question of Power, as they still say, it is first of all a matter of the postal service and telecommunications, as everyone knows.

The capitalization of power alerts us to the fact that a specific, technical usage of the term is being evoked,\textsuperscript{61} while the connection with

\textsuperscript{59} It is perhaps not coincidental, then, as we shall see in the next chapter, that Foucault in the course of his 1983 lectures at the Collège de France chooses to make one of his most direct retorts to Derrida in the course of a reading of Plato’s seventh letter. For Derrida’s comments on this letter in La carte postale, see the envoi of September 9, 1977 (1980: 91). While there is not room to deal with it here, Derrida’s extensive and learned, if unconventional, discussion of the letters and their authenticity, has not received the attention it deserves (1980: 65–66, 91–102, 148–49, 273).

\textsuperscript{60} Psychanalyse et Politique, often abbreviated Psych. et Po, was one of the first feminist political groups in France (Moi 2002: 95–96). Derrida, by using the abbreviation without capitalization, at once signals his solidarity with the group and at the same time broadens the problematic from that of the actual organization to the entire field of the conjunction of psychoanalysis and politics.

\textsuperscript{61} On the next page (1980: 114), “Derrida” recounts how he had agreed to give a series of taped interviews critical of the media in order to boost the sales of his book. His agreement was conditional upon his being allowed “to improvise freely” on the role of the postal in the Iranian revolution. It will be remembered that the Ayatollah Khomeini (“l’ayatollah telekommeiny”) was living in France during the Iranian uprising against
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psychoanalysis, feminism, and politics at once points us toward the series of problematics in which the History of Sexuality proposed to intervene and toward a famous lacuna in that intervention, the absence of feminist theory and the failure to engage questions of gender. Finally, the recontextualization of this intervention within the larger field of postality and in relation to the specific question of the authenticity and transmission of the Socratico-Platonic logos points to the same basic historical and philosophical problem that Derrida alleged in his response to Histoire de la folie: Foucault’s failure to escape from the confines of the dominant and dominating structures of western reason, and the consequent need to produce a radicalized or counter-genealogy of this very discourse.

As we shall see in the next chapter, this is precisely what Foucault himself did, after his own fashion, when he too turned to antiquity at the very time when La carte postale was being published. Derrida would later recognize the kinship and continuing antagonism between their respective projects in a moving and subtle tribute to Foucault at the end of his La politique de l’amitié (1994). There, Derrida concludes his investigation of the concepts of friendship, kinship, enmity, and the state with a reading of Blanchot’s Michel Foucault tel que je l’imagine (1986). He chooses a passage devoted to Foucault’s late work on self-fashioning and friendship in ancient philosophy. It concludes with Blanchot asserting:

By testifying on behalf of a work that needs to be studied (read without bias) rather than praised, I hope to remain faithful, however clumsily, to the intellectual friendship that his death, which was very painful for me, permits me today to declare to him: at the same time, I remember the saying attributed by Diogenes Laertius to Aristotle: “Oh my friends, there is no friend.” 62 (Derrida 1994: 332–33)

Blanchot’s declaration of friendship—out of respect, out of discretion, out of love—can come only after Foucault has died and only in the form

the Shah. He largely communicated with his followers through taped sermons that were smuggled into the country. Foucault, like many French intellectuals of the period, supported the revolution, which seemed to offer an authentic indigenous response to a corrupt autocracy installed as the result of a CIA coup and thus a real alternative to both American imperialism and Soviet totalitarianism. He wrote a number of well-known articles on the subject in 1978 and 1979 (1994n–1994aa), including one specifically on the role of these taped messages in the uprising (1994u).

62. On Montaigne’s citation of this formula, see chapter 1, page 24.
of a declaration addressed to friends that declares the impossibility of that friendship, the necessary absence, ambivalence, and aggression that lies at the heart of the most genuine affections. Derrida’s choice of this passage is revealing: for, it is precisely through the reading of Foucault, and not his praise, that Derrida too has testified to the powerful bond between the student and his former teacher.

“Oh my friends, there is no friend.”

This apocryphal declaration by Aristotle opens every chapter of *La politique de l’amitié*. By choosing to conclude his book with this passage from Blanchot, Derrida transforms the whole work retrospectively into a declaration of friendship for a now absent Foucault. Of course, Aristotle’s (and Blanchot’s) formula does not simply assert friendship (“Oh my friends”), but also its impossibility (“there is no friend”), and takes that impossibility as a gage of authenticity. Blanchot too seeks that same complex authenticity. He comes not to praise Foucault but to read him. By the same token, Derrida in this work occupies himself precisely with Aristotle’s writings on friendship, *philía*, which, as he notes, Foucault passed over in his final turn to antiquity (1994: 334). Thus Derrida’s declaration of friendship is also an implicit critique, a correction, a reading.

Yet when the book ends, Derrida leaves no doubt that Blanchot’s words are also his, that his continuing engagement with Foucault, his debates, his criticisms—always in the context of both the immediate intellectual moment and a continuing engagement with antiquity—were also a homage, a simultaneous declaration of friendship and its impossibility. Derrida writes:

Will one have ever punctuated with more rigor, economy, reserve, while leaving open the hypothesis, but let’s not stop there, that, perhaps, no one is there anymore for anyone, and there is precisely death, that dying of which Blanchot complains so often, so profoundly, not that it might be fatal but that it might remain impossible? Like friendship perhaps: “I hope to remain faithful, however clumsily, to the intellectual friendship that his death, which was very painful for me, permits me today to declare to him: at the same time, I remember the saying attributed by Diogenes Laertius to Aristotle: ‘Oh my friends, there is no friend.’” Which is demonstrated (performatively), by the fact attested here that this
friendship could not have been declared with the friend still living. It is death that “permits me today” to “declare” this “intellectual friendship,” “at the same time.” Thanks be to death. It is thanks to death that friendship can declare itself. Never before, never otherwise. And never except by remembering (so long as, thanks to it, the friend remembers that there are no friends). And when friendship is declared to friends who are alive, it confesses at bottom the same thing, it confesses the death thanks to which the chance of declaring itself, although never lacking, finally came.

Without trying to hide it, one will have understood, that I would like to speak here about those to whom I am bound by a rare friendship, that is to say that I want also to speak to them. Be it across the rare friendships that I name and which never lodge within me without admiration and gratitude. (Derrida 1994: 335; emphasis in original)

Amen.

5. Conclusion: Writing Death, Writing Philia

The high ones die, die. They die. You look up and who’s there?
—Easy, easy, Mr. Bones. I is on your side.
I smell your grief.
—I sent my grief away. I cannot care forever. With them all again & again I died and cried, and I have to live. (John Berryman, “36,” The Dream Songs)

Phaedo: I had no feeling of pity, such as would seem natural in my sorrow, nor indeed of pleasure, as we engaged in philosophical discussion as we were accustomed to do—for our arguments were of that sort—but I had a strange feeling, an unaccustomed mixture of pleasure and pain at the same time as I reflected that he was just about to die. (Phaedo 59a; Grube 1997: 51)

And so we return via Socrates and Plato, Freud and Foucault to the necessary relation between death and philia. We first saw this relation in the Antigone where the only real possibility of a philia beyond the conventions of Creon’s social contract—of a philia grounded in kinship, friendship, and shared being—was found in death: for death is beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the compromises, exchanges, and substitutions that make intercourse possible. Death (both the first and the second) is like the unlimited in the Philebus. It is that which
is both before and beyond the ontic, before and beyond the possibility of recognized goods, before and beyond self and other. As such, it is simultaneously the predicate of *philia* and the desire that fuels it. It is the moment before the Aristophanic androgyne is split in the *Symposium*, before desire becomes the rubric of our being, and it is the posited reunion with our other, better half that is desire’s telos: a reunion that, as Diotima observes, can only ultimately be conceived as the totalization of the forms of phenomenal existence in the One, the Good, or the Beautiful. Beyond the pleasure principle lies the unchanging.

The self-conscious desire for that totalization, the desire that recognizes itself as the desire for that totalization, is precisely, according to Plato, *philosophia*. As the lover of wisdom proceeds through the logic of collection and division to plumb the realms of the limited, the unlimited and the mixed, s/he seeks a kind of mastery which both encompasses that totalization and is predicated on its divisions, the cuts, the marks that forever defer the possibility of either obtaining a final totalization or of reaching an absolute origin of division: the virginal wax tablet before the trace, before the incision of writing. As Diotima reminds the young Socrates, only the gods possess wisdom. Mortals possess the desire for it, and seek it through the mediation of Eros, the *daimôn* who is neither good nor bad, neither mortal nor immortal, neither beautiful nor ugly. The desire/love of wisdom, then, as Plato, Lacan, and Derrida all recognize, is always already predicated on a primal lack, an initial cut, a limit or division.

*Philosophia*, then, as a kind of desire, is a form of the drive for mastery, both of the self and the other. This drive for mastery, in turn, according to Derrida—who is drawing upon intellectual resources whose roots stretch beyond and through Foucault, Lacan, and the existentialists to the dawn of formalized western thought in Plato—is “the place of the psychoanalytic and political problematic . . . the question of Power.” Power, however, from a Derridean perspective, cannot be separated from the question of the ontic, of division and writing. Nor can it be separated from the soul and its analysis, from the internalized writing that both creates the psyche and forever alienates it from itself.

Thus every politics is for Derrida a politics of friendship, of *philia*. The question of power is made possible by the prior question of division that the prospect of shared being, kinship, *concitoyenité*, and friendship must presume. And yet the practice of division, the drive to spilt, to cut, to dismember so as to re-member, can only be viewed as a function of the larger drive for mastery: *la volonté de puissance, la volonté*
de savoir. It is thus the predicate and the manifestation of power. This drive can only be fully achieved and *philia* fully forged, however, in the moment of death, in the moment beyond the pleasure principle, in the moment when division itself is mastered and overcome. “Oh friend, there are no friends.” Thus for Derrida, a politics of friendship is always predicated on a true spiritual practice and that practice is inconceivable outside the continuous movement of a certain form of analysis, of collection and division, that traces its genealogy to Plato’s debt to Freud, and whose telos must forever be deferred, but whose desire is not to be ceded upon.