

Deconstruction, Sophistic and Hermeneutics: Derrida, Gorgias, Plato, and Gadamer

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My intention in this essay is to set into an intricate round dance Gorgias and Plato, Jacques Derrida and Hans-Georg Gadamer, proper names which might be translated into doxographic terms like sophistic and deconstruction, dialectic and hermeneutic. In the criss-cross figures of doctrinal assertion and critical reply, it will be difficult to distinguish interpretation from invention, argument from language (style, rhetoric), and even earlier from later. What is at stake in this choreography are the relations among being, thought, and language.

I. Gorgias

I want to make it clear at the outset that I use the words "sophistry," "sophistic," "sophist," in a descriptive, not projective sense. Obviously, pure neutrality is impossible for us who come in the wake of Plato's relentless hatchet job on the sophists, despite attempts to recover a more positive estimate of their achievement – attempts which being with Hegel and Grote and continue to this day. A neutrality sought with deliberate effort is very different from the response which follows on open minded ignorance. The platonic disapproval of sophistry infects even Jacques Derrida. Arguing in the "Pharmacie de Platon" that Plato does not simply reject or oppose the sophists, but steadily expropriates their arguments, setting up a ceaseless exchange, imitation, interchange between platonic "philosophy" and its most intimate and inimical neighbor, a relation of *simulacrum* regulated by a systematic indecision.¹ Yet Derrida concludes that it is necessary "bien entendre que cette lecture de Platon n'est aucun moment anime par quelque slogan ou mot d'ordre du genre 'retour-aux-sophistes.'" (D, 823) This is a striking moment in Derrida's text, one that

would surely attract his attention in any other writer. The author here steps out of the line of his thought to address the reader directly and to exercise his authority to pre-empt what it is permitted to say about his text. Between his dicta on Plato, Derrida writes this interdiction, this attempt to control the reader's reading by exercising a power from a place logically *hors-texte*. This intimate space of opposition is occupied by an "Il faudra (bien entendre)"—it *must* be thoroughly understood that...One is reminded of Wittgenstein's remark, whenever anybody says, "You must not do this," one thinks immediately, "Why not? what if I do?" What is the necessity announced here? It cannot belong to a material, physical, causal realm—one does not enforce for one's reader the necessity, say to breathe. This "must" must belong to the moral realm, the realm of human freedom and vagary. It asserts one has no right to say such a thing about my text, that if one dares do so, one will be punished—by *misunderstanding*. To avoid such a banishment, the reader will have to knuckle under, put himself under Derrida's thumb, lest he be accused of having merely thumbed through Derrida, of having hitchhiked or strayed in and out crossed the border here firmly drawn. But alas, such interdictions come always too late—they forbid what has always already happened. Having been sent off to read Freud on negation, we, can scarcely return empty-handed. This negation in Derrida's text—so emphatic ("is *not at any moment* moved by *any* slogan or password"), so, one would say, overdetermined—attempts to erase or efface the trace of the very thought denied within Derrida himself. For he could scarcely deny a thought which had never occurred to him at all. As author Derrida wishes to deny to his reader the very thought that as reader he himself thought. This splitting and projection of part of oneself onto an indeterminate addressee repeats, of course, precisely that process Derrida outlines by which platonic philosophy defines itself against its "other," sophistry. For readers who have imbibed the pharmaceutical spirit (or should it be letter - what he actually *does* in his writing) of Derrida, there will be no hesitation to follow the scapegoat, the pharmakos, thus banished by the letter (or should it be by the *spirit*—the author's attempt to lay a ghostly hand on his reader's shoulder) into the wilderness of misinterpretation. Let us then ignore this "no trespassing" sign, breach this border, and boldly "return to the sophists."

To be sure, it is a nearly featureless plain. Or we might better say, an Atlantis, pressed down beneath the sea of platonic and post-platonic thought, with only a few islands poking above the surface and uncertainly connected below. Among these islands, I have chosen to concentrate on the archipelago called Gorgias, of whom a few scattered remarks survive along

with three substantial masses : an outline of the argument of *On Not-Being* or *On Nature*, preserved by Sextus Empiricus and in another version by Aristotle or pseudo-Aristotle; the *Encomium of Helen*; and the *Apologia for Palamades*.²

According to Sextus' summary, the treatise *On Not Being* or *On Nature* undertakes to prove three theses : "first, that nothing exists; secondly, that even if anything exists it is inapprehensible by man; thirdly, that even if anything is apprehensible, yet of a surety it is inexpressible and incommunicable to one's neighbour," I will not rehearse Gorgias' arguments, but only note that we must certainly see what he says against the background of Eleatic philosophy. Fragment II of Parmenides asserts :

Come then, I shall tell you, and do you pay attention to the account when you have heard it, which are the only ways of inquiry that can be conceived; the one (says) : "exists" and "it is not possible not to exist," it is the way of persuasion (for persuasion follows upon truth); the other (says): "exists-not" and "not to exist in necessary," this I point out to you is a path wholly unknowable. For you could not know that which does not exist (because it is impossible) nor could you express it.³

Gorgias uses Parmenides' own rigorous dialectic tools, particularly the law of the excluded middle, to subvert Parmenides doctrine, but not simply to invert it. Instructive is the difficulty scholars have had formulating this relation to Parmenides (as to Gorgias' other predecessors) and their consequent difficulty in describing the tone of Gorgias' work. It has been called parody, farce, rhetorical display, a "toy" (paignion), a serious critique of dogmatic absolutism on behalf of common sense, even a "monument to the anarchy of thought between Parmenides and Plato." (U, 164) A Clue to this puzzle is the fragment (DK 82B12) preserved by Aristotle (Rhet. III. 18.7.1419b.3): "Gorgias spoke rightly when he said one ought to lead the serious in one's opponent to its ruin in jest. and his jest to its ruin seriousness." Jest and earnest here are not merely opposed, but as with the jiu-jitsu wrestler, the opponent is made to trip himself up by having his own weight and force turned against him. Gorgias does not simply oppose another dogma to Parmenides': his treatise neither asserts nor presupposes any univocal dogmatic standpoint. Rather he works like a parasite inside Parmenides, leading him along his own path to ruin by drawing his logical demonstrations into "neutralizing antinomies" (U, 143) which cancel each other. He thus shows that "the ambivalence of logos" (U, 150) simultaneously undermines everything it establishes, leaving it undecidable by any

rigorous or unequivocal proof. The opening ontological section of his treatise concludes, "thus, if nothing is, I declare that the proofs deceive,"⁴ This appears to mean that rigorous demonstration does not achieve This appears to mean unshakable certainty, but masters irreducible and unsynthesizable ambiguity by blinding us to the antithesis which reasoning itself generates in the very process of proof. There results a dizzying and ceaseless interchange between what logos at once institutes and ruins, a perpetual displacement whose movement carries us beyond tears and laughters, earnest and jest, into an exhilarating and energizing disillusionment whose contemporary name is "deconstruction."

Having shown the ambivalence of any logos directed toward what exists merely as such, Gorgias proceeds to argue that no possibility of knowing or speaking escapes this ambivalence: even if something exists, it is unknowable; and even if knowable, it is incommunicable. The demonstration of both theses centers on the principle of heterogeneity—on the one hand, between thought and its contents, and on the other, between thought and language. We can see that Gorgias thus achieves a general critique of representation, or as Jacqueline de Romilly says 'shows that existence is irreducible to thought or speech.'⁵ Drawing on the stock poetic examples of Scylla and Chimaera, Gorgias argues that since we can think what does not exist, thought has no criterion within itself to distinguish existent from non-existent thought contents. What is true of poetry applies equally to philosophical speculation and to sense perception. We may know what we think, but thinking does not make it so. Nor can experience intervene from outside, thought to make good a thought-content's claim to exist. For, in order to "correct" or "existentialize" a thought, an experience would have to pass over into the heterogeneous domain of thought, and in doing so, it would lose precisely that autonomy which had promised to provide the criterion of existence. In contemporary terms, we can recognize here the argument that there are no "brute" facts against which to check our representations—which does not mean, as is sometimes said, that nothing exists or "there are no facts," but only that between what exists and what is thought and said there is a difference, a gap unbridgeable by mere thinking or mere existing.

Similarly, speech and thought are irreducibly heterogeneous. In speaking, we do not reveal to each other "things" (ta onta), whether sensations or any other experience (pragma); but rather, we reveal only speech (logon). And once again, if the meaning of speech were determined

by what it named (whether a sense object, a thought-content, or "experience" in general), then it is not speech which would make present what it names, but rather what is external to speech, named in it, which would betray what the speech meant. And Gorgias goes further. If speech is not itself a thing among other things, if it effaces itself, is the transparent medium through which I make present to my neighbor the things I experience, then there is an unbridgeable gap between things and speech. Once things have given up their thingness in order to be conveyed by speech, there will be no way for them to recover that thingness. But on the other hand, if speech itself is a thing, if it asserts itself as a presence, then it can assert only its own presence, not the presence of something else, just as we do not learn from our ears what we see or from our eyes what we hear.

That this difference is *différance* become clear from Gorgias' final arguments. The gap between my representation and my neighbor's receipt of that representation is at once spatial and temporal. If what is represented appears to me now and to my neighbor later, then what is represented differs. But if it appears simultaneously, then it appears in two places, and hence differs. But if speaker and hearer are in every respect alike, then they are one, not two, and I have not communicated. And the same is true of the separate subject. He is dispersed among the experience of difference perceptions at the same time, disseminated across the bodily organs of sensation—for example, seeing, hearing, and so on; and among perceptions he experiences differently in the present from in the past. But this theme, this temporal difference, to which he gave the name *kairos*, permeates Gorgias' entire thought. *Kairos* is a strange concept, a concept which undermines the concept of logos, undermines the concept of concept. A recognition of the contradictory multiplicity of the world obliges us to see that man does not have at his disposal a logos through which he can dominate the world, imposing on it unity and harmony, but rather the world is dispersed, disseminated into moments and circumstances, *kairoi*, whose very dispersal blocks any resolution or synthesis. And indeed human being itself is dispersed in its corporeality and temporality. Once liberated from the fixity of one sided dogmatism, logos is recovered as a mobile power within varying circumstances.

Lest such an observation call up the ancient fear that the rhetorician is an unprincipled casuist, I would wish to remind us that when we experience the contradictory clash of rights, a decision cannot be merely

deduced from principle, but we must seek "the right moment" (to deon en toi deonti, DK82B6.18, and see U, 177). What Gorgias wishes us to surrender is the rigidity which supposes there will be nothing problematic in the interpretation and application of the law or in the relation of any speculative system to the "veriegateds plendor" (U, 190) of life. Neither the variety of occasion nor the means of responding to them can be anticipated by formal principles or rules, Gorgias thinks, but rather they must be met by a power of improvisation, which it was claimed he was the first to teach. (DK 82A1a) Undoubtedly, the unmooring or dissolving of any dogmatism is experienced subjectively as the threat of chaos, but if we measure the distance between the most rigid demands of justice (dike), and an equity (epieikes) responsive to circumstances, we may see a general model of the disseminating effects of temporality, of *différance*, within any system instituted to efface precisely those effects.

From the view of Gorgias sketched thus far, it may be possible to understand one of his most suggestive and cryptic fragments. Tragedy, he says, "with its myths and its emotions has created a deception (apate), such that its successful practitioner is nearer to reality than the unsuccessful, and the man who lets himself be deceived is wiser than he who does not. For the successful deceiver conforms more justly to reality because, having promised this result, he has brought it to fulfilment; whoever has allowed himself to be deceived is wiser, for anyone not lacking in sensibility allows himself to be overcome by the pleasure of the words." (U, 113-14, 189) Once again, the tone of this remark is elusive: does Gorgias mean to dismiss poetry with this witty paradox? I agree with Untersteiner that he does not. Gorgias understands the unquenchable human need to resolve or reduce the uncontrollable variety of existence, even at the price of a one-sided self-deception. It is tragedy which seizes both this human need and the irremediable contradictoriness of reality on which it founders. This is not, to be sure, a generic distinction. As an orator, Gorgias sought in prose the same power of "irrational judgment of kairos" (U, 199) without surrendering the tensions of thought and existence to a utilitarian expediency. Commenting on Gorgias prose, particularly his use of rhetorical figures rooted in religious formula and incantation, Untersteiner remarks, "The sacred and magic character of style is interwoven with the rigidity of logic in such a way that the tragic consequences of the latter are nullified by the persuasive and deceptive force of particular formal expressions" (U 201) We are certainly not speaking here of the mere appeal to audience passion of which Gorgias has been accused. The hearer

who yields to this deception is not a passive victim, but reaps a particular "pleasure." Again I quote Untersteiner: "The joy which art can arouse owes its existence to the satisfaction afforded by the overwhelming realization of the irrationality of the universe and of its variegated splendour full of charm; to a serene awareness of the tragic nature of the irrational in its irreducible antitheses; to the wise capability of the intelligence which can adapt particular creations to the variety of 'occasions.'" (U, 190)

These remarks lead to a final and more important question which I make no claim to solve here. If the strict parallel between the thought of Gorgias and the deconstruction of Jacques Derrida I have implied here is just—and I believe it is—then we may ask: what is the historical significance of the emergence at a specific time of this particular variety of "edifying philosophy" (to use Richard Rotry's term)? Eric Voegelin has this to say: "The abstract of the essay *On Being* is a priceless document because it has preserved one of the earliest, if not the very first, instance of the perennial type of enlightened philosophizing. The thinker operates on symbols that have been developed by mystic-philosophers for the expression of experiences of transcendence. He proceeds by ignoring the experiential basis, separates the symbols from this basis as if they had a meaning independent of the experience which they express, and with brilliant logic shows, what every philosopher knows, that they will lead to contradictions if they are misunderstood as propositions about objects in world-immanent experience."⁶ Voegelin seems to concur with Plato's estimate that only political catastrophe can follow such "enlightenment." Against this, we may set Untersteiner's sympathetic portrait of Gorgias as a mind which has intuited a great truth, the insight into existence forged by tragedy, and who "has translated [this truth] into philosophical terms without forgetting its literary origin" (U. 202) It is not my intention in raising this question to propose some facile historical analogy by whose means we might anticipate a balance sheet of good and bad consequences for deconstruction. Rather, I believe the most fruitful reflection on deconstruction will be one which reanimates its inherence in the temporality of the tradition it interrogates and carries forward.

2. Gorgias and Plato

Gorgias appears in person in Plato only in the dialogue which bears his name. E. R. Dodds argues that Plato regarded him neither as a philosopher, nor even as a sophist, for unlike the latter, he did not claim to teach

virtue. He "was simply *deinos legein* (Symp. 198c)," a skilled speaker, and in response to Socrates' characteristic and energetically pursued inquiry about what exactly he *is*, Gorgias replies that he is a "rhetorician" (*rhetora*, *Gorgias* 449a). In general, Dodds remarks, Plato treats him "with the consideration due to an elderly and respected literary figure whose personal probity was unquestioned."⁷ What is particularly striking is that Gorgias rapidly falls silent in the dialogue, as though the rhetor has lost chief characteristic in the confrontation with philosophy. For Gorgias claimed he was "never at a loss for words" (DK 82B17). But of course the subject has changed from the nature of rhetoric to the role of virtue in political life. Since Gorgias did not claim to teach virtue, he can scarcely have much to say about this. He seems in fact more interested to hear what Socrates has to say and keeps trying to quiet his own followers, who want to quibble or show off their powers of speech. Gorgias' genial, shame-faced, and polite vacillations give way to the cynical *extermism* of Callicles, as the master rhetorician loses control of the situation and of his own pupil. Having read the dialogue, Gorgias is said to have remarked, "How well Plato knows how to satirize!" (DK 82A15a). His reduction to silence is avenged by Jacques Derrida.

In fact, it seems to me the figure of Gorgias saturates the Platonic text, or at least he may stand as the representative sophist against whom the philosopher constantly fences. Whether Plato is exploring the difficult relation of being to saying in the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*; probing the possible connections between forms and things in the *Parmenides*; or looking on disapprovingly at sophistic abuses of language in the *Euthydemus*—Gorgias or his diffusion into "gorgianism" or just sophistry is always nearby. The fullest, yet most tacit reply, not simply to what Gorgias may have said but to what Gorgias *is*, can be found in the *Phaedrus*. That dialogue is centered on the topic of *logos*, a term which takes in not only the arts of discourse, but the mental powers which deploy them on the road to insight, carried along that road by the motive power of erotic attraction toward a goal that escapes formulation.

The sophist, of course, would not put it this way. The aim of discourse is persuasion, power over others, for their own good, if possible, for the speaker's good without question. Plato shrewdly discerns the issues in that conception. First of all is the inevitable dialectic of masks and domination that it entails. The *Phaedrus* begins with the reading of a speech by the

great orator Lysis, a sophistic display or set piece in which a lover pretends to be a non-lover in order to persuade the boy he loves to yield (the trick is not just to claim that the non-lover is a better lover to yield to, but to give the lover who speaks a [feigned] identity which distinguishes among the boy's pursuers). Or more accurately, Lysis pretends to be a lover pretending to be a non-lover in order to show his skill and seduce boys like Phaedrus to study with him. Or even more accurately, Phaedrus pretends to be Lysis pretending . (in order to - what? Seduce himself? Seduce Socrates?) The boy - or perhaps the god love - has power over the lover, who deploys the Power of language to master the situation, in the process submitting himself to the power of rhetoric, that is, to Lysis, who strangely enough must submit to the monetary power his students have over him by concocting this sort of display piece. Meanwhile, no boy could be so foolish as not to see the point and Socrates with equal ease penetrates the rhetorical pretenses and priteniousness of the speech. Only Phaedrus seems thoroughly taken and taken in, his mind awlirl with talk of love.

Even before the issue arises explicitly, writing and speaking are also at stake. The complex style, interwoven and exaggerated, which Gorgias taught Athens, undecidably combines the deliberateness of written composition with the improvisatory skill of the occasional speaker. Phaedrus has brought the written speech, the scroll sticking out of his tunic, as Socrates, on the watch for things sticking out of tunics, notices. But he has come to practice it, to memorize it, so that he can pretend to speak it spontaneously, under his own inspiration, and perhaps equally to turn it into a model for speaking this way whenever a similar occasion offers (for it would be incredible luck for exactly *this* situation to occur; but what occasion would be "similar" and how would one recognize it is such?). When Socrates replies with an even better speech on the same premisses, Phaedrus learns the power of a speaker who knows what he is talking about. Socrates then leads him to a speech about love and madness whose frank design is to draw him into a life in pursuit of wisdom. This second and "sincere" Socratic speech with its strange interplay of mythos and logos, insight and imagery, turns Phredrus so completely round that he suddenly scorns Lysias and recalls how politicians criticize him as a mere speech-writer. Socrates immediately points to the hypocrisy of those who thus condemn speechwriting, but love to have their names on laws, and he and Phaedrus take up the large question what makes speaking and writing good or bad.

After a discussion of speaking, Socrates turns to writing. But the distinction between bad and good writing becomes a distinction between

writing and a metaphor for writing, a writing "in the soul," that is, Socratic conversation : in fact, writing as such is again condemned without qualification. And thus Plato joins, perhaps, even inaugurates, that mistrustful subordination of writing to speaking, of language to logic, which is the cornerstone, for Derrida, of the "metaphysical tradition." The particular picklocks Derrida uses to break open this vault are widely recognized, if not yet much reflected on. I want to attend to one or two in order to link him to Gorgias.

From the outset, one senses in Derrida's essay a certain sympathy for Theuth, the hard-working Egyptian god who, in Socrates' myth, brings his many inventions, including writing, to Thamus the king for inspection and approval, before they are transmitted to men. Thamus, however, takes an independent view, and condemns writing as conferring only the appearance of memory, learning, and wisdom. Theuth is permitted no reply. Derrida turns to the scholars on Egyptian religion to tell us much more about Theuth : he is the moon, the judge, the guardian of law, guarantor of truth, inventor of writing, of number and measure, of games, patron of archives and libraries, the savior and healer of Seth's severed eye, the god of medicine and equally of magic, the creative word through whom the world was made. Derrida's point is that once Plato lets this indeterminately variable figure into his text, he will be unable to control and limit its affiliations, not simply because they override his conscious meaning, but because they tie together in a rigorous and necessary system the reserve from which he draws the distinctions he needs to articulate that very meaning. But Gorgias' "Apology for Palamedes" defends an inventive trickster precisely parallel to Theuth against Odysseus' accusation that he has betrayed the Greeks to the Trojans. Gorgias' Palamedes mentions his invention of letters, written laws, number, measures and weights, military aids (reportedly, tactics an art parallel to the "putting together" of letters into syllables and of numbers into measurements), powerful beacons, swift messengers (rapid communications) and the game of checkers. Ernst Wst adds that the invention of letters was inspired by observation of the flight of cranes,* and that Palamedes also invented dice, as well as a knowledge of the stars sufficient to set the hours for changing guards. He scorned healing arts already known, but gladly found new ones; some accounted him a magician.⁸ It has been argued both that Socrates drew from Gorgias the doctrine that "no one does wrong willingly" and that his *Apology* systematically echoes the *Palamedes* in order to refute its ethical and rhetorical doctrines.⁹

Gorgias' interest in this mythic polymath is no more accidental than Derrida's interest in Theuth—or Socrates', for that matter. Emerging to prominence in the Fifth Century, myths of the "great discoverers" and of the progress of human reason were enthusiastically adopted by sophists. What is key in a figure like Palamedes or Theuth is measure, that is, putting things together in a way that can be examined by thought (logos). We have a sort of "analysis and synthesis" whose counterpart in Plato is dialectic. Socrates' scepticism about these myths is indicated not only by the displacement from Greece to Egypt, undercutting Greek claims to originality, but also by the introduction of an examination and judgment of inventions. Palamades mentions his inventions, but does not submit them to judgment as part of his defense. Socrates checks Theuth's enthusiastic partisanship by permitting him no reply to Thamus' condemnation of writing. Derrida's strategy, however, is technically sophistic. Quintilian (3.1.10; DK 80B6) attributed to Protogoras and Gorgias the discovery of "general arguments," *loci communes*, the "commonplaces" or "topoi" on which the speaker could draw to alter the proportions things have in the minds of the audience. Likewise, Derrida draws on the realm of opinion, *doxa*, recorded in myth and organized by that encyclopedic literacy the sophists' inaugurated, to extend the figure of Theuth, to enable him to overflow his "place" in the Socratic discourse even while he has been forced into silence.

But not only the figure of Theuth and the strategy of *Toposforschung* is common to Gorgias and Derrida' Gorgias style has been a subject of reproach since antiquity. John D. Denniston asserted that he took "certain qualities inherent in Greek expression, balance and antithesis, and exaggerate[d] them to the point of absurdity."¹⁰ To make the balance more obvious, Gorgias keeps his causes short, equal in number of syllables, and well marked by rhyme and by like case endings. He repeats words, balances the semantic level with synonyms and antonyms, and closely juxtaposes words of similar derivation (paranomasia : monos monoi). While no modern uninflected language can exactly parallel Greek, it is easy to recognize here the resemblance to Derrida. His favourite stylistic devices heap up parallel clauses and words, usually varying slightly their structure, sound, and sense : "the transgression of the law...a law of transgression", "repetition" (doubly nice, since itself a repetition); "the space of silence and the silence of space"; "the truth of the word and the truth which opens itself to the word"; the series "pharmakos/pharmakon/pharmakeus." These strings include figures of thought as well as sound : "Thought in this original reversibility, the *pharmakon* is the *same* precisely because it has no identity. And the same (is) in supplement. Or in difference. In writing." Typically, this series leads us step by step over a considerable

territory. It is a style of antimetabole, paranomasia, repetition, tautology, oxymoron, the joint assertion of mutually exclusive phrases, and of "emboitement," the nesting effect of the *mis en abime*.

Speaking of Gorgias, Denniston sums up, "Starting with the initial advantage of having nothing in particular to say, he was able to concentrate all his energies upon saying it." It may be doubted whether one could thus artfully deploy words without having anything to say, and perhaps such an art may itself have something not unimportant to say. But in any case from Denniston's condemnation we can elicit the positive insight, to return to Jacqueline de Romilly's formulation, that existence is irreducible to thought or speech. The opposition of having something to say and having a way to say it belongs to the separation and subordination of speech to thought, of the rhetorician to the philosopher. But the very question whether having a style disqualifies Gorgias (or Derrida) as a "serious" philosopher is ill-formed, not a neutral inquiry, but a polemical strategy. Gorgias remarked that one should destroy one's opponent's jest with seriousness and his seriousness with jest: what is presumed is a situation of opposition and the labor of undermining the opponent. With whome? With what audience of judges? With what purpose or victory in mind? Gorgias calls his "Encomium of Helen" a *paignion*, a play-thing, and scholars have not hesitated to use the word against him. Are we to see Gorgias merely as the buffon of sophistry, the court jester of the pre-Platonic philosophic scene? Perhaps this is precisely his role - that of the trickster, the shape changer, the master of appearance, who is needed to introduce a certain mobility into a world of wooden mental counters and hostile exchanges. One discovers with Gorgias not exactly "philosophy" in the sense of a dogma one can master and stick to, emerging from it as from a well-constructed fortress to engage the enemy before the walls, but just this mobility of mind which is the experience of thinking, of seeing what can be said on any occasion, in response to any question, briefly or at length.

It is precisely the liberation of language from being and thought that opens space for the play of gorgianic style, for the elaboration of autonomous utterance through tropes and figures. That these bring oratory closer to poetry is entirely appropriate: both, according to Gorgias, rely on *apate*, the power of language to deceive, to create a world of appearance which rises out of the soil of *doxa*, of all that "is said." Such a language excluded the careful distinction of "senses" of terms, each held firmly in place by

reality so as to avoid intercontamination and absent-minded verbal associations and puns. Language is a "a powerful lord," an autonomous power that works "by means of the finest and most invisible body" (DK 82b11.8) to produce its effects like witchcraft on the hearer's soul. What Gorgias feels is his own situation in the human universe of discourse, the ground covered with prior utterance, a world where speeches are bandied back and forth and opinion veers now this way, now that, in a swift and endless whirl.

But again, it would be quite mistaken to set up a sharp opposition of style to thought here, chiefly because that opposition has presumed a certain definition of thought. Both Cicero and Quintilian (DK82A25) observe that Gorgias exploited commonplaces in order to amplify or deflate a subject, to praise or to blame. The Gorgianic art is epideictic, that is, it does not answer the Socratic question, *ti esti*, what is it? But the treatise on not being suggests that this is in its nature an unanswerable question, one that speech qua speech is not concerned with. In Plato's dialogue bearing his name, the master sophist Protagoras with stubborn belligerence refuses the binary oppositions Socrates proffers him, well disguised traps as they are. Gorgias' technique may be more successful: he revels in binaries, but reduces both alternatives to absurdity or impossibility. He offers no synteezizing resolutions of distinctions, but leaves the dilemma undecidable ("indecidable"), indescribable ("indicible"). Gorgias' thinking does not obey a law external to itself, but it does obey a law: the "Helen" ends with the boast, "I have observed the procedure (nomos) which I set up at the beginning of the speech.." (DK 82B11.21) Ernst Lux points out that both the "Helen" and the "Palamades" do not in fact rely on elaborate rhetoric; but on a clear procedure of argumentation.¹¹ In each case a thesis is proposed for defense (Helen is innocent; Palamades is innocent), and then the *opposite* is considered and shown to lead logically to impossibility. The original thesis is then affirmed. The procedure rests on general logical grounds and on *loci communes*: that is, the appeal is to logical reasoning and to thinking through the logical possibilities of accusation in general, not to any empirical facts (in the "Helen", but for the repetition of her name, we would lose sight of her altogether, for nothing at all particular to her or her situation is mentioned; only the most general grounds of argument, applicable to any such case, are brought forward). Any merely emotional appeal is explicitly rejected in the "Palamades." Gorgias does not merely stand for style in opposition to thought, but to a fully developed way of elaborating discourse (logos) completely different from "dialectic."

I certainly need make no special point of what seems to me the close resemblance to Derrida. Throughout the analysis of the *Phaedrus*, Derrida relentlessly pursues unity, system, necessity, rigor, coherence, structure, law, and binary oppositions. His is not a welter of emotional appeals and stylistic flourishes, but a numbingly simplified logic, one aimed like a sword at the "conditions of possibility" of Plato's ideas and especially his distinctions. The reading would lose its exemplary force on any other basis and become merely one more empirical, *ad hoc* interpretation of a single Platonic text. To be sure, the point is to locate the "undecidable" term out of whose reserve are drawn both sides of a hierarchized distinction. But the demonstration would be merely local unless the process shown followed an inescapably general logic. What I want to assert, then, is the possibility of characterizing Derrida's treatment of the *Phaedrus* as "Gorgian." It uses sophistic resources, brought forward out of Plato's own text, to set back into play the world of words Plato is seen as absorbing only in order to silence it the more effectively. Through Derrida, Gorgias leapfrogs Plato.

Plato

In using the dance to figure the relationship I want to establish between Gorgias, Gadamer, Plato, and Derrida, I mean to avoid any simple oppositions or alliances. Derrida is not Gorgias' representative, nor does the possibility of reading Derrida as carrying out a "Gorgian" reading of Plato suggest a possibility of "correction." Still less would I want to equate Gadamer with Plato or set his interpretation of Plato over against Derrida's as merely correct. It is true that both Derrida and Gadamer seem to find in Plato's richly variegated writings at least the issues, if not the answers, central to their own philosophical reflection. This is sometimes claimed to be the situation of every interpreter: as Emerson said, we bring home from the Indies of our reading only the riches we carried with us on the voyage out. In a limited sense, the claim is doubtless true; but in a forceful sense, it is not, and the fact that it is not is just the strength and the weakness of workaday philology. We who are philologists can but rarely claim to "have" a philosophy—we have a few more or less entrenched opinions, most of them borrowed from this thinker or that, the whole a shifting mass or heap underpinned by no very coherent or consistent bed rock of views about things. Such incoherence helps us avoid many local blunders—we do not see far enough into consequences and connections to sense that a particular passage contradicts a cherished prejudice (or illustrates it), and so we feel neither the temptation nor the need to misread it

in a sense more congenial to ourselves. The risk, however, is that we will fail to rise above the local, or above what I will dare to call the merely textual, in order to give our mind to what our author is saying. To understand what our author is saying to us requires that we actually think it. And here the advantage lies with those who can think and think well. Those of us who cannot think quite so well must inevitably turn to those who can in order to learn what we must understand is being said to us. We are left in a paradoxical, indeed an irritating position. Powerful thinkers who interpret other powerful thinker often seem to philologically irresponsible. They commit misreadings and blunders that would embarrass a beginner. Their own thinking is no smooth steel glass in which the author they read is flawlessly mirrored, and we must ceaselessly measure one author against the other, so that we are never confident which we are using to interpret which. Yet these thoughtful interpreters manage to establish an idea, a way of looking at the thing the author interpreted is saying, a way which somehow endures as our best, indeed our only path to that author.

This peculiar situation is the Gadamer has followed relentlessly into the heart of understanding. I can illustrate it with his essay, "Hegel and the Dialectic of the Ancient Philosophers." Hegel believes that in the *Parmenides* of Plato, the sharpening of contradictions through dialectic is not a mere propaedeutic exercise, but has a positive content: Plato wants us to see that "the identical must be recognized in one and the same respect as different."¹² Gadamer comments:

As has long been established, Hegel arrives at this view through a total misunderstanding of passage 259c in the *Sophist*. His translation reads, "what is difficult to grasp yet true is that what is another is the same, and *specifically in one and the same regard*, in reference to the *same aspect*" (XIV 233) What is actually said is that what is difficult to grasp yet true is that when someone says, the same is in some way different, one must inquire in *which* sense and in *which* respect it is different. Taking the same as different in a vague sense without specification of the respect and producing contradictions in this way is, contrary to Hegel's interpretation, expressly characterized as purposeless and as a concern of beginners only.

"There can be no doubt," Gadamer adds, that Hegel's interpretation is "unjustified." Gadamer then proceeds to show "what positive view in this matter Hegel has which makes him convert the meaning of a not particularly obscure passage into its opposite." The details of this demonstration

are not our subject here. But it leads to the conclusion that "even if he is mistaken about specifics" Hegel has "understood Plato's position as a whole correctly." (HD, 24) The core of this "correct understanding" is Hegel's grasp of "that which he sees everywhere where philosophy exists—speculation." (HD, 30) For Gadamer, what sustains this fundamental and orienting insight which Hegel achieves is Hegel's power, only partly conscious, "to conjure up the speculative content hidden in the logical instinct of language." (HD, 31) Precisely from the irreducible ambivalence of Hegel's encounter with Greek thinking, Gadamer achieves a further insight into their common substance: in his words, "the dialectic development of thought and listening to the speculative spirit in one's own language are in the final analysis of the same nature." This insight goes beyond Hegel's understanding of himself, but the fact that reflection on him makes it possible argues for the conclusion Gadamer reaches in *Truth and Method* in a closely related discussion: "Hence whoever wants to learn from the Greeks has always first to learn from Hegel."¹³ It is thus not a question simply of correcting Hegel in the light of our own autonomous and more accurate understanding of Plato. Rather, our most compelling insights into Plato arise when we accept it as our task and our opportunity to interpret him, that is, to think what he says to us, within a historical situation of which Hegel is a decisive moment. The approach to Plato through Hegel has the same advantage Gadamer elsewhere finds in the fragmentary glimpses of Plato we get through Aristotle's critique: precisely because they occur within the fully articulated thought of another major thinker, we know what to make of them.

From this vantage point, what is striking about Derrida's discussion of the *Phaedrus* is not simply the originality of insight liberated by his attention to the theme of writing, but the extent to which his interpretation remains within the tradition of a neo-platonic reading of Plato. Derrida does not question that Plato yearns for essence, truth, presence, a single hierarchy of rigorously distinct concepts which make and "master" all oppositions, a changeless "same" withdrawn from the confusions of ordinary life. He occasionally recognizes that the oppositions he is deconstructing constitute "platonism," considered here as the dominant structure of the history of metaphysics." (D, 172) As he traces the rigorous law or system which simultaneously weaves and unravels Plato's text, Derrida repeatedly raises the issue of "the author's intention," and the repetition indicates a certain embarrassment. He rejects setting up any authorial intention over against the text's actual system of signification and with it rejects establishing the text over against the linguistic or cultural system

which constitutes the conditions of possibility of its signification. What seems obvious, however, is that "Plato's intention," if invoked against Derrida's interpretation, in fact simply abbreviates a rival and traditional interpretation of the text. One may reject that interpretation, but in the name of what? Derrida is forced back on a concept of "necessity": the "Plato" posited by "platonism" is "constrained" to acknowledge the specific incoherence that overtakes his desire for rigorous knowledge, an incoherence which is not external to that desire, but arises within and through the language that brings it into being. Derrida gives us a fresh opposition of thought and language, as "vouloir-dire" and "écriture," as the attempt to "dominate" or "master" language and languages resourceful escape along paths opened by logic's "necessary" self-subversion. Derrida's interpretation forces apart a rigorous system" of the text from a "Plato" (of "platonism") who does not and cannot "intend" that system, but is caught in it by "necessity." Such a conception leaves the status of the interpretive reading problematic. By refusing to speak for Plato, Derrida becomes unable to speak for himself. The "Pharmacie" opens with the assertion that the reading of Plato's writing and the writing of that reading all submit to the logic of supplementarity. But it closes with a hallucination of Plato in a drugstore, engaged in futile efforts to analyze and distinguish, mistaking the echoes of his monologue for dialogue, laboring through the night, disturbed by knocks on the door from outside, which themselves echo *Macbeth*. This caricature solidifies the neo-platonic reading of "Plato" into specular image which arrests the open interplay of readings that forms the interpretative tradition, and by doing so, it conceals the entire problematic of "establishing the text."

Gadamer focuses his discussion of the *Phaedrus* somewhat differently.¹⁴ In all writing, he notes, the question arises whether "there is not in the use of words always already something like a drive toward fixation." This question arises equally sharply at the level of meaning, for "how is the unity and self-identity of something meant and communicated built up into its self-identity in the temporal flow of happening?" Aristotle already stresses that the "universal" arises not from the logic of argument or the coherence of a syllogism, but rather out of *mneme*, memory. Primary is memory's power to hold perceptions until they form a unity and raise themselves into the firmer durability of the universal, built up on *logos*. We are here never far from language and its life of meaning. But Gadamer insists we must widen this Aristotelian analogy between work and concept. He adduces the *phrase*, both in its negative rhetorical sense of

