

§ 13 *Pardes*: The Writing of Potentiality

Pardes

The second chapter of the talmudic treatise *Hagigah* (literally, "Offering") considers those matters that it is permitted to study and those that must not in any case become objects of investigation. The Mishnah with which the chapter opens reads as follows:

Forbidden relationships must not be explained in the presence of three [people]; the work of creation must not be explained in the presence of two [people]; the Chariot [*merkebah*, the chariot of Ezekiel's vision, which is the symbol of mystical knowledge] must not be explained in the presence of one, unless he is a sage who already knows it on his own. It is better never to have been born than to be someone who investigates into the four things. The four things are: what is above; what is below; what is first; and what is after [that is, the object of mystical knowledge, but also metaphysical knowledge, which claims to study the supernatural origin of things].

At 14 b we find the following story, which marks the beginning of a brief cycle of aggadoth concerning Elisha ben Abuya, who is called "Aher" (literally, the "Other") after having sinned:

Four rabbis entered *Pardes*: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aher, and Rabbi Akiba. Rabbi Akiba said, "When you reach the stones of pure marble, do not say: 'Water! Water!' For it has been said that *he who says what is false will not be placed before My eyes.*" Ben Azzai cast a glance and died. Of him Scripture says: *precious to the eyes of the Lord is the death of his saints.* Ben Zoma looked and went mad. Of him Scripture says: *have you found honey? Eat as much as you can, otherwise you will be full and you will vomit.* Aher cut the branches. Rabbi Akiba left unharmed.

According to rabbinical tradition, *Pardes* ("garden," "Paradise") signifies supreme knowledge. In the Cabala, the Shechinah, the presence of God, is thus called *Pardes ha-torah*, the Paradise of the Torah, that is, its fullness, its fulfilled revelation. This gnostic interpretation of the term "Paradise" is common to many heretical movements, both Christian and Jewish. Almeric of Bène, whose followers were burnt at the stake on November 12, 1210, stated that Paradise is "the knowledge of truth, and we should await no other."

The entry of the four rabbis into *Pardes* is therefore a figure for access to supreme knowledge, and the aggadah contains a parable on the mortal risks inherent in this access. What, from this perspective, is the significance of the "cutting of the branches" attributed to Aher in the context of Ben Azzai's death and Ben Zoma's madness? We do not know for certain, but the Cabala identifies the "cutting of the branches" with the gravest sin that can be committed on the road to knowledge. This sin is defined as "isolation of the Shechinah" and consists in the separation of the Shechinah from the other Sefiroth and in the comprehension of it as an autonomous power. For the Cabalists, the Shechinah is the last of the ten Sefiroth, that is, attributes or words of God, and it is the one that expresses the divine presence itself, God's manifestation or dwelling on earth. In cutting the branches (that is, the other Sefiroth), Aher separates the knowledge and revelation of God from the other aspects of divinity.

It is therefore not an accident if, in other texts, the cutting of branches is identified with the sin of Adam, who, instead of contemplating the totality of the Sefiroth, preferred to contemplate only the last one, which seemed in itself to represent all the others. In this way, he separated the tree of knowledge from the tree of life. The Aher-Adam analogy is significant; like Adam, Aher, the "Other," represents humanity insofar as he isolates knowledge, which is nothing other than the fulfilled form of divine manifestation, from the other Sefiroth in which divinity shows itself, making knowledge into his own destiny and specific power. In this condition of "exile," the Shechinah loses its powers and becomes maleficent (with a striking image, the Cabalists say that it "sucks the milk of evil").

Exile

Moses of Leon, the author of the *Zohar*, offers us a different interpretation of the story of the four rabbis. According to his reading, the ag-

gadah is in truth a parable on the exegesis of the sacred text and, more precisely, on the four senses of Scripture. Each of the four consonants of the word *Pardes* refers to one of the senses: P stands for *peshat*, the literal sense; R stands for *ramez*, the allegorical sense; D stands for *derasha*, talmudic interpretation; and S stands for *sod*, the mystical sense. Correspondingly, in the *Tikunei ha-Zohar*, each of the four rabbis incarnates one level of interpretation: Ben Azzai, who enters and dies, is the literal sense; Ben Zoma is the talmudic sense; Aher is the allegorical sense; and Akiba, who enters and leaves unharmed, is the mystical sense. How, from this perspective, is one to understand Aher's sin? In the cutting of the branches and the isolation of the Shechinah we can see a moral risk implicit in every act of interpretation, in every confrontation with a text or discourse, whether human or divine. This risk is that speech, which is nothing other than the manifestation and the unconcealment of something, may be separated from what it reveals and acquire an autonomous consistency. It is significant that the *Zohar* elsewhere defines the isolation of the Shechinah as a separation of the word from the voice (the Sefira *Tipheret*). The cutting of the branches is, therefore, an *experimentum linguae*, an experience of language that consists in separating speech both from the voice and pronunciation and from its reference. A pure word isolated in itself, with neither voice nor referent, with its semantic value indefinitely suspended: this is the dwelling of Aher, the "Other," in Paradise. This is why he can neither perish in Paradise by adhering to meaning, like Ben Zoma and Ben Azzai, nor leave unharmed, like Rabbi Akiba. He fully experiences the exile of the Shechinah, that is, human language. Of him, the Talmud says: "he will not be judged, nor will he enter into the world to come."

Terminus

Benjamin once wrote that terminology is the proper element of thought and that, for every philosopher, the *terminus* in itself encloses the nucleus of his system. In Latin, *terminus* means "limit, border." It was originally the name of a divinity who was still represented in the classical age as an anthropomorphous figure whose body gradually faded away into a dot firmly planted on the ground. In medieval logic, which transmitted the word's current sense to modern languages, a "term" was a word that did not signify itself (*suppositio materialis*) but instead stood for the

thing it signified, referring to something (*terminus supponit pro re, supposito personalis*). According to this conception, a thought without terms—a thought unfamiliar with a point at which thought ceases to refer to itself and is firmly grounded on the soil of reference—is not a philosophical thought. Ockham, the head of the school of philosophers usually defined as “terminists,” therefore excluded from terms in the strict sense conjunctions, adverbs, and other syncategorematic expressions. In the terminology of modern philosophy, it is no longer possible to maintain either the clear opposition between self-reference and reference or the exclusion of syncategorematic terms (if, that is, one admits that it ever was). It was already impossible to say whether certain fundamental terms of Kantian thought (such as the transcendental object and the thing in-itself) were referential or self-referential. Since Kant, moreover, the terminological relevance of syncategorematic expressions has been steadily growing. M. Puder thus noted the importance of the adverb *gleichwohl* in the articulation of Kantian philosophy. And in his Marburg lectures of summer 1927, Heidegger called attention to the frequency of the adverb *schon* and this word’s relevance for the proper determination of the problem of temporality. Even a simple punctuation mark can acquire a terminological character. The strategic importance of hyphens in *Being and Time* (as in the expression “Being-in-the-world”) thus did not escape an observer as attentive as Karl Löwith.

If it is true that, as has been efficiently stated, terminology is the poetry of thought, this displacement and transformation of the properly poetic moment of thought undoubtedly characterizes contemporary philosophy. But this does not mean that philosophical terms have lost their specific sense and that, abandoning its name-giving gesture, philosophy has therefore become indistinguishable from literature and has been returned to the “conversation” of humanity, as some have argued. Philosophical terms remain names, but their referential character can no longer be understood simply according to the traditional scheme of signification; it now implies a different and decisive experience of language. Terms, indeed, become the place of a genuine *experimentum linguae*.

This crisis (in the etymological sense) of terminology is the proper situation of thought today, and Jacques Derrida is the philosopher who has perhaps most radically taken this situation into account. His thought interrogates and calls into question precisely the terminological moment (hence the properly poetic moment) of thinking, exposing its crisis. This

explains the success of deconstruction in contemporary philosophy, as well as the polemics that surround it. Deconstruction suspends the terminological character of philosophical vocabulary; rendered indeterminate, terms seem to float interminably in the ocean of sense. This is not, of course, an operation accomplished by deconstruction out of capriciousness or unnatural violence; on the contrary, precisely this calling into question of philosophical terminology constitutes deconstruction’s insuperable contemporaneity.

Nevertheless, it would be the worst misunderstanding of Derrida’s gesture to think that it could be exhausted in a deconstructive use of philosophical terms that would simply consign them to an infinite wandering or interpretation. Although he calls into question the poetico-terminological moment of thinking, Derrida does not abdicate its naming power; he still “calls” by names (as when Spinoza says, “by *causa sui* I understand . . .,” or when Leibniz writes, “the Monad, of which we will speak here . . .”). For Derrida, there is certainly a philosophical terminology; but the status of this terminology has wholly changed, or more exactly, has revealed the abyss on which it always rested. Like Aher, Derrida enters into the Paradise of language, where terms touch their limits. And, like Aher, he “cuts the branches”; he experiences the exile of terminology, its paradoxical subsistence in the isolation of all univocal reference.

But what is at issue in the terms of Derrida’s thought? What is named by a philosophical terminology that no longer wants to refer to something and yet, at the same time, above all experiences the fact that there are names? What can be the meaning of a *terminus interminatus*? And if all thought defines itself above all through a certain experience of language, what is the *experimentum linguae* of Derrida’s terminology?

Nomen Innomabile

Derrida himself has often defined the status of his own terminology. In the three passages that follow, this status is determined as *nonname*, as undecidable and as trace:

For us, *différance* remains a metaphysical name, and all the names that it receives in our language are still, as names, metaphysical. . . . “Older” than Being itself, such a *différance* has no name in our language. But we “already know” that if it is unnamable, it is provisionally so, not because our language has not yet found or received this *name*, or because we would have to seek it

in another language. . . . It is rather because there is no *name* for it at all, not even the name of essence or of Being, not even that of "*différance*," which is not a name, which is not a pure nominal unity, and unceasingly dislocates itself in a chain of differing and deferring substitutions. . . . This unnamable is not an ineffable Being which no name could approach: God, for example. This unnamable is the play which makes possible nominal effects, the relatively unitary and atomic structures that are called names, the chains of substitutions of names in which, for example, the nominal effect *différance* is itself *enmeshed*, carried off, reinscribed.¹

Henceforth, in order better to mark this interval . . . it has been necessary to analyze, to set to work, *within* the text of the history of philosophy, as well as *within* the so-called literary text . . . certain marks . . . that *by analogy* . . . I have called undecidables, that is, unities of simulacrum, "false" verbal properties (nominal or semantic) that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, but which, however, inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, *without ever* constituting a third term: . . . It is a question of re-marking a nerve, a fold, an angle that interrupts totalization: in a certain place, a place of well-determined form, no series of semantic valences can any longer be closed or reassembled. Not that it opens onto an inexhaustible wealth of meaning or the transcendence of a semantic excess. By means of this angle, this fold, this doubled fold of an undecidable, a mark marks both the marked and the mark, the re-marked site of the mark. The writing which, at this moment, re-marks itself (something completely other than a representation of itself) can no longer be counted on the list of themes (it is not a theme, and can in no case become one); it must be subtracted from (hollow) and added to (relief) the list.²

The relationship between the two texts, between presence in general . . . and that which exceeds it . . . —such a relationship can never offer itself in order to be read in the form of presence, supposing that anything ever can offer itself in order to be *read* in such a form. And yet, that which gives us to think beyond the closure cannot be simply absent. Absent, either it would give us nothing to think or it still would be a negative mode of presence. Therefore the sign of this excess must be absolutely excessive as concerns all possible presence-absence, all possible production or disappearance of beings in general, and yet, *in some manner* it must still signify, in a manner unthinkable by metaphysics as such. In order to exceed metaphysics it is necessary that a trace be inscribed within the text of metaphysics, a trace that continues to signal not in the direction of another presence, or another form of presence, but in the direction of an entirely other text. . . . The mode of inscription of such a trace in the text of metaphysics is so unthinkable that it must be described as an erasure of the trace itself. The trace is produced as its own erasure. And it

belongs to the trace to erase itself, to elude that which might maintain it in presence. The trace is neither perceptible nor imperceptible. . . . Presence, then, far from being, as is commonly thought, *what* the sign signifies, what a trace refers to, presence, then, is the trace of the trace, the trace of the erasure of the trace.³

Paradoxes

What status is ascribed to the term in these three dense passages? First of all, the nonname *différance* (like Derrida's other terms) does not refer to something unnamable or ineffable, a *quid* beyond language for which names would be lacking. What is unnamable is *that there are names* ("the play which makes possible nominal effects"); what is nameless yet in some way signified is the name itself. This is why the point from which every interpretation of Derrida's terminology must depart (its "literal sense," to take up the Cabalistic exegesis of the aggadah of Aher) is its self-referential structure: "the sign of this excess must be absolutely excessive as concerns all possible presence-absence, all possible production or disappearance of beings in general, and yet, *in some manner* it must still signify," "by means of this angle, this fold, this doubled fold of an undecidable, a mark marks both the marked and the mark."

Deprived of its referential power and its univocal reference to an object, the term still *in some manner* signifies itself; it is self-referential. In this sense, even Derrida's undecidables (even if they are such only "by analogy") are inscribed in the domain of the paradoxes of self-reference that have marked the crisis of the logic of our time. Here it is possible to observe the insufficiency of the manner in which both philosophical and linguistic reflection have generally understood the problem of self-reference. This manner owes much to the medieval distinction between *intentio prima* and *intentio secunda*. In medieval logic, an *intentio prima* is a sign that signifies not another sign or an *intentio* but an object; it is a referential term (*signum natum supponere pro suo significato*). An *intentio secunda* is, instead, a sign that signifies an *intentio prima*. But what does it mean to signify a sign, to intend an *intentio*? How is it possible to intend an *intentio* without turning it into an object, an *intentum*? Are the two modes (first and second) of *intentio* truly homogeneous? Do they differ only with regard to their object?

The insufficiency here consists in the fact that *intentio secunda* (the intention of a sign) is thought according to the scheme of *intentio prima*

(reference to an object). Self-reference is thus referred to the acoustic or graphic consistency of the word, that is, to the identity of the term as an object (the *suppositio materialis* of medieval logicians). There is thus, properly speaking, no self-reference, since the term signifies a segment of the world and not intentionality itself. What is understood is not truly an *intentio* but a thing, an *intentum*.

Only if one abandons this first level of self-referentiality (or rather, pseudo-self-referentiality) does one reach the heart of the problem. But everything, for that very reason, is then complicated. For there to be the signification of an intentionality and not of an object, it is necessary that the term signify itself, but *signify itself only insofar as it signifies*. It is thus necessary that the *intentio* neither be a referent nor, for that matter, simply refer to an object. In the semiotic scheme by which *aliquid stat pro aliquo*, A stands for B, the *intentio* cannot indicate the first *aliquid* or the second; it must, rather, above all refer to the "standing for" itself. The aporia of Derrida's terminology is that in it, one *standing for* stands for another *standing for*, without anything like an objective referent constituting itself in its presence. But, accordingly, the very notion of sense (of "standing for") then enters into a state of crisis. This is the root of the particular terseness of Derrida's terminology.

For an intention to refer to itself and not to an object, it must exhaust itself neither in the pure presence of an *intentum* nor in its absence. But the status of Derrida's terminology therefore follows coherently from the notion of trace as it is elaborated in *Speech and Phenomena* and *Of Grammatology*. In its inaugural gesture, the grammatological project appeared above all as a "destruction of the concept of the 'sign'" and as a "liberation of semiotics" in which "the self-identity of the signified retreats and is infinitely dislocated." In Derrida, the irreducible character of signification implies the impossibility of the "extinction of the signifier in the voice" grounding the Western conception of truth. "Trace" names precisely this inextinguishable instance of *repraesentamen* in every presence, this excess of signification in all sense. To return to the terms of medieval logic, there can be neither an *intentio prima* nor an *intentio secunda*; every intention is always *secundo-prima* or *primo-secunda*, such that in it intentionality always exceeds intent and signification always anticipates and survives the signified. This is why

the trace is not only the disappearance of the origin . . . it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin. From

then on, to wrench the concept of the trace from the classical scheme, which would derive it from a presence or from an originary nontrace and which would make of it an empirical mark, one must indeed speak of an originary trace or arche-trace. Yet we know that that concept destroys its name and that, if all begins with the trace, there is above all no originary trace.⁴

The concept "trace" is not a concept (just as "the name 'différance' is not a name"): this is the paradoxical thesis that is already implicit in the grammatological project and that defines the proper status of Derrida's terminology. Grammatology was forced to become deconstruction in order to avoid this paradox (or, more precisely, to seek to dwell in it correctly); this is why it renounced any attempt to proceed by decisions about meaning. But in its original intention, grammatology is not a theory of polysemy or a doctrine of the transcendence of meaning; it has as its object not an equally inexhaustible, infinite hermeneutics of signification but a radicalization of the problem of self-reference that calls into question and transforms the very concept of meaning grounding Western logic.

From this perspective, the central paradox of grammatology ("The concept 'trace' is not a concept") strikingly recalls the paradox that Frege, in 1892, stated in "Object and Concept," and which was the first sign of the crisis that a few years later shook the edifice of formal logic: "the concept 'horse' is not a concept." Frege's paradox (as defined by Philippe de Rouilhac in a recent book) consists in the fact that every time we *name* a concept (instead of using it as a predicate in a proposition), it ceases to function as a concept and appears as an object. We think we mean an object (*ein Begriff gemeint ist*) but, instead, we are naming an object (*ein Gegenstand genannt ist*); we intend an *intentio* but we find ourselves before an *intentum*.⁵

Frege's paradox is thus the consequence of a more general principle that can be stated in the following fashion: *a term cannot refer to something and, at the same time, refer to the fact that it refers to it*. Or, taking up the White Knight's line in *Through the Looking-Glass*: "the name of the name is not the name." It is worth noting that this "White Knight's theorem" lies at the basis both of Wittgenstein's thesis according to which "we cannot express through language what expresses *itself* in language" and Milner's linguistic axiom, "the linguistic term has no proper name."⁶ In each case, what is essential is that if I want to say an *intentio*, to name the name, I will no longer be able to distinguish between word and thing, concept and object, the term and its reference.

As Reich showed for Carnap's attempt to name the name through quo-

tation marks and as is implicit in Gödel's theorem, the logicians' expedients to avoid the consequences of this radical anonymity of the name are destined to fail. It does not suffice, however, to underline (on the basis of Gödel's theorem) the necessary relation between a determinate axiomatics and undecidable propositions: what is decisive is solely how one conceives this relation. It is possible to consider an undecidable as a purely negative *limit* (Kant's *Schranke*), such that one then invokes strategies (Bertrand Russell's theory of types or Alfred Tarski's metalanguage) to avoid running up against it. Or one can consider it as a *threshold* (Kant's *Grenze*), which opens onto an exteriority and transforms and dislocates all the elements of the system.

This is why the notion of "trace" constitutes the specific achievement of Derrida's thought. He does not limit himself to reformulating logical paradoxes; rather, like Heidegger—who in *On the Way to Language* wrote, "there is no word for the word," and proposed an experience of language in which language itself came to language—Derrida makes these paradoxes into the place of an experiment in which the very notion of sense must be transformed and must give way to the concept of trace. But why does the attempt to name the name now take the form of "a writing without presence and without absence, without history, without cause, without *archē*, without *telos*, absolutely dislocating all dialectics, all theology, all teleology, all ontology"? What is the nature of Derrida's *experimentum linguae*, if it must have the form of writing?

Scribe

The late Byzantine lexicon that goes under the name of *Suda* contains, in the entry "Aristotle," the following definition: *Aristotelēs tēs physeōs grammateus ēn ton kalamon apobrekhōn eis noun*, "Aristotle was the scribe of nature who dipped his pen in thought." In a slightly altered form, this definition had already appeared in Cassiodorus (and was then passed on to Bede and Isidore of Seville), where it characterized not the "scribe of nature" but, instead, Aristotle the logician: *Aristoteles, quando perihermeneias scriptabat, calamum in mente tingebat*, "When he wrote *De interpretatione*, Aristotle dipped his pen in thought." According to this tradition, the work grounding the Western conception of linguistic signification and its link to thought was written "by dipping a pen in thought." Thought was able to write about the relation between language

and thought and between thought and the world only by referring purely to itself, filling its pen with the ink of its own opacity.

What is the origin of this striking metaphor? What in Aristotle's text could have authorized the image of a "writing of thought"? And what would such a writing be?

A comparison between thought and the act of writing is contained in the famous passage of *De anima* (430 a 1) in which Aristotle likens the potential intellect to a writing tablet (*grammateion*) on which nothing is written: "the mind [*nous*] is like a writing tablet on which nothing is actually written." This famous image of a *tabula rasa* (or rather, as Alexander of Aphrodisias suggests, of a *rasum tabulae*, that is, of the light stratum of wax on which the pen inscribed characters) is contained in the section of *De anima* devoted to the potential or passive intellect (*nous pathetikos*). The nature of the intellect is such that it is pure potentiality (429 a 21–22: "It [*nous*] has no other nature other than that of being potential, and before thinking it is absolutely nothing"). *Nous* is thus a potentiality that exists as such, and the metaphor of the writing tablet on which nothing is written expresses the way in which a pure potentiality exists. All potential to be or do something is, for Aristotle, always also potential not to be or not to do (*dynamis mē einai, dynamis mē energein*), without which potentiality would always already have passed into act and be indistinguishable from it (this is the thesis held by the Megarians, whom Aristotle explicitly refutes in Book Theta of the *Metaphysics*). This *potential not to* is the cardinal secret of the Aristotelian doctrine of potentiality, which transforms every potentiality in itself into an impotentiality (*pasa dynamis adynamia* [*Metaphysics*, 1046 a 32]). Just as the geometer is a geometer because he is capable of not doing geometry, and just as the kithara player is a kithara player because he is capable of not playing the kithara, so thought exists as a potential not to think (the potential intellect of the medievals), as a writing tablet on which nothing is written. The pure potentiality of thought is a potentiality that is capable of not thinking, that is capable of not passing into actuality. But this pure potentiality (the *rasum tabulae*) is itself intelligible; it can itself be thought: "it [the intellect] is intelligible like other intelligibles" (*De anima*, 430 a 2).

It is in the light of this conception of potentiality that we must read the passage of *De anima* in which Aristotle repeats the argument of Book Lambda of the *Metaphysics* concerning thinking that thinks itself: "When the mind [the potential intellect] has actually become all [of the intelli-

gibles], as the learned man when active is said to do (and this happens when he can exercise his function by himself), even then the mind is in a sense potential . . . and is then capable of thinking itself" (429 b 6–10).⁷ The thinking of thinking is first of all a potential to think (and *not to think*) that is turned back upon itself, *potentia potentiae*. Only on this basis is it possible to comprehend fully the doctrine of Book Lambda on *noēsis noēseōs*, the "thinking of thinking"; pure actuality, that is, the actuality of an act, is pure potentiality, that is, the potentiality of a potentiality.

The apothegm on the scribe of nature who dips his pen in thought thus acquires its proper sense as the image of a *writing of potentiality*. Aristotle could write his logical works (that is, those that treat the pure potentiality of thought and language) only by dipping his pen in *nous*, that is, in pure potentiality. Potentiality, which turns back on itself, is an absolute writing that no one writes: a potential to be written, which is written by its own potential not to be written, a *tabula rasa* that suffers its own receptivity and can therefore *not not-write itself*. According to Albert the Great's felicitous intuition in his commentary on *De anima: hoc simile est, sicut diceremus, quod litterae scribent se ipsas in tabula*, it is as if "the letters wrote themselves on the tablet."

Matter

It is in the context of this writing of the potentiality that no one writes that we must situate Derrida's concept of the trace and its aporias. The trace is nothing other than the most rigorous attempt to reconsider—against the primacy of actuality and form—the Aristotelian paradox of potentiality, the gesture of the scribe who dips his pen in thought and writes solely with his potentiality (not to write). The trace, writing "without presence or absence, without history, without cause, without *arkhē*, without *telos*," is not a form, nor is it the passage from potentiality to actuality; rather, it is a potentiality that is *capable* and that experiences itself, a writing tablet that suffers not the impression of a form but the imprint of its own passivity, its own formlessness.

But everything is then once again complicated. For what can it mean to think neither a thing nor a thought, but a pure potential to think, to name neither objects nor referential terms, but the pure *dynamis* of

speech, to write neither texts nor letters, but the pure potential to write? What does it mean to experience a potentiality, to experience a passivity, if the words "experience" and "passion" still have meaning here? Does the aporia of self-reference, which the writing of potentiality aimed to resolve, not then return once again?

A passage from Plotinus's treatise "On the Two Matters" poses precisely these questions. How, Plotinus asks, is it possible to conceive of a non-form (*amorphon*) and an indetermination (*aoristia*)? How is it possible to grasp what has neither size nor form? Only through an indetermination will it be possible to conceive of an indetermination:

What, then, is this indetermination in the Soul? Does it amount to an utter absence of Knowledge [*agnoia*], as if the Soul or Mind had withdrawn? No: the indeterminate has some footing in the sphere of affirmation. The eye is aware of darkness as a base capable of receiving any colour not yet seen against it: so the Mind, putting aside all attributes perceptible to sense—all that corresponds to light—comes upon a residuum which it cannot bring under determination: it is thus in the state of the eye which, when directed towards darkness, has become in some way identical with the object of its spurious vision. There is vision, then, in this approach of the Mind toward Matter? Some vision, yes; of shapelessness, of colourlessness, of the unlit, and therefore of the sizeless. More than this would mean that the Soul is already bestowing Form. But is not such a void precisely what the Soul experiences [*pathos*] when it has no intellection whatever? No: in that case it affirms nothing, or rather has no experience: but in knowing Matter, it has an experience, what may be described as the impact of the shapeless [*paskhei pathos hoion typon tou amorphou*].⁸

In the dark, the eye does not see anything but is, as it were, affected by its own incapacity to see; in the same way, perception here is not the experience of something—a formless being—but rather perception of its own formlessness, the self-affection of potentiality. Between the experience of something and the experience of nothing there lies the experience of one's own passivity. The trace (*typos, ikhnos*) is from the beginning the name of this self-affection, and what is experienced in this self-affection is the event of matter. The aporias of self-reference thus do not find their solution here; rather, they are dislocated and (according to the Platonic suggestion) transformed into *euporias*. The name can be named and language can be brought to speech, because self-reference is displaced onto

the level of potentiality; what is intended is neither the word as object nor the word insofar as it *actually* denotes a thing but, rather, a pure potential to signify (and not to signify), the writing tablet on which nothing is written. But this is no longer meaning's self-reference, a sign's signification of itself; instead, it is the materialization of a potentiality, the materialization of its own possibility. Matter is not a formless *quid aliud* whose potentiality suffers an impression; rather, it can exist as such because it is the materialization of a potentiality through the passion (*typos, ikhnos*) of its own impotentiality. The potential to think, experiencing itself and being capable of itself as potential not to think, makes itself into the trace of its own formlessness, a trace that no one has traced—pure matter. In this sense, the trace is the passion of thought and matter; far from being the inert substratum of a form, it is, on the contrary, the result of a process of materialization.

In the *Timaeus*, Plato gives us the model of such an experience of matter. *Khōra*, place (or rather nonplace), which is the name he gives to matter, is situated between what cannot be perceived (the Idea, the *anaisthēton*) and what can be perceived (the sensible, perceptible as *aisthēsis*). Neither perceptible nor imperceptible, matter is perceptible *met' anaisthēsiās* (a paradoxical formulation that must be translated as “with the absence of perception”). *Khōra* is thus the perception of an imperception, the sensation of an *anaisthēsis*, a pure taking-place (in which truly nothing takes place other than place).

This is why Aristotle develops his theory of matter as potentiality on the basis of Timaeus's *khōra*. Like the eye when it is confronted with darkness, the faculty of sensation, we read in *De anima*, can sense its own lack of sensation, its own potentiality. Potential thought (the Neoplatonists speak of two matters, one sensible and one intelligible), the writing tablet on which nothing is written, can thus think itself. It thinks its own potentiality and, in this way, makes itself into the trace of its own formlessness, writes its own unwrittenness while letting itself take place in separating itself (*ho de nous khōristos*, 429 b 5).

Derrida's trace, “neither perceptible nor imperceptible,” the “re-marked place of a mark,” pure taking-place, is therefore truly something like the experience of an intelligible matter. The *experimentum linguae* that is at issue in grammatological terminology does not (as a common misunderstanding insists) authorize an interpretative practice directed toward the

infinite deconstruction of a text, nor does it inaugurate a new formalism. Rather, it marks the decisive event of matter, and in doing so it opens onto an ethics. Whoever experiences this ethics and, in the end, finds his matter can then dwell—without being imprisoned—in the paradoxes of self-reference, being capable of not not-writing. Thanks to Aher's obstinate dwelling in the exile of the Shechinah, Rabbi Akiba can enter the Paradise of language and leave unharmed.