

On the problematic origin of the forms: Plotinus, Derrida, and the neoplatonic subtext of deconstruction's critique of ontology

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Abstract. My aim in this paper is to draw Plotinus and Derrida together in a comparison of their respective appropriations of the famous “receptacle” passage in Plato’s *Timaeus* (specifically, Plotinus’ discussion of intelligible matter in *Enneads* 2.4 and Derrida’s essay on *Timaeus* entitled “*Khōra*”). After setting the stage with a discussion of several instructive similarities between their general philosophical projects, I contend that Plotinus and Derrida take comparable approaches both to thinking the origin of the forms and to problematizing the stability of the sensible/intelligible opposition. With these parallels in focus, I go on to explain how examining such points of contact can help us to dismantle the canonical constructs of “Plotinus the metaphysician” and “Derrida the anti-metaphysician” that have obscured important connections between Neoplatonism and deconstruction, and suppressed latent resources within the Platonic tradition itself for deconstructing the dualistic ontology of so-called “Platonic metaphysics.”

Until recently, the idea that there might be substantive parallels between the traditions of Neoplatonism and deconstruction has been all but unthinkable for English-speaking philosophers. This fact isn’t surprising given that deconstruction came to fashion in North America in the late nineteen-sixties as an anti-philosophy, a literary method for uncovering and discrediting every last vestige of “Platonism” in the Western canon. By the late seventies, Richard Rorty was promoting deconstruction in the philosophical mainstream as a tool for overthrowing modern “representationalist epistemology” and the “Platonic metaphysics” it allegedly presupposed.¹ And by the early eighties, the association of deconstruction with anti-platonism (anti-metaphysics, anti-transcendence) had been firmly entrenched in the common sense of most philosophers.

It was the late eighties before this anti-platonist caricature of deconstruction began to lose its grip. In the wake of texts like Christopher Norris’s *Derrida*, John Caputo’s *Radical Hermeneutics*, and Rodolphe Gasche’s *The Tain of the Mirror*, it became increasingly respectable to understand deconstruction as an inquiry into the transcendent origins of language and world, albeit an inquiry that privileges a logic of difference and negation to that of straightforward analysis.² Throughout the nineties and into the present, a growing number of English-speaking philosophers (continentalists and medievalists alike) have

associated this alternative logic of transcendence with the negative dialectics of the Neoplatonic tradition.³

But if this burgeoning Anglo-American interest in the Neoplatonic resonances of Derrida's philosophical project is a comparatively recent phenomenon, it is not for lack of early and frequently recurring cues in this direction from Derrida himself.⁴ Indeed, Derrida has explicitly acknowledged these resonances in numerous texts from the outset of his career onward, repeatedly situating his work in relation to "a tradition of the 'via negativa' which . . . accords its possibility to a Greek – Platonic or Plotinian – tradition that persists until Heidegger and beyond: the thought of that which is beyond being (*epekeina tes ousias*)."⁵

The 'or' Derrida places between 'Platonic' and 'Plotinian' is significant here, for it is precisely Plotinus' appropriations of Plato's most perplexing and oft-neglected offerings (*Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Timaeus*) that make it difficult to decide where Platonism-proper ends and something else begins. To be sure, the "negative way" that Plotinus (and, I will argue, Derrida) finds in Plato is something quite other than the cut-and-dried metaphysical dualism often associated with "Platonism." What is at stake for this "other" tradition of Plato interpretation, I will suggest, is an implicit critique of the methodological assumptions and conceptual hierarchies that are often presumed to be Platonic orthodoxies.⁶

To this end, I attempt in what follows to draw Plotinus and Derrida together in a comparison of their respective appropriations of the famous "receptacle" passage in Plato's *Timaeus*⁷ (specifically, Plotinus' discussion of intelligible matter in *Enneads* 2.4⁸ and Derrida's essay on *Timaeus* entitled "*Khōra*"). After setting the stage with a discussion of several instructive similarities between their general philosophical projects, I contend that Plotinus and Derrida take comparable approaches both to thinking the origin of the forms and to problematizing the stability of the sensible/intelligible opposition. With these parallels in focus, I go on to explain how examining such points of contact can help us to dismantle the canonical constructs of "Plotinus the metaphysician" and "Derrida the anti-metaphysician" that have obscured important connections between Neoplatonism and deconstruction, and suppressed latent resources within the Platonic tradition itself for deconstructing the dualistic ontology of so-called "Platonic metaphysics."

I

To bolster confidence in the perhaps unlikely enterprise of drawing Plotinus and Derrida together as readers of an "other" Plato, it will be useful to

begin with a survey of several striking similarities between their respective approaches to philosophical inquiry. First and foremost, both Plotinian Neoplatonism and Derridean deconstruction are *aporetic* in structure; that is, both endeavors are directed toward and disciplined by a philosophical impasse or *aporia* that is recognized from the outset to be beyond the reach of conceptualization.

For Plotinus, the *aporia* unfolds as an attempt to understand how the multiplicity of the universe is derived from transcendent unity. In addressing this problem, Plotinus posits a dynamic process of emanation that he expounds in terms of three hierarchically ascending intelligible hypostases: soul, intellect, and the One.⁹ He characterizes this emanation in terms of both procession and reversion; though the lower principles proceed from the One and are thereby differentiated from it, they have their being in reverting back toward the One even as they are disseminated.

Though all being is in some sense “caused” by the One in this dynamic participatory process, the One itself transcends being and thereby ruptures any attempt to explain emanation in terms of temporal priority¹⁰ or a simple logic of cause and effect. Rather, at the origin of each derivative hypostasis, cause and effect are indistinguishable in so far as the effect is a perfectly unified determinate expression of its cause. Consequently, there is no decidable moment at which the One gives way to intellect or the intellect gives way to soul; on the contrary, pure soul is indistinguishable from intellect as pure intellect is indistinguishable from the One. In this respect, the process of emanation is characterized by the simultaneous appearance and disappearance of the One in the lower hypostases; the One is paradoxically *ever* present in intellect and soul as trace, though it is *never* present in itself as beyond being.¹¹

Derrida confronts a similar *aporia* in attempting to understand the origin of language as a primordial difference against which the opposed terms of conceptual oppositions (sensible/intelligible, immanence/transcendence, etc.) become distinguishable from one another, and thereby meaningful as delimitive concepts. Though the origin of language is traditionally explained in terms of the duplication and transmission of an originary presence (logos, intelligibility, cognition, etc.), Derrida argues that the concept of presence itself is intelligible only within the context of the dyadic opposition “presence/absence.” This opposition, in turn, is intelligible only on the basis of an originary difference that cannot depend, for obvious reasons, on a previously disclosed presence.

To set apart this primordial difference from the concept of difference that is the dyadic counterpart to the concept of sameness, Derrida names it *différance*. Since *différance* is what makes it possible to constitute the differences that give rise to meaningful concepts, it follows that it cannot itself be conceptualized

except approximately in terms of the conceptual oppositions it engenders.¹² Thus, *différance* both appears and disappears in what it produces; for if it vanishes behind determinate conceptual oppositions in producing them, it can be glimpsed, if only provisionally, in those oppositions as a trace. Like the One, then, *différance* has the aporetic status of a non-temporal (or perhaps “pre-originary”) origin that can be conceived as such only indirectly by working backward from the traces it engenders.

Given this structural kinship between their projects, it is not altogether surprising that Plotinus and Derrida employ similar discursive strategies in their respective attempts to describe the indescribable. First of all, both thinkers are keenly aware that the privileged methodology of traditional philosophy – direct and systematic predication through logical analysis – is an insufficient means for attempting the task at hand. At the same time, neither thinker denies the continuing importance of logical analysis to their endeavors; the challenge for both is to trace the *logos* to the limits of its power while attempting to discern, at those limits, the provisional indications of that which lies beyond them. Their shared commitment to the employment of this “trace logic”¹³ is exemplified strikingly in the following passages from the *Enneads* and *Of Grammatology* respectively:

Since to say it [the One] is the cause is to predicate an attribute not of it, but of us, in that we have something from it, [it] which exists in itself. But he who speaks accurately should not say ‘it’ or ‘exists’, but we circle around it on the outside, as it were, wishing to communicate our impressions, sometimes coming near, sometimes falling back on account of the dilemmas that surround it.¹⁴

Since these concepts [the dyadic oppositions of western metaphysics] are indispensable for unsettling the heritage to which they belong, we should be even less prone to renounce them. Within the closure, by an oblique and always perilous movement, constantly risking falling back within what is being deconstructed, it is necessary to surround the critical concepts with a careful and thorough discourse – to mark the conditions, the medium, and the limits of their effectiveness and to designate rigorously their intimate relationship to the machine whose deconstruction they permit; and, in the same process, designate the crevice through which the yet unnamable glimmer beyond the closure can be glimpsed.¹⁵

In seeking to glimpse the “unnamable glimmer” beyond the conceptual “dilemmas that surround it,” however, this “trace logic” avails itself of more than just those traces of the beyond that manifest themselves at the limits of conceptual analysis. Indeed, for Plotinus and Derrida alike, conceptual analysis is but one of many finite human discourses that bear traces leading back

to the *aporia* at their origin – among them analogical, allegorical, mythological, and even artistic discourses. Accordingly, both philosophers are perfectly comfortable with deferring to these other discourses and employing them as complements, supplements, or foils when “rational” discourse inevitably founders.

Compare, for instance, the following two passages in which Plotinus and Derrida respectively affirm a surprisingly close kinship between *logos* and *mythos* – two traditionally opposed discourses which are deemed here to complement one another as alternative modes of access to questions regarding “things ungenerated”:

But myths, if they are really going to be myths, must separate in time the things of which they tell, and set apart from each other many realities which are together, but distinct in rank or powers, at points where rational discussions, also, make generations of things ungenerated, and themselves, too, separate things which are together; the myths, when they have taught us as well as they can, allow the man who has understood them to put together again that which they have separated.¹⁶

Shall we gain access to the thought of the *khōra* by continuing to place our trust in the alternative *logos/mythos*? And what if this thought called *also* for a third genus of discourse? And what if, perhaps as in the case of the *khōra*, this appeal to the third genre was only the moment of a detour in order to signal toward a genre beyond genre? Beyond categories, and above all beyond categorical oppositions, which in the first place allow it to be approached or said?¹⁷

Plotinus and Derrida seem to agree, then, that – in Derrida’s words – “this meshing of the mythological and the philosophical points to some more deeply buried necessity.”¹⁸

There is apparent concurrence, as well, that traces of this “deeply buried necessity” are also to be found in the similar and equally unheralded “meshing” of *logos* and the much maligned mimetic arts. In a discussion in *Enneads* 5.8 on the role of artistic beauty in the Platonic ascent to the Good (beyond being), Plotinus puts the point as follows:

But if anyone despises the arts because they produce their works by imitating nature, we must tell him, first, that natural things are imitations too. Then he must know that the arts do not simply imitate what they see, but they run back up to the forming principles from which nature derives; then also that they do a great deal by themselves, and, since they possess beauty, they make up what is defective in things.¹⁹

Derrida paints a similar picture in “The Double Session,” where he assesses the duplicitous relation of *mimesis* to *logos* as it functions in the Platonic *corpus*:

But painting, that degenerate...and supplementary frill of discursive thought...also plays a role that seems to be just the opposite of this. It functions as a pure indicator of the essence of a thought or discourse defined as image, representation, repetition. If *logos* is first and foremost a faithful image of the *eidos*...of what is, then it arises as a sort of primary painting, profound and invisible. In that case painting in its usual sense, a painter’s painting, is really only the painting of a painting. Hence it can reveal the essential pictoriality, the representativity, of *logos*. [...] The painter...is able, through an exercise of analysis, separation, and impoverishment, precisely to purify the pictorial, imitative, imaginal essence of thought. The painter, then, knows how to restore the naked image of the thing, the image as it presents itself to simple intuition[.]²⁰

What is intriguing about these examples is not just that Plotinus and Derrida concur in their accordance of philosophical significance to the traditionally marginalized discourses of myth and the mimetic arts, but also – and more importantly for our purposes – that they elicit these insights from the very Platonic texts that the received interpretation of “Platonism” has used to deny the philosophical significance of myth and the arts. In addition to highlighting important similarities between the ways Plotinus and Derrida approach philosophical inquiry, then, these examples lend credibility to the guiding suggestion that an “other” Plato is in play in their readings of the Platonic *corpus*.

The emergence of this “other” Plato in the writings of Plotinus and Derrida sheds light as well on the way that their general approaches to philosophical inquiry influence the way they interpret particular philosophical texts. Rather than subjecting a text to systematic commentary, both thinkers practice what I call “epiphanic” exegesis: they find in the text a particularly important and often mysterious philosophical insight (perhaps no more than a paragraph or even a single sentence in length) and then go on to show how this epiphany both illuminates the text at issue and serves as a catalyst for reflection beyond what is overtly stated in the text.

For Plotinus, this epiphany is the *ennoia*, a moment of transcendent inspiration whose conceptual unfolding parallels emanation from the One. Like the One, the *ennoia* cannot be grasped as an object of propositional knowledge; rather, it is the enigmatic source from which propositions are derived. For this reason, the *ennoia* hidden in a given text cannot be brought to light by systematic commentary, but must be elicited using methods consistent with the

logic of the trace: short citations, brief paraphrases, fragmentary references, and recurring motifs.²¹

Though Derrida reads texts as traces of *différance* rather than finite insights into transcendent *ennoia*, his methods are remarkably similar. Instead of affirming or rejecting a text's standard interpretation, he attempts to solicit the aporetic insights hidden within it by tracing recurring themes to the limits of their intelligibility, playing key passages against one another, and uncovering great importance in what might seem on the face of it to be the least significant detail.²² As Derrida sees it, the value of a text is not reducible to the success of its arguments, and it is often the case that the most illuminating insights are revealed precisely at those junctures where the arguments break down. Like Plotinus, then, Derrida approaches texts as open-ended invitations to philosophical epiphany rather than as finished works to be tested for systematic coherence.

In summary, three instructive similarities between Plotinian Neoplatonism and Derridean deconstruction have come to the fore: first, each takes its departure from an *aporia* that is deemed to be beyond the reach of conceptualization; second, each employs a "trace logic" that seeks to discern provisional indications of the "beyond" within the limits of the various modes of understanding at its disposal; and third, each practices "epiphanic exegesis" in order to solicit such indications from other texts.

II

With these general similarities between the philosophical projects of Plotinus and Derrida in view, the stage is set for elucidating the significant parallels between their specific discussions of the problematic origin of the forms. The catalyst for these discussions is the curious passage in Plato's *Timaeus* in which Timaeus posits the necessity of a "third kind" of principle element (over and against the "intelligible" and "sensible") that serves as "the 'receptacle' of all generation."²³ What is intriguing about this "receptacle" is that, from Timaeus' description, it seems to have both intelligible and sensible characteristics despite its alleged status as the "womb" from which these first two kinds are given birth. Moreover, the appeal to this "third kind" (also known as *khōra* (χώρα)) has unsettling implications for so-called "Platonic" ontology, given that it upsets the traditional hierarchy of form over matter by placing a decidedly matter-like "emptiness" at the source of the forms.

To facilitate a fruitful comparison between the Plotinian and Derridean discussions of this constellation of issues, it will be helpful on the outset to

clarify two brief strategic considerations. First, because Plotinus and Derrida address the primordial “emptiness” in question under different names – “intelligible matter” and “*khōra*” respectively – it will increase the plausibility of the comparison to demonstrate, in advance, that there is a close conceptual linkage between the matters for thinking given under these different names. In “Intelligible Matter and Plotinus,” Dmitri Nikulin provides just such a demonstration, observing that intelligible matter is “tightly connected” with the imagination, a faculty that “corresponds to $\chi\acute{\omega}\rho\alpha$ ” in that it

is not any thing defined but is close to non-being, a mere possibility of embodiment or accepting something (cp. *Tim.* 52a). But this “plenum” is not merely a privative non-being, mere nothingness, but represents being as well, since it is present primarily not in physical or bodily things but in the noetic objects.²⁴

Like the imagination, Nikulin continues, “intelligible matter is a ‘plenum’ and $\chi\acute{\omega}\rho\alpha$ as empty” rather than as “a definite place for embodiment of intelligible objects.”²⁵ In short, intelligible matter, like *khōra*, gives place to the forms without determining their content in any respect whatsoever.

But if it is plausible to interpret independent discussions of intelligible matter and *khōra* as addressed to the same cluster of problems, it is crucial to point out that there is more at stake in this comparison than the juxtaposition of two parallel secondary readings of an oft-neglected puzzle at the margins of “Platonism.” What merits attention here, rather, is the similarity between the ways in which Plotinus and Derrida appropriate Plato in advancing their own positive projects: in each case, a marginal and mysterious Platonic insight that sits ill with the prospect of articulating a systematic “Platonic” ontology becomes the guiding light of an attempt to glimpse the provenance, beyond (or at least otherwise than) being, of the intelligible entities (forms, concepts) through which being is ordered and understood. The aim, in summary, is not just to compare Plotinus and Derrida as commentators on Plato, but to appreciate how their original appropriations of a peculiar Platonic insight simultaneously cut against the grain of “Platonism” and open new possibilities both for thinking alongside Plato and for understanding the complexity of Plato’s legacy to the history of metaphysics.

Plotinus’ dealings with this insight arise, among other places, in *Enneads* 2.4, where he distinguishes between sensible and intelligible matter. He argues that these two types of matter correspond to two “diametrically opposed” types of indeterminacy. Sensible matter is indeterminate in that it is “all things in turn and only one thing at each particular time; so nothing lasts because one thing pushes out another.”²⁶ As a mutable substratum subject to the prior forms

that give it shape, sensible matter is utterly alien to the good of existence and is therefore identified with absolute privation itself: non-being/evil.²⁷ By equating matter with non-being, however, Plotinus isn't suggesting that matter simply doesn't exist; in this context, he explains, "non-being does not mean absolute non-being but only something other than being."²⁸ He describes this "something other" in terms of a "vision of shapelessness" that the soul perceives only with respect to a whole of two components: "it thinks the whole and the compound of both elements [matter and form]; and the thought or perception of the overlying elements [form] is clear, but that of the substrate [matter], the shapeless, is dim, for it is not a form."²⁹ In this respect, the soul can be said to "know" sensible matter only by reference to a privileged intelligible form.³⁰

Given his discussion of sensible matter alone, Plotinus' account might seem a textbook case of what Derrida would call "logocentric metaphysics."³¹ But the indeterminacy of matter as "all things in turn" is not the end of the story. Intelligible matter, by contrast, is indeterminate in that it is "all things at once": "it has nothing to change into, for it has all things already."³² Eternal and immutable, intelligible matter is the permanent substratum in which the form-ideas themselves are differentiated and thereby rendered intelligible as distinct in their unity. As the distinguishing difference to which even the form-ideas owe their identity, intelligible matter is the originary derivative of the One: "that which is before [intelligible matter] is beyond being."³³

In its close logical proximity to the One, then, intelligible matter has an exceedingly curious ontological status. Insofar as intelligible matter is distinguishable from the One, it cannot properly be classed as beyond being. But as the "necessary "substrate" of the forms in being which is "prior" to being," intelligible matter is equally alien to the realm of "being" proper.³⁴ Moreover, its priority over sensible matter precludes its classification as run-of-the-mill "non-being." But if intelligible matter is neither beyond being, nor being, nor non-being, in what sense can it be said to exist? Only, one might conclude, in an indefinite sense, namely, in that of the "indefinite dyad," the primary source and potentiality of multiplicity that, in turning towards the One, "receives, as if, a double definition: both from the One and from the multitude of the forms which form the structure of all-unity."³⁵ In short, we must glimpse intelligible matter, however provisionally and paradoxically, as existing somehow "between" being (form-ideas) and beyond-being (the One) on the one hand, and "between" being (form-ideas) and non-being (sensible matter) on the other.³⁶

From this description, it is not difficult to see why the priority Plotinus accords to intelligible matter would be cause for alarm from the perspective of the received interpretation of "Platonism." For at the very inception of the forms themselves, "before" the advent of the intellect that putatively

reflects and transmits their presence into the shadowy world of sensible matter, Plotinus locates a strange and undecidable emptiness, indeed, an intelligible double of matter that would seem – notwithstanding its alleged intelligibility – to compromise the purity of the forms and to contaminate their presence with absence, their intelligibility with sensibility, their being with non-being.

It is precisely the problem of this “contamination” at the genesis of intelligibility that has been the animus of Derrida’s project from the very beginning, and that has motivated his sustained interest in the thought of *khōra*. In prefacing the 1990 publication of his 1953 dissertation on Husserl and the problem of genesis, Derrida retrospectively sums up the trajectory of his thought from the dissertation onward as follows:

It is always a question of an originary complication of the origin, of an initial contamination of the simple, of an inaugural divergence that no analysis could *present, make present* in its phenomenon or reduce to the pointlike nature of the element, instantaneous and identical to itself. In fact the question that governs the whole trajectory is already: “How can the originary of a foundation be an *a priori* synthesis? How can everything start with a complication?” All the limits on which phenomenological discourse is constructed are examined from the standpoint of a fatal necessity of a “contamination” (“unperceived entailment or dissimulated contamination” between the two edges of the opposition: transcendental/ “worldly”, eidetic/empirical, intentional/nonintentional, active/passive, present/non-present, pure/impure, etc.), the quaking of each border coming to propagate itself onto all the others.³⁷

In the intervening fifty years since the Husserl dissertation, Derrida has ceaselessly attempted to show up the “quaking borders” from which this oppositional “contamination” seeps by reference to various “supplements of origin” linked in a chain of “non-synonymous substitutions” (including “arche-trace,” “*différance*,” and “*khōra*”); while each of these supplements may be provisionally posited as a stand-in for the absent genesis in question, Derrida is adamant that each is but a trace of the withdrawal of this genesis, and that consequently none may serve as a master name.³⁸

But if *khōra* is just one of many substitutions in Derrida’s “system beyond being,” it enjoys an exemplary significance in virtue of its status as a “supplement of origin” that irrupts within the Platonic *corpus* itself at the alleged origin of so-called “Western metaphysics.” More specifically, tracing the figure of *khōra* as it operates in the *Timaeus* (and as it destabilizes the broader Platonic narrative in which *Timaeus* is situated) allows Derrida to perform two of his favorite deconstructive maneuvers at once. On the one hand, he can exemplify the conceptual slippage (or “contamination”) that confronts any attempt to think the origin of intelligibility. On the other hand, he can

demonstrate that this loss of traction on the question of genesis is not a problem of recent provenance, but one that has confounded philosophical inquiry from the very beginning of its history, despite its best efforts to conceal this difficulty. In addition to furnishing another unique case study of the “quaking border” between the sensible and the intelligible, then, the thought of *khōra* opens the way to a previously hidden (or at least marginalized) interpretation of the philosophical tradition as a history of the perpetual deferral, differentiation, and repression of the difficulties inherent to posing questions of origin.³⁹

This exemplary significance of the figure of *khōra* for Derrida’s broader project is well documented by his most influential interpreters.⁴⁰ However, there is one leading commentator whose work merits special mention given the support it affords to the specific interpretation of Derrida on *khōra* under development here. In “*Pardes: The Writing of Potentiality*,” Giorgio Agamben locates the thought of *khōra* – and more importantly, the thought of *khōra* precisely as intelligible matter – as the primary site of Derrida’s problematic.⁴¹ After citing Plotinus’s treatise “On the Two Matters” expressly in order to illuminate “Derrida’s concept of the trace and its aporias,” Agamben situates “Timaeus’s *khōra*” as “the model [for the] experience of matter” at stake in these discussions, and then positions Derrida accordingly:

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). [. . .] 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[. . .]⁴²

Having established the centrality of intelligible matter and *khōra* to the similar Plotinian and Derridean problematics in which they respectively function, we may review our case study of the problematic origin of the forms with a brief comparison of two pivotal texts in which the previously observed parallels come vividly and summarily to the fore. Consider, first, the following passage from Derrida’s “*Khōra*”:

Khōra seems to be alien to the order of the paradigm, that intelligible and immutable model. And yet, invisible and without sensible form, it participates in the intelligible in a very troublesome and indeed aporetic way. . . *Khōra* marks a place apart, the spacing which keeps a dissymmetrical relation to all that which, “in herself”, beside or in addition to herself,

seems to make a couple with her. In the couple outside of the couple, this strange mother who gives place without engendering can no longer be considered as an origin. She eludes all anthro-theological schemes, all history, all revelation, and all truth. Preoriginary, before and outside of all generation, she no longer even has the meaning of a past, of a present that is past. Before signifies no temporal anteriority. The relation of independence, the nonrelation, looks more like the relation of the interval or the spacing to what is lodged in it to be received in it.⁴³

Against this backdrop, Plotinus' description of intelligible matter as "that in which the difference of the form-ideas is lodged" is particularly instructive:

Intelligible reality [the realm of the forms] is certainly altogether absolutely without parts, yet it has parts in a kind of way. If the parts are torn apart from each other, then the cutting and tearing apart is an affection of matter: for it is matter that is cut. But if intelligible reality is at once many and partless, then the many existing in one are in [intelligible] matter which is that one, and they are its shapes: conceive this unity as varied and of many shapes. So, then, it must be shapeless before it is varied; for if you take away in your mind its variety and shapes and forming principles and thoughts, what is prior to these is shapeless and undefined and is none of these things that are on it and in it.⁴⁴

The parallels between these accounts are striking indeed. Like *khōra*, intelligible matter participates in the intelligible in an "aporetic way" in that it brings together the typically opposed characteristics of intelligibility and indeterminacy. Also like *khōra*, intelligible matter marks "a place apart" as "the shapelessness before variation" that is in "dissymmetrical relation" to the "couples" of oppositional thought lodged within it. In this respect, intelligible matter (despite its name) would seem to represent, again like *khōra*, a third genus that is neither sensible nor intelligible, but prior to both of these kinds, and thus "*outside* of all generation."⁴⁵ By the lights of "Platonism," in short, the upshot of these discussions is unsettling. In virtue of their putative anteriority even to the forms that ostensibly ground being and presence, intelligible matter and *khōra* appear to indicate an abyss at the very ground of ground, thereby raising the question of whether the forms themselves, in all their plentitude, are but traces of a more primordial emptiness.

It would appear, then, that the writings of Plotinus and Derrida furnish ample resources both for affecting a destabilization of the ontology upon which the privilege of form over matter has traditionally rested, and for leveraging the suspicion that the "Plato" handed down by this history is not the only one to be found in the Platonic *corpus*. Of course, the claim that Derrida deploys these resources in the above capacities is uncontroversial. But the questions

of whether Plotinus in fact deploys them thus, and whether, in any case, it is responsible for others to do so in his name, call for further investigation.

III

While it is still somewhat unorthodox in the English-speaking academy to draw Plotinus and Derrida together as critics of ontology, French philosophers (both Neoplatonists and phenomenologists alike) have been pondering the merits of such comparisons for decades. In “French Neoplatonism in the 20th Century,” Wayne Hankey locates Heidegger’s critique of ontology as one of the guiding problems “at issue in the French endeavor to open modern subjectivity through the retrieval of Neoplatonism in this century.”⁴⁶ Among the thinkers whose work Hankey surveys are several that look to Plotinus for just the sort of deconstructive critique we’re hoping to find. Jean Trouillard, Hankey observes, was initially attracted to Plotinus by “the Plotinian language of the ‘unspeakable contact,’ the grounding in what is unthinkable because prior to both *noesis* and *esse*.”⁴⁷ Pierre Aubenque, in like fashion, finds in Plotinus an overcoming of Classical Greek ontology that might “escape Heidegger’s critique of [onto-theology]” as well as “belong to a Derridean deconstruction of ontology.”⁴⁸ Along with these Neoplatonists, French phenomenologists as diverse in their approaches as Emmanuel Levinas and Reiner Schürmann have identified Plotinus’s discourse on the One with an “overcoming of metaphysics.”⁴⁹

As luck would have it, another French philosopher who identifies Plotinus as a critic of ontology is Jacques Derrida himself. In his 1967 essay “Form and Meaning,” Derrida bookends his text with an epigraph from Plotinus⁵⁰ and a long footnote concerning the affinities between his own critique of the form/meaning distinction in Husserl’s theory of language and what he takes to be Plotinus’ critique of the dualistic ontology characteristic of “Western metaphysics.”⁵¹ On Derrida’s analysis, because Plotinus locates the source and ground of all being in the beyond-being, “form (presence, evidence) would not be the final recourse, the last instance, to which every possible sign would refer – the *arche* or the *telos*”. Rather,

in a perhaps unheard of way, the *morphe*, *arche* and *telos* would still turn out to be signs. In a sense – or a non-sense – that metaphysics would have excluded from its field, while nonetheless being secretly and incessantly related to it, the form would already and in itself be the trace (*ichnos*) of a certain non-presence, the vestige of the formless, announcing and recalling its other to the whole of metaphysics – as Plotinus perhaps said. The trace would not be the mixture or passage between form and the amorphous,

between presence and absence, etc., but that which, in escaping this opposition, renders it possible because of its irreducible excess.⁵²

As Derrida reads the *Enneads*, then, Plotinus maintains that the attempt to think form as primordial presence, indeed that the very advent of thought itself, is tainted at its origin by a necessary fragmentation, a dissemination into traces of that which is beyond thought and being.⁵³ According to Derrida, Plotinus's hypothesis that the realm of the forms is not an absolute origin (and that the abyss indicated beyond it must remain unthought except in terms of the traces it produces) marks a "transgression of metaphysical thought" which indicates "the closure of metaphysics."⁵⁴

But here we must proceed with caution. For in light of Derrida's iconoclastic reputation, the temptation is strong to misinterpret terms such as the "transgression" or "closure" of metaphysics as denoting something akin to the rejection or repudiation of metaphysics. And if it were the rejection of metaphysical questioning and its traditional concepts and categories that Derrida had in mind in employing these terms, his application of them to Plotinus's thinking (which is thoroughly saturated with the metaphysics handed down to him from Plato and Aristotle) would be implausible at best, if more likely absurd. However, what Derrida intends by these often misunderstood terms is certainly not the "end" or "abandonment" or "circumvention" of metaphysical questioning that Richard Rorty, for instance, has popularly associated with deconstruction.⁵⁵

In point of fact, Derrida's disposition to the metaphysical tradition is decidedly less deflationary and anti-metaphysical than his reputation might tempt one to think. Indeed, he has insisted from the beginning of his career onward that deconstruction is aimed at anything but a clean cut severance from the metaphysical tradition that would be leveled from a discourse "outside" of (and "uncontaminated" by) metaphysics. On the contrary, Derrida argues that deconstruction must always begin with and within metaphysics, and that deconstruction is therefore constantly susceptible to the very vicissitudes it sets out to uncover. As he explains,

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work.⁵⁶

If deconstruction aims thus to mark the finitude of its predecessor discourses and to indicate their indebtedness to an unacknowledged pre-conceptual reserve, it does so in full awareness of its own finitude and indebtedness to these discourses, and without any ambition to reject or ultimately supplant the conceptual resources that allow it, however tentatively, to indicate this reserve. Though the following passage was cited previously as a description of the workings of “trace logic,” its pivotal significance for the present discussion of “closure” warrants a second look:

Since these concepts are indispensable for unsettling the heritage to which they belong, we should be even less prone to renounce them. Within the closure, by an oblique and always perilous movement, constantly risking falling back within what is being deconstructed, it is necessary to surround the critical concepts with a careful and thorough discourse – to mark the conditions, the medium and the limits of their effectiveness and to designate rigorously their intimate relationship to the machine whose deconstruction they permit; and, in the same process, designate the crevice through which the yet unnameable glimmer beyond the closure can be glimpsed.⁵⁷

Against the backdrop of this text, the crucial difference between certain popular conceptions of the “end” of metaphysics (as a severance or termination) and Derrida’s understanding of its “closure” comes into much sharper relief.⁵⁸ For if deconstruction is necessarily beholden to the inherited conceptual machinery from within which it operates, then there is a fundamental incompatibility between the task of deconstruction and the achievement of a definitive “end” from which one could then leverage a “new” beginning – a discourse that would finally expel the contaminants of metaphysics from its system and behold the unthought commerce of the tradition in light of its authentic fruition. “Because it has always already begun,” Derrida maintains,

[metaphysics] therefore has no end. But one can conceive of the closure of that which is without end. Closure is the circular limit within which the repetition of difference infinitely repeats itself. That is to say, closure is its *playing* space. This movement is the movement of the world as play.⁵⁹

Since this infinite repetition of difference “within” the closure is simultaneously the tracing of what withdraws from it, however, neither its “inside” nor its “outside” can be constituted as a “homogeneous” field; rather, the “outside” is always already inscribed “within” the closure as traces.⁶⁰ Accordingly, thinking “within” the closure must first of all be cautious of any ordering of these traces that aims to homogenize the field with the conceit of drawing “nearer” to its “outside”. As Derrida explains,

What we must be wary of. . . is the metaphysical concept of history. This is the concept of history as the history of meaning: the history of meaning developing itself, producing itself, fulfilling itself. And doing so linearly, as you recall: in a straight or circular line. This is why, moreover, the “closure of metaphysics” cannot have the form of a line, that is, the form in which philosophy recognizes itself. The closure of metaphysics, above all, is not a circle surrounding a homogeneous field, a field homogeneous with itself on its inside, whose outside then would be homogeneous also. The limit has the form of always different faults, of fissures whose mark or scar is borne by all the texts of philosophy.⁶¹

If “all the texts of philosophy” thus bear witness to the closure of metaphysics, and if this closure is inscribed in them along “always different faults,” then the history of philosophy is not a continuous progression of a monolithic metaphysical tradition that, upon the onset of a definitive deconstruction, suddenly discovers what the tradition had left unthought; rather, it is a *diasporá* of traditions whose thoughts and unthoughts penetrate, inseminate, and thus, disseminate one another to such an extent that their causes and effects, origins and ends, insides and outsides, are ultimately undecidable. As Derrida reads this history, then, the indication of the unthought beyond thinking that irrupts at the closure of metaphysics is not the exclusive commerce of our “epoch”—the age of the late “prophets of the apocalypse of metaphysics” (Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger)⁶²—but is rather in play from the very inception of this history, and often in the very texts that these prophets might lead us to believe are the least likely places to find it.

Thus, while a certain reading of Hegel’s history of philosophy might find in Plotinus an instance of “unhappy consciousness” taking flight into mysticism, and a certain reading of Heidegger’s might find an early stage in the oblivion of “Platonism,” Derrida’s history invites one to locate in Plotinus those insights that indicate his confrontations with closure, and thereby to resist his categorization as a mere placeholder in a pre-scripted metaphysical progression that evolves with nary an inkling of its limits.

The closure of metaphysics, which certain bold statements of the *Enneads* seem to have indicated by transgressing metaphysical thought. . . would crack the structure and history of [metaphysics], by organically inscribing and systematically articulating from within the traces of the before, the after, and the outside of metaphysics. In this way we are offered an infinite and infinitely surprising reading of this structure and history.⁶³

What Derrida has in mind when he speaks of thinking the closure of metaphysics, in summary, is a way of criticizing metaphysics from within by observing how its limited access (traces) to what lies beyond it complicates

and confounds its efforts to provide definitive answers to questions of origin. Far from an anti-metaphysics, then, attempting to think the closure of metaphysics might more appropriately be called a “meta-metaphysics” in that it seeks to save metaphysical thinking from the bad faith of imagining itself to have reached its unreachable origin and end.

So, Derrida understands himself and Plotinus as mutually engaged in the attempt to think the closure of metaphysics, albeit from radically different vantage points within its history. But what is perhaps most intriguing about this Plotinian subtext nestled in the footnotes of “Form and Meaning” is that Derrida finds the attempt to think this closure not only in Plotinus, but also in the very philosopher who is so often branded the most naïve of metaphysicians, and presumed the least likely to share common ground with Derrida:

An irreducible rupture and excess may always occur within a given epoch, at a certain point in its text (for example in the “Platonic” fabric of “Neo-Platonism”) and, no doubt, already in Plato’s text.⁶⁴

While Derrida is not specific about the Platonic text(s) from which the “fabric” of Neoplatonism is woven, one can well imagine Plotinus with *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, and *Timaeus* on the loom, painstakingly separating and reweaving Plato’s own attempts to think the closure of metaphysics.

Without doubt, there are many questions left to consider about the relationship between the Plotinian and Derridean agendas drawn together in this study. The one that looms largest (which the comparison of intelligible matter and *khōra* conveniently enabled us to skirt) is that of whether the “beyond-being” of Plotinus’s One and that of Derrida’s “other than being” are in fact remotely similar. While both signs are aimed beyond the order of being, it might be that they indicate opposed interpretations of “beyond-being” (say, as “positive infinity” and as “negative infinity”) that have radically different consequences for the practice of ontology. If there were two such “beyond-beings” to consider, how would the critiques of ontology motivated by each differ? Could that of “positive infinity” still rightly be called an “overcoming of metaphysics” in the Heideggerian sense?⁶⁵ How about the Derridean sense? And what of this “other” Plato said to be at play in the texts of Plotinus and Derrida? Is he simply a revisionist fantasy? Or is the Plato of so-called “Platonic metaphysics” the chimera, and the “other” Plato the authentic one?⁶⁶ The remainder of such difficult and interesting questions is indicative, I hope, that this comparison has been worth making.⁶⁷

Notes

1. Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing" (1978) in Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 90–109.
2. Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Rodolphe Gasche, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).
3. See John Sallis, "Platonism at the Limit of Metaphysics," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 19/20 (1997), and Sallis, *Chorology: On Beginning in Plato's Timaeus* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); see also John Caputo, "The Good News About Alterity: Derrida and Theology," *Faith and Philosophy*, Volume 10, Number 4 (October 1993): 453–470, and Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); and Rodolphe Gasche, "God, for Example," in Gasche, *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 150–170. On the Medievalist front, see Wayne Hankey "French Neoplatonism in the 20th Century," *Animus* 4, 1999, and Hankey, "Neoplatonism and Contemporary Constructions and Deconstructions of Modern Subjectivity," in *Philosophy and Freedom: The Legacy of James Doull*, eds. David G. Peddle and Neil G. Robertson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 250–278; see also Stephen Gersh, "Derrida Reads (Neo-) Platonism," delivered at International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, Liverpool, England, June 2004 (this paper is chapter 1 of Gersh's forthcoming book, *Neoplatonism after Derrida*).
4. See, for example, in Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 6; Derrida, "Ousia and Gramme: A Note on a Note from *Being and Time*," in *Margins*, 66, note 41; Derrida, "Form and Meaning: A Note on the Phenomenology of language," in Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 127, note 14; Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," trans. K. Frieden, in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. H. Coward and T. Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 73–142; Derrida, "Khōra," in Derrida, *On the Name*, trans. David Wood (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995); Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," trans. Samuel Weber, in *Religion*, eds. J. Derrida and G. Vattimo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
5. Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 19.
6. That there are resources in Plato for mounting a critique of "Platonism" is by no means an original suggestion. Two particularly insightful articulations of this suggestion are Hans-Georg Gadamer's "Dialectic and Sophism in Plato's *Seventh Letter*" (in Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980)), and Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy" (in Derrida, *Dissemination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981)). Derrida's *The Post Card* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) offers a more radical (if esoteric and hyperbolic) treatment of this approach, suggesting hypothetically that the whole of "Platonic metaphysics" and even Socrates himself are but instances of Plato's literary-artifice written for his own amusement and sent to future generations like postcards from an eccentric grandfather. For a helpful secondary engagement with these texts, see Catherine H. Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 70–103 (on Gadamer), 201–253 (on Derrida).

7. Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).
8. Plotinus, *Enneads*, Vol. II, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 104–149. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations of Plotinus are from Armstrong’s translation.
9. In summarizing Plotinus’s general project, I will rely on Dominic O’Meara’s *Plotinus: An Introduction to the Enneads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
10. Plotinus is explicit that time is produced by soul following the derivation of soul from intellect. (5.1.7) Though the One is conceptualized as “prior” to both intellect and soul, this priority (for obvious reasons) cannot be temporal.
11. In “Intelligible Matter and Plotinus,” Dmitri Nikulin puts this point nicely: “The One is the infinite, unspeakably great potency of all, *δύναμις πάντων* which never becomes that all, i.e. is ever absent from anything other than itself (only a certain “trace” of the One is in every thing as the uniqueness of its individuality). The One is thus always absent in its presence.” Dmitri Nikulin, “Intelligible Matter in Plotinus,” *Dionysius*, Volume XVI (1998): 108.
12. In Derrida’s words, “there cannot be a science of *différance* itself in its operation, as it is impossible to have a science of the origin of presence itself, that is to say of a certain non-origin.” See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1974), 63. See also Derrida, “*Différance*”, in Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
13. Though Derrida’s use of “trace” terminology is more well known than Plotinus’s, it is worth noting that the latter makes explicit use of the term “trace” (*ιχνοζ*) throughout the *Enneads*, and specifically in discussing the relationship between soul and intellect: “so soul is a thing of a good kind since it has some good, a trace of intellect, and it is not evil of itself.” (1.8.11, p. 307) This fact is not particularly surprising, given that *ιχνοζ* appears at 53b in the famous “receptacle” passage of the *Timaeus*: “But when the world began to get into order, fire and water and earth and air did indeed show faint traces of themselves, but were altogether in such a condition as one may expect to find wherever God is absent.” The explicit association of “trace” with “absence” here is particularly instructive and lends credibility to the view that Plotinus, like Derrida, is well aware of the duplicitous nature of the trace. The trace simply cannot be reduced to a repetition of presence; it is always simultaneously (and perhaps even principally) an indeterminate absence.
14. Plotinus, *Enneads*, 6.9.3.49–55 as cited in Dominic O’Meara, *Plotinus*, 1993. For a host of comparable passages, see Plotinus, *Enneads*, Vol. V., 5.3, p. 73–135 (“On the Knowing Hypostases and That Which is Beyond”).
15. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 14.
16. Plotinus, *Enneads*, Vol. III, 3.5.9, p. 201. In a footnote to this passage, A.H. Armstrong adds that “Plotinus is prepared to apply this penetrating observation of the closeness of metaphysical and mythical discourses (*λογοι* and *μυθόι*) to each other to his own metaphysical discussions: cp. VI. 7 [38] 35, 27–30.” There are other helpful references as well: Vol. I, 1.8.14; Vol. III, 3.6.14; Vol. V, 5.1.7; Vol. V., 5.5.3.
17. Derrida, “*Khōra*,” 90. Later in the essay, Derrida approvingly observes the following of the use of myth in *Timaeus*: “[I]n the order of becoming, when one cannot lay claim to a firm and stable *logos*, when one must make do with the probable, then myth is the done thing [*de rigueur*]; it is rigor.” (112) For a more detailed discussion of the complementarity of *logos* and *mythos* (and the indication of “a more deeply buried necessity” hidden within it), see Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” in Derrida, *Dissemination*, 63–171.

18. Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 86.
19. Plotinus, *Enneads*, Vol. V, 5.8.1, p. 239.
20. Derrida, "The Double Session," in Derrida, *Dissemination*, 189. See also in Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
21. Throughout the *Enneads*, Plotinus relies on these methods to approach numerous Platonic *ennoia* including the ideas that the Good is beyond being; that soul is made of divisible and indivisible substance (4.2); that each soul chooses its own daemon (3.4); that eternity and time are distinct (3.7); and that God is simultaneously transcendent and immanent (6.4–5). I am grateful to Stephen Gersh for his counsel on the Plotinian conception of the *ennoia*.
22. One could cite myriad examples of this "epiphanic" style in Derrida. One of the most instructive examples, as we shall see in part III, is his usage of a one sentence epigraph from Plotinus's *Enneads* on the outset of the essay "Form and Meaning" to establish the guiding insight of his deconstruction of Husserl's theory of meaning. A more recent example is his re-reading of Aristotelian friendship in light of the aporetic apostrophe "O my friends there is no friend." (Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), 26–48.
23. Plato, *Timaeus*, 49b, 1176.
24. Nikulin, "Intelligible Matter in Plotinus," 97. See also in Nikulin, *Matter, Imagination, and Geometry: Ontology, Natural Philosophy, and Mathematics in Plotinus, Proclus, and Descartes* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).
25. Nikulin, "Intelligible Matter in Plotinus," 99.
26. Plotinus, *Enneads*, Vol. II, 2.4.3, p. 111.
27. The eighth tractate of the first Ennead offers an in-depth explanation of this equation of matter and evil; see Plotinus, *Enneads*, Vol. I, 279–317.
28. Plotinus, *Enneads*, Vol. I, 1.8.3, p. 283.
29. Plotinus, *Enneads*, Vol. II, 2.4.10, p. 129.
30. For a concise discussion of the nature of sensible matter in Plotinus, see Nikulin, "Intelligible Matter in Plotinus," 85–88. For a more in depth discussion, see chapters 3 and 4 of J.-M. Narbonne's Plotin, *Les deux matières [Ennéade II, 4 (12)]*, introduction, texte grec, traduction et commentaire par Jean-Marc Narbonne, Histoire des doctrines de l'Antiquité classique 17, sous le direction de Jean Pepin (Paris: Vrin, 1993), 135–260.
31. "Logocentric" is an adjective that Derrida has coined to describe metaphysical systems that determine being and truth as *presence*. From the perspective of a logocentric metaphysic, anything that has being or meaning has such only in immediate proximity to *logos*, God's (or Reason's) infinite understanding. According to Derrida, this logocentric privileging of presence over absence is embodied in the conceptual oppositions that dominate western metaphysics: immanent/transcendent, sensible/intelligible, real/ideal, signifier/signified, writing/speech, etc. In each of these oppositions, the former term, though presumed inferior, is still assumed to be in proximity to presence as a promise, or indication, or repetition of something that is logically prior to the term itself; the being, or significance, or meaning of the former term is determined solely by its subordinate relationship to the latter.
32. Plotinus, *Enneads*, Vol. II, 2.4.3, p. 111.
33. Plotinus, *Enneads*, 2.4.16, p. 149. Stephen MacKenna translates this passage somewhat more emphatically: "there is nothing previous to [intelligible matter] except the Beyond-Existence." Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (New York: Penguin, 1991), 2.4.16, p. 107.

34. Nikulin, "Intelligible Matter in Plotinus," 92.
35. Nikulin, "Intelligible Matter in Plotinus," 93. I am following Nikulin in presenting intelligible matter as the indefinite dyad (*ἀόριστος δυάς*). For argumentative support of and general references to this position, see Nikulin, 90–93, 101, 105–108, 110.
36. Nikulin, "Intelligible Matter in Plotinus," 99. In Nikulin's words "On the one hand, intelligible matter is "between" the One and the form-[ideas]; on the other hand, it is also "between" pure being (ideal forms) and mere non-being (bodily matter)."
37. Derrida, "Preface to the 1990 Edition," in Derrida, *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy*, trans. Marian Hobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), xv. While it is the problem of genesis in *Husserl's* philosophy that is explicitly at stake in his 1953 thesis, a tantalizing entry (dated 1949–1950) in the "Curriculum Vitae" timeline of Geoffrey Bennington's *Jacques Derrida* invites the hypothesis that Derrida's interest in the problem of genesis may have been kindled in part through studies of Plotinus: "J.D. remembers intense reading of Simone Weil (in a pathos of vague Christian mysticism), of the "existentialists" (Christian or other), wrote essays described as "Plotinian" by Etienne Borne in spite of the obligatory schooling of the time (Sartre, Marcel, Merleau-Ponty, etc.)." Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 328.
38. Rodolphe Gasche's *The Tain of the Mirror* remains the definitive assessment of the inner-workings of Derrida's chain of substitutions. See especially in chapter 9, "A System beyond Being," 177–251.
39. Both of these advantages are clearly exhibited in the three texts where *khōra* receives sustained attention: "*Khōra*" (as the title indicates, the entire essay is devoted to this topic; section IV (119–127) offers an especially intriguing account of the alternative history of philosophy Derrida is seeking to uncover); "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" (100–122); and "Faith and Knowledge" (17–22).
40. See, for instance, in Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, 207–212; Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 34–40, 58–61, 167–69; and Gasche, "God, for example," 152–53, 165–167. For a helpful analysis of the role *khōra* plays in Derrida's articulation of an alternative history of philosophy, see Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, 235–243.
41. Giorgio Agamben, "*Pardes*: The Writing of Potentiality," in Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 205–219.
42. Agamben, "*Pardes*," 218–219.
43. Derrida, "*Khōra*," 124–125.
44. Plotinus, *Enneads*, Vol. II, 2.4.4, p. 113.
45. The question of whether intelligible matter is generated or before generation is a tricky one, given its paradoxical ontological status. Plotinus puts the dilemma as follows: "As for the question whether intelligible matter is eternal, one must investigate it in the same way as one investigates the ideas: intelligible realities are originated in so far as they have a beginning, but unoriginated because they have not a beginning in time; they always proceed from something else, not as always coming into being, like the universe, but as always existing, like the universe There. For Otherness There exists always, which produces intelligible matter." (2.4.5, p. 117) Here, we are placing intelligible matter and *khōra* "outside all generation" in that they "have not a beginning in time". On this topic, it is intriguing to observe that in his 1953 dissertation, Derrida gives a remarkably similar account of the tension inherent within the problem of genesis that emerges in Plotinus's explanation above: "On the one hand, genesis is birth, absolute emergence. . . that cannot

be reduced to the preceding instance. . . in relation to something other than itself; in brief, there is no genesis without absolute origin. . . But at the same stage, there is no genesis except within a temporal and ontological totality which encloses it; every genetic product is produced by something other than itself; it is carried by a past, called forth and oriented by a future. . . The existence of any genesis seems to have this tension between a transcendence and an immanence as its sense and direction. It is given at first both as ontologically and temporally indefinite and as absolute beginning, as continuity and discontinuity, identity and alterity.” Derrida, *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl’s Philosophy*, xxi.

46. Wayne Hankey, “French Neoplatonism in the 20th Century,” in *Animus* 4 (1999), an electronic journal at <http://www.mun.ca/animus>, 23–24.
47. Hankey, “French Neoplatonism in the 20th Century,” 7.
48. Hankey, “French Neoplatonism in the 20th Century,” 18.
49. Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Reiner Schürmann, “L’hénologie dépassement de la métaphysique,” *Les Etudes philosophiques* (no. 3: 1982), 331–350. See also in Schürmann, “The One: Substance or Function,” in *Studies in Plotinus’s Enneads*, ed. Michael Wagner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 157–177.
50. “For the trace is the shape of the shapeless” (τό γάρ ἴχνοσ τοῦ ἀμόρφου μορφῆ).
51. Derrida, “Form and Meaning,” 127, note 14.
52. Derrida, “Form and Meaning,” 127, note 14. Plotinus crops up in a similar capacity in the footnotes of Derrida’s 1968 essay “*Ousia and Grammē*,” once again at precisely the moment where Derrida suggests that “presence, far from being. . . what the sign signifies, is the trace of the trace”: “Thus Plotinus (what is his status in the history of metaphysics and in the “Platonic“ era, if one follows Heidegger’s reading?), who speaks of presence, that is, also of *morphē*, as the trace of nonpresence, as the amorphous (*to gar ikhnos tou amorphous morphē*). A trace which is neither absence nor presence, nor, in whatever modality, a secondary modality.” Derrida, “*Ousia and Grammē*,” 66, note 41.
53. Note that Derrida’s analysis maps almost precisely onto the account of the origin of the forms that we previously encountered in Nikulin’s discussion of Plotinus on intelligible matter: “[As the indefinite dyad, intelligible matter] plays an important role in the (logical, not temporal) “process” of constituting the intellect νοῦς. The dyad which represents not yet definite and not defined thinking, νόησις of the second hypostasis, tends to “offer itself” back to its source, the One which is beyond being and any determination (III.8.11). Therefore, the dyad. . . necessarily “misses” the One and can only grasp it as multiplicity and plurality. Then the dyad in “looking” towards that which cannot be seen. . . and thus returning back to the One engenders the whole multiplicity of the forms.” Nikulin, “Intelligible Matter in Plotinus,” 92.
54. Derrida, “Form and Meaning,” 127, note 14.
55. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and elsewhere, Rorty argues that Derrida should be read as a “private ironist” whose engagements with the philosophical tradition are largely intended as “private jokes” designed to help us laugh off the “pseudo-problems” of Western metaphysics.
56. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 24.
57. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 14.
58. Derrida states his commitment to this distinction between “end” and “closure” early and often. See, for example, in *Of Grammatology*, 4, 14; “The Supplement of Origin,” in Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 102; “The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of

- Representation”, in Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 250; *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 13, 57; and “On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy”, trans. John Leavey, Jr., in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida*, ed. Peter Fenves (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 167–168.
59. Derrida, “The Theater of Cruelty,” 250.
 60. Geoffrey Bennington’s gloss on this difficult notion of “closure” may be helpful here: “And we shall also insist on the complexity of the idea of “closure,” which should not be imagined as a circular limit surrounding a homogeneous field: that would be metaphysical thinking of the closure, which would on this view separate an inside from an outside, and would facilitate the analogical transfer of this inside/outside onto before/after, which is none other than the confusion we are trying to avoid here: the closure is rather to be thought as an invaginated form that brings the outside back inside and on the contrary facilitates the understanding of the Derridean always-already.” Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, 287–288. Derrida himself has used the vaginal metaphor to approach this phenomenon of “the inside that is always already outside” in the analysis of “the medium of the hymen” offered in “The Double Session”: “What holds for “hymen” also holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for all other signs which, like *pharmakon*, *supplément*, *différance*, and others, have a double, contradictory, undecidable value that always derives from their syntax, whether the latter is in a sense “internal,” articulating and combining under the same yoke, *huph’ hen*, two incompatible meanings, or “external,” dependent on the code in which the word is made to function.” Derrida, “The Double Session,” 221.
 61. Derrida, *Positions*, 57.
 62. Derrida, “On the Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy,” 149.
 63. Derrida, “Form and Meaning,” 127, note 14.
 64. Derrida, “Form and Meaning,” 127, note 14.
 65. See J.-M. Narbonne, “‘Henôsis’ et ‘Ereignis’: Remarques sur une interprétation heideggerienne de l’Un plotinien,” *Les Études philosophiques* (1999): 108–121. In “French Neoplatonism in the 20th century” (22), Hankey cites ‘Henôsis’ in a succinct articulation of Narbonne’s current research trajectory. Says Hankey, “Narbonne concludes against Reiner Schürmann’s “L’hénologie comme dépassement de la métaphysique,” that Plotinian hénologie is not: “[the route to some absence or retreat of foundation, but yet more the representation of an absolute foundation, since the One is for him the infinite source of all finite possibles. . . Plotinus’s metaphysics is without question a negative theology, i.e. a foundational metaphysics and for that an onto-theology. But the culminating point of this onto-theology is neither a being (*ontos*) nor a god (*theos*). . . but a limitless infinity (*apeiron*)].” The translation of Narbonne’s French is my own.
 66. Hans-Georg Gadamer’s take on this question is fascinating indeed: “The fundamental step of going beyond all existing things in Plato is a step beyond a simplistic acceptance of the ideas; thus, it ultimately represents a countermovement against the metaphysical interpretation of Being as merely the being of beings. . . Actually, the history of metaphysics could be written as a history of Platonism. Its stages would be, say, Plotinus and Augustine, Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa, Leibniz, Kant and Hegel; which means, of course, all those great efforts of Western thought to go questioningly back behind the substantial being of the Form and thus behind the whole metaphysical tradition.” See Gadamer, “Reflections on My Philosophical Journey,” trans. Richard E. Palmer, *The*

Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Lewis Hahn, ed. (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 34.

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