The Gift of Logos

The Gift of Logos:
Essays in Continental Philosophy

Edited by

David Jones, Jason M. Wirth
and Michael Schwartz

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume of essays is dedicated to those participants of over more than a decade of philosophical conversations of the *Georgia Continental Philosophical Circle*. This Circle of philosophers eschewed the common practices of grandstanding, defending one's territory at all costs, mean-spiritedness, self-absorption, professional elitism, and a parochial, self-serving but philosophically indefensible delimitation of philosophy itself. It was in their spirit of recovering and enacting the generosity of genuine dialogue that the *Comparative and Continental Philosophy Circle* was established as a kind of Symposium in the old Platonic style where the *Logos* is indeed realized as a gift from the gods and goddesses. We welcome you to receive this gift of *logos*, a gift in which the nature of the *logos* itself is both the occasion of our celebration and the provocation of our philosophical investigations. This volume is a small commemoration of over a decade of the most robust giving and receiving practices and represents the first volume of the *Comparative and Continental Philosophy Series*. The editors of *The Gift of Logos* are also very grateful to Jenna Thomas-McKie of Augusta State University for her technical support in preparing this manuscript.

INTRODUCTION

THE LOGOS AND ITS GIFT

DAVID JONES, JASON M. WIRTH,
AND MICHAEL SCHWARTZ

In his classic work, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Marcel Mauss poses the question "What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?"[1] Gift giving comes with strings, or ribbons, that tie together our packages of giving and receiving. Sometimes these ties can be burdensome, or even negative—they have strings attached; other times they are aesthetically designed and bind us together—this package of giving leaves us ribboned together, that is, we are tied to and connected with each other; we are interconnected. It is to this giving, to this positive giving and its gift, that this book embraces for this gift is an encirclement that completes itself, ties itself together, as a sublime gift. The sublimity of this gift is what is divine in the human experience; it is the gift of *logos* that overcomes the *différance* that keeps us apart, disconnected, and often alienated. *Logos*, and its gift, bring us together through language, through speech, and through word. We are destined as humans, as *Dasein*, to live in our languages as Heidegger reminds us.

For Mauss, the way we exchange gifts builds relationships because all relationships are in some sense negotiated. Gift giving creates a need, often a deep need, even an obligation on the receiver to reciprocate the gift. This reciprocity of gift giving, and the underlying force of the gift to enact a return, provides a means of coming together in families, communities, and as a common people. The implicit sense of the gift is seen in the giving of oneself through the gift—the gift gives the self over to a new horizon, and this horizon is the horizon of the other. In return, the other is now encouraged and even urged inwardly to do the same; the situation of receiving a gift prompts the possibility of return or mimicry of the act of giving that might have not risen yet to the level of awareness.

The receiver is exhorted to move from the inwardness of self to the outwardness of the other. This process of receiving, or giving, of the gift overcomes the existential alienation and separation that is constituent of the human condition. To ritualize giving and its gifting is to provide a syntax of solidarity that bespeaks our desire for cohesion and our need for identities beyond our own. To give a gift is to befriend. The gift of *logos* is more than a gift from the gods and goddesses to man and woman, for it is an act of giving for those friends of wisdom—for those philosophers who give to each other and to their worlds. These philosophers also receive the blessings of *logos* from each other.

As Derrida reminds us, this gifting, even the gifting of *logos*, arrives with the stipulation of the gift and giver's intent: "For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift, or debt. If the other gives me back or owes me or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift, whether this restitution is immediate or whether it is programmed by a complex calculation of a long-term deferral or différance."[2] The giver cannot give himself or herself over to the horizon of the other if the giver consciously seeks return for the gift. The exchange must be beyond the debits and credits of the calculative mind; there can be no exact accounting of the nature of the exchange. The exchange must be selfless, unguarded, natural, and seek its *telos* elsewhere; its mind must not be the calculative, but the meditative mind of *das besinnliche Denken* that Heidegger suggests. Derrida is aware the exchange makes the gift and its gifting problematic because of the obligatory possibility of the gift. The gift exchange must lead to a mutual interdependence between the giver and receiver, but cannot end in some kind of unauthentic gesturing of return and reciprocity. As Derrida warns, "From the moment the gift would appear as gift, as such, as what it is, in its phenomenon, it sense and essence, it would be engaged in a symbolic, sacrificial, or economic structure that would annul the gift in the ritual circle of the debt."[3]

The gift of *logos* and its debt therefore presents us with the dilemma of a debtless debt; a debt that can only be repaid without the ego's involvement in the repaying of the received gift. Receiving is more difficult, bears a far greater weight, than the giving of the gift. The dilemma of the debtless debt is to get beyond the expectation of exchange in both giving and receiving. To learn to cultivate both the giving and receiving is to "expect the unexpected" of Herakleitos, for in doing so is not to listen just to him, or to others, but is to "listen to the *logos*" for therein this experience it will be wise to agree that "all things are one." To do philosophy in the spirit of the gift of *logos* is to philosophize in the old

Platonic style of dialogue, that old Platonic style of and through *logos*. Then, and only then, will this gift exchange lead us to mutual interdependence between givers and receivers.

It is in this spirit that this book and its commemorating of *logos* were born. More specifically, *The Gift of Logos* was born out of a desire to expand and experiment with the content, methods, and environment of the philosophical forum and out of a love of philosophy manifested originally in the various meetings of the *Georgia Continental Circle* and currently in its flowering as, the *Comparative & Continental Philosophy Circle*. From the beginning, we wished to establish a kind of Symposium in the Platonic style; this symposium would persist in its dedication to keep always in mind that *logos* is a gift from the gods. In feasting on *logos*, we tried to remember we were eating, digesting, and eliminating divine flesh, the flesh of the gods and goddesses. The flesh of *logos*, those words we speak and write about, somehow make us different as a species even though we share so much with all of the world's other species. This *logos* we have, or can summon on occasion when the Muses bless us, is somehow beyond us; it mystifies us, seduces us, eludes us, and often plays us for its fools.

The foolishness of this *logos* is our wisdom as Nietzsche reminds us: "At times we need a rest from ourselves by looking upon, by looking *down* upon, ourselves and, from an artistic distance, laughing *over* ourselves or weeping *over* ourselves. We must discover the *hero* no less than the *fool* in our passion for knowledge; we must occasionally find pleasure in our folly, or we cannot continue to find pleasure in our wisdom."[4] This double movement between folly and wisdom and wisdom and folly drives us to a more robust range of philosophical discourses and attempts to recover and enact the spirit and generosity of genuine dialogue.

For more than a decade, this spirit of dialogue assumed many guises. We attempted to make our philosophical conversations as broad as situations allowed and tried willingly to be open to a diversity of voices. We needed not to try too hard, however, since it was natural for us to do so. The Chinese "*wuwei*" captures this sentiment the best, for *wuwei* is a disciplined and learned spontaneity appropriate to the context that gives rise to action that appears as no action since nothing is being asserted, only emergence—egos gone, with only *logos* remaining.

This volume commemorates in so many ways more than a decade of these sensitivities and their subsequent activities by featuring new and important works by those who have participated and contributed to our conversations. While it is merely stating the obvious to say that we are possessed by a passion for Continental philosophy, the repercussions of such a passion are less obvious.

Our work together, born of a commitment to the Continental idiom, has branched out in many directions and the sections of this volume indicate the most basic of these trajectories. *The Gift of Logos* is divided into four parts. Part One, "The *Archē* of Beginnings—*Muthos*, *Logos*, and Madness," features pieces by Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback, "Ulysses at the Mast," David Jones, "Pan's Death and the Conspiracy of *Logos*: Plato's Case against Myth," and "Blanchot, Madness and Writing" by Brian Schroeder. Part Two, "The Question of Ethics," includes chapters by Duane H. Davis, "Elisions: Ontology and the Ethics of Omission," Michael Smith, "The Ethical and 'Beyond Being' in Levinas," and Ronald Bogue, "The Immanent Ethics of Gilles Deleuze." The third part of the book, "Meditations on Globalization," investigates the nature of globalization from theoretical and practical perspectives with Bret W. Davis' "The Global Displacement of Western Modernity," James J. Winchester's "Living in an Age of Excess and Extreme Poverty: Of Giving, Buying, and Squandering," and "Out of Latin American Thought—From Radical Exteriority: Philosophy after the Age of Pernicious Knowledge" by Alejandro Vallega. In the final part, *The Gift of Logos* looks to today by looking to the past with Thomas R. Flynn's "Sartre and Foucault on History: The Diary and the Map," Jason M. Wirth's "Poison and the Great Health: Nietzsche and Master Hakuin," and Michael Schwartz's "Introspection and Transformation in Philosophy Today."

The Continental tradition has always and appropriately placed great emphasis on the Greeks and the first part consists of two discussions of the relationship between *muthos* and *logos*. At the heart of this relationship is a set of questions whose answers help determine the nature and fate of philosophical discourse as such. The two essays form an important counterpoint to each other. Both return to Plato—that master and grounder of the *logos*—and read him against the background of his own philosophical tradition. David Jones finds in *muthos* the haunting of forces that *logos* cannot fully accommodate while Marcia Schuback, reading Plato in reverse from the perspective of Homer, finds in Plato's philosophy the first and most seminal defenses of *muthos*. Both essays understand that the fate of philosophy is linked to the fate of our understanding of what is at stake in the nature of the *logos* itself. The nature of *logos* is taken up by Brian Schroeder in the context of writing. Following Blanchot's distinction between the book and the work and the writing act, readers are led to the role of the author and the experience of madness framed in discussions of Nietzsche, Foucault, and Levinas.

As one can see from the essays present in section one, our discussions have pursued an ongoing philosophical investigation of philosophy's own activity—its limits and possibilities. Such an impulse is directly the concern of the three essays that comprise the first section. All of the essays ask about the nature of philosophical activity in relationship to fundamental practice. At the end of his life, Foucault, writing against the prospect of the imminent totalization of thought, turned to a profound consideration of what he called "practices of the self." Such practices were local but they re-emerge in our age in direct response to a crippled *logos* that confuses its movement with an unquestioned movement towards self-universalization. Hidden behind such universalization is the assumption that the way of the *logos* is self-evident and independent. To put the matter bluntly, it seems to be obvious that all that is required for the practice of philosophy is philosophy itself. This posturing of philosophy assumes that philosophy is a wholly autonomous movement and that all that one needs to do in order to participate in its movement is to master the conceptual gymnastics particular to its domain. Philosophy is uniquely suited for the armchair because its movements are exclusively intellectual.

This sense of philosophy is already implicitly under interrogation in the second section as it was explicitly so in the first. The discussions so far—discussions in which the stakes of philosophy as such are either implicitly or explicitly at issue—are emphatically ethical. In fact, the question of ethics has guided, both in practice and in theory, much of the activities that have led us to this book. Such thinking is decidedly evident in the next two sections, where six essays are devoted to the question of ethics and living together. The thematic of the "other" is not new to French philosophy, and in this light Duane H. Davis explores the question of ethics in the works of Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty. He does not do so simply to curate the record of what these thinkers did and did not accomplish in this respect. Rather, such an analysis is part of his own efforts to articulate a Post-Heideggerian Ethic of Care, a mode of comportment in which we know and welcome (and become) the anguish of being-with-others. Developing an Ethic of Care constitutes an apprehension of and cultivation with the other. Much of this type of ethical discussion these days stems from the growing importance of the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Michael Smith, a translator of many of Levinas' works, contributes his reflections of Levinas' connection of the domain of the ethical to what he dubbed a "beyond being" or an "otherwise than being" or a "better than being." Ronald Bogue, one of our country's best Deleuze scholars, dedicates his essay to the implicit ecological (what Deleuze himself dubbed "ethological") practice that governed his

philosophical work from the beginning. Bogue argues that, although Deleuze never produced a formal ethical theory, his work is an implicitly ethical practice. As such, this essay is an important contribution to our appreciation of Deleuze and the practice of philosophy. In a fundamental sense, the ethical realm is part of a larger social and political structure.

As children of modernity, we draw on its resources even in our many attempts to outgrow its limits and excesses. This post-modern condition is taken up by Bret W. Davis who sees in the very questioning of modernity a stepping back from the practices of the technological manipulation of life, the destruction of nature as a result of anthropocentrism, and the homogenization of cultures. This new global context in which we all find ourselves in is engaged directly by James Winchester in his spirited analysis of our own consumer practices. Our unthinking devotion to our own pleasures engages us in practices that take a large but not immediately visible toll on the poor of the world. As we settle into the comfort of our own place in the sun, we do not hear the pain of those whose lives we are helping ruin. The author not only describes the problem, but points to things that we can concretely do in our own lives to begin addressing this issue. The issue of globalization is met head-on in "Out of Latin American Thought—From Radical Exteriority: Philosophy after the Age of Pernicious Knowledge" by Alejandro Vallega. In his essay, he reflects on the much needed interruption of the prevailing philosophical consciousness and the great need to develop thinking from a position of total exteriority. Such an interruption is necessary in order to create a space to see the cultural destruction that is sustained by the Western modern philosophical project. This space of interruption represents an opening to all peoples who have undergone coloniality and continue to suffer its consequences through loss of identity and sense for authentic culture. The point is not to just occupy the existing spaces of identity politics, but rather to transform them through changes in fundamental practices through a total exteriority that engages in situated historical and epistemic hermeneutics that provide a site for the creative interpretative re-appropriation of culture.

The historical thread of globalization is picked up by Thomas R. Flynn, who has for many years done important and admirable work on Sartre and Foucault, both individually and in relationship to each other. In his chapter, Flynn continues his significant work on the problem of history with regard to these two seminal thinkers. Through an existentialist approach to history, Sartre employs a social ontology to uncover the moral responsibility of historical agents who find themselves thrown into the midst of the impersonal systems of colonialism, ideologies such as racist

"humanism," and so forth. For Sartre, the very living history and biography are inevitably intertwined. As Flynn states, "If both philosophers adopt a kind of "nominalism" in their approach to historical intelligibility, Sartre's is admittedly "dialectical" whereas that of Foucault approximates the positivistic in its drive toward fragmentation and multiplicity." Although different in their approaches and often arriving at dissimilar conclusions, Sartre and Foucault's choice of topics is directed toward the ethical direction, that is, to the oppressed and marginalized in society.

The need to heal these ruptures encountered in our life-worlds has been implicitly expressed throughout all the essays in this volume and the questions it has addressed. Jason Wirth's essay also addresses such questions, although his approach is more indirect. In his essay, he explores the "and" that conjoins poison and the great health of Nietzsche and Hakuin, the Rinzai Zen reformer. In doing so, he does not try to locate some ultimately banal coincidences (as if a coincidence was *ipso facto* enough to recommend it to our attention), but rather he takes up the issue of the relationship of philosophy to fundamental practice (the relationship of thinking to the "Great Health" in Nietzsche and to "Zen empty mind" in Hakuin). In conjoining poison and the Great Health, he explores the extent to which this "and" does more than merely append one to the other. To do so, he suggests, would be simply to list one after, or before, the other. Rather, he wishes to think the inner necessity that governs their belonging together. In thinking this belonging together, the question of philosophy and its fate are connected ineluctably to practice.

This question of the nature and fate of philosophy in relationship to practices that are independent of philosophy (but which philosophy ignores at its own peril) is addressed unswervingly by Michael Schwartz's essay and sets the tone for the conclusion of *The Gift of Logos*. Do not certain fundamental practices (ancient and modern, western and non-western) form the conditions for the possibility of a more robust, more loving, philosophical practice? Does not, as Nietzsche clearly saw, a petty mind produce only petty thoughts, even if such thoughts are nonetheless true thoughts? Are there not base and tepid philosophies that are nonetheless entirely true? Does their truth *ipso facto* recommend their worthiness and relevance to the human condition? If we want larger, nobler truths, can we assume that our hearts, that our love for truth, are automatically large enough for what we purport to want? Is there not a need for some kind of intervention of fundamental practices that train us to enlarge our capacity for the scope of philosophical experience?

To these questions, Michael Schwartz suggests modern philosophy has adopted the medicine of the thinking-cure and that the theoretical

discourse mistakenly thinks it serves the twin task of diagnostic and cure. We have looked repeatedly in the wrong places for the panacea of our ills of alienation, separation, and encounters with the other of others. Such self deception has been at the expense of the explicitly transformative practices and in lieu of normalized training procedures. In this light, philosophy unknowingly has internalized certain habits of modern life. Ours is a spectacular culture—it is a culture of spectators: "not playing sports, but watching them; not cooking gourmet food, but watching the Food Network; not working on ourselves to become more loving, but thinking the terms of love." Related to the rise in the theoretical stance of philosophy has been the appearance of an inflated sense of individual subjectivity. Such an understanding is echoed in the works of Weber, Lukacs, Heidegger, Adorno, Foucault, DeBord, Habermas, Ken Wilber, and others.

Following the lead of others in this book, we end with Schwartz's warning of the increasing objectification of human being and how such objectification has mobilized a regressive narcissism; the ego has reasserted itself in light of the meaningless quantifying forces from without. By not reflecting deeply enough upon its conditions of existence in the modern world and on its orginary moments, philosophy has not been immune from this besotted sense of self. Even postmodern thought (where one would think we should know better) still suffers with exaggerated tones of self-importance. Although not an invective against thinking, nor against modern and contemporary philosophy's genuine advances, *The Gift of Logos* concludes with a call to wake up "from the delusion that theoretical re-description is somehow the same as transforming who we are." This transformation is our greatest gift to each other, and to ourselves. To give it voice, is the gift of *Logos*.

Notes

[1] Marcel Mauss, W.D. Halls trans., *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* Routledge, 2002, 4.
[2] Jacques Derrida, Peggy Kamuf, trans. *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, University of Chicago Press, 1994, 12.
[3] Ibid., 23.
[4] Walter Kaufmann trans. *The Gay Science* 107, (New York: Random House, 1974).

PART ONE:

THE *ARCHĒ* OF BEGINNINGS— *MUTHOS*, *LOGOS*, AND MADNESS

CHAPTER I

ULYSSES AT THE MAST

MARCIA SÁ CAVALCANTE SCHUBACK

> The myth accomplishes a work. The work of myth liberates us not only from everything that already is finished and definite, that is, from all substances, individualities and systems but it even liberates us towards an understanding of the taking place of totality, its birth, vibration and death. This art is the gift of the myths to philosophy. In this sense, the Greeks wove different relations between myth and philosophy that have constituted western history.
> —Emmanuel Carneiro Leão

Kafka has written a short story about the meeting between Ulysses and the sirens.[1] His story offers us an important key to the understanding of the work of myth. In Kafka's concise, cutting, precise words, the myth appears to have been transformed. Unlike the hero of the Greek narrative, Kafka's Ulysses behaves just as his shipmates and fills his ears with wax. With deaf ears, Kafka's Ulysses is no longer the hero who resists the seductive and tempting song of the sirens. Kafka's Ulysses "has escaped them." At least Ulysses ought to have escaped them when he, with wax in his ears, could not hear that, for once, the sirens did not sing at all.

How does Kafka transform the myth? First, Kafka's Ulysses doesn't consider that the song of the sirens pierced everything and that the passion of those who have been seduced by them could shatter other things than chains and masts. As his fellow sailors, Ulysses fills his ears with wax. Kafka's Ulysses trusts completely his "handful of wax and the fettering chains" and, with innocent happiness, he sails to meet the sirens. Another even more important transformation of the myth is that Kafka's sirens do not sing when Ulysses sails by them. The title of Kafka's short story is indeed "The Silence of the Sirens." With their silence, however, the sirens stage the non-singing, the lack of seduction, which, in Kafka's words, is

"an even more terrible weapon than their song." The transformation was in fact a transposition from the element of myth—that is, from the spoken word with its musical power and enchanting aspect of 'hearing speak about'—to an illusory deafness. In other words, it is only when Ulysses fills his ears with wax that he can spend his entire life within the illusion that the sirens had sung as he had imagined and expected. As a matter of fact, it is only when Ulysses puts wax in his ears that the sirens become myth, in the common sense of that word—that is, illusion, lie, fantasy, invention, or ideology. Ulysses' deafness would then be nothing other than the deafness of prejudice towards the truth of myth. At this instant—at the instant Ulysses doesn't listen to the song of the sirens—only then can myth and truth present themselves as being those elements that are most distant from each other—those that Aristotle taught us to call opposites.[2]

Kafka didn't quite change the myth. He simply tells once again Homer's myth, although with one hugely important addition. He retells, in the myth, both the myth and the long tradition of deafness toward the truth of myth. In his retelling we can see that Kafka shows how myth differs from literature. Literature is not myth. Even when literature uses mythical images, or allusions to myth, literature remains literary; it is not mythical. What then does it mean to remain literary? It means to remain in the element of the letter—in *littera*'s element—in the system of the alphabet, in the written word. And that means the possibility of transmitting and committing something without needing to hear or speak about it. Written culture lives in another element. It lives in the element of visuality. Illusion is a concept that emerges in the domain of the visual. Auditory illusions are in a way impossible. Kafka's version of Homer's myth permits us to identify the incomprehension of the truth of myth with the emergence of the written culture and its creation (literature). But this demands at least one more comment. Myth can only be considered an illusion on the condition that it is possible to produce an exact, literal and immediate image of reality. Being immediate, exact and literal—these aspects characterize the promise of a truth free from all illusion. This is the Promethean promise of the written word. The promise of a word which would be able to preserve something without transforming it, the promise of acting as an ancient charioteer able to drive round and round again, always in the same circular wheel path.[3] However, this is only a promise, the promise that the letter should be able to exactly reflect the real. Yet, the real always surpasses the letter and all that is literary. All attempts to exactly reflect the real are doomed to failure. But it is out of this failure that literature is born. Literature doesn't really emerge from the letter, but in letters as a tiny leaf of grass, born in a block of cement. Literature is

born out of an excess of the real. That is why literature shows that the real is its own presentation, nothing more, nothing less. In literature, the real presents itself as word. And when the word and the world (the real) show themselves as one, it is no longer possible to suspect that the literal word is an illusion. In literature it is the real that is mythical. When Kafka's Ulysses fills his ears with wax, thereby signaling that only through such an act does myth become synonymous with illusion, Kafka shows that literature is the way towards the truth of myth. Just as Ulysses' tale, literature is (in itself) a sailing back into myth.

Walking down this Kafkan path into myth, we can perhaps admit that the truth of myth does not exist in some concealed meaning, but in the wondrous identity between myth and the real. "The real is a myth." This is a statement to which a great number of philosophers today would subscribe. However, I would say that the statement has to be another, namely, that the myth is nothing more, nothing less than the real. In this article we hope to reach an understanding of how myth equals reality. To gain such an understanding, only one path lies before us: to follow once again the path of myth.

* * * * *

Let us read Homer's Ulysses through Kafka's Ulysses. Homer's Ulysses doesn't choose not to hear the song of the sirens. Neither does he choose to fill his own ears with wax. He follows the advice of Circe, the goddess, and let his men tie him to the mast, so that he will be able to listen to the sirens. If we admit that a) how the myth is told, b) who tells the myth, and c) the myth's content, constitute together an indivisible unity, then we must also follow the myth with such a unified gaze. In the *Odyssey*'s twelfth song, we can hear the myth being told three times. The first time, the one who tells the myth is Circe, the beautiful sorceress on the island of Ajaja, whom Homer describes as "the goddess of goddesses" (XII, 155) and as the "daughter of the sun (X, 138). The name Circe etymologically relates her to *kirkos*, which, according to the scholars, seems to have been identical to the circle of nature, with the circle that connects birth to death, and appearance to disappearance in an eternal movement, that is, in the circular movement of the universe itself.[4] Circe says the following:

> So: all those trials are over. Listen with care
> to this, now, and a god will arm your mind.
> Square in your ship's path are Seirēnēs, crying
> Beauty to bewitch men coasting by;

Woe to the innocent who hears that sound!
He will not see his lady or his children
In joy, crowding about him, home from sea;

The Seirēnēs will sing his mind away
On their sweet meadow lolling. There are bones
Of dead men rotting in a pile beside them
And flayed skins shrivel around the spot. Steer wide;
Keep well to seaward; plug your oarsmen's ears
With beeswax kneaded soft; none of the rest
Should hear that song. But if you wish to listen,
Let the men tie you in the lugger, hand
and foot, back to mast, lashed to the mast,
so you may hear those harpies' thrilling voices;
shout as you will, begging to be untied,
your crew must only twist more line around you
and keep their stroke up, till the singers fade. (XII, 37-55)[5]

The second time it is Ulysses who tells the myth. He tells the crew what Circe told him. He recounts what he had been told. In this way he again mythifies what Circe had already mythified. Ulysses' version is narrated in lines 154-164. Ulysses thinks that he himself must tell the myth, because it is necessary that not only one or two men, but the whole crew, should know the destiny that Circe, the beautiful goddess, has divined to him. He addresses them:

Dear friends,
More than one man, or two, should know those things
Circe foresaw for us and shared with me,
So let me tell her forecast: then we die
With our eyes open, if we are going to die,
Or know that death we baffle if we can. Seirēnēs
Weaving a haunting song over the sea
We are to shun, she said, and their green shore
All sweet with clover; yet they urged that I
Alone should listen to their song. Therefore
You are to tie me up, tight as splint,
Erect along the mast, lashed to the mast,
And if I shout and beg to be untied,
Take more turns of the rope to muffle me" (XII, 154-164)[6]

Circe's and Ulysses' narratives are very similar. Lines 162 (Ulysses' account) and 51 (Circe's account) in Homer's original are exactly the same. It is interesting to observe that in this mythical repetition, Ulysses

does not tell what actually would happen if one listens to the voices of the Sirens. The terrible images of piles of bones, the impossibility of coming back home and meeting one's family again, are omitted from Ulysses' narrative. He only says that the divinely beautiful song of the Sirens is insidious and threatening. Already in his narrative, Ulysses flees from the destructive force of the Sirens' song when he states that their song is dangerous, without describing how.

So far, we know through Circe what happens to the one who listens to the song of the Sirens and through Ulysses that their song is insidious and threatening. But what do the Sirens sing? What terrible song is it that emerges from their throats? This is the subject of the third narrative of the same myth that we can read in lines 184-191. The Sirens don't sing terribly; their melody is not out of tune. They do not really sing at all, nor do they make rhythmical sounds. *They sing words*. Their song is a saying, *phthoggos*, melodious words and meanings, a singing saying. What do they say?

This way, oh turn your bows,
Akhaia's glory,
As all the world allows—
Moor and be merry.

Sweet coupled airs we sing.
No lonely seafarer
Holds clear of entering
Our green mirror.

Pleased by each purling note
Like honey twining
From her throat and my throat
Who lies a-pining?

Sea rovers here take joy
Voyaging onward,
As from our song of Troy
Greybeard and rower-boy
Goeth more learned.

All feats on that great field
In the long warfare
Dark days the bright gods willed
Wounds you bore there,

Argos' old soldiery

On Troy beach teeming.
Charmed out of time we see.
No life on earth can be
Hid from our dreaming. (XII, 185-191)

Who are those who know so well what Argives and Trojans suffered when the city of Troy in accordance with the will of the gods? It is the myth itself that knows. It is Homer himself, that is, myth itself, singing and knowing what has happened in the suffering, fertile earth. The words sung by the Sirens are nothing more, nothing less, than the retelling of the beginning of the *Iliad*:

Anger be now your song, immortal one,
Akhilleus' anger, doomed and ruinous,
that caused the Akhaians loss on bitter loss
and crowed brave souls into the undergloom,
leaving so many dead men—carrion
for dogs and birds; and the will of Zeus was done.
Begin it when the two men first contending
broke with one another—The Lord Marshal
Agamemnon, Atreus' son, and Prince Akhilleus.[7]

The song of the Sirens is nothing more, nothing less, than the myth of myths.

There are innumerable interpretations of the myths in Homer, not least of the myth of the Sirens. Félix Buffiere's book, *Les mythes d'Homere et la pensée grecque*,[8] presents a beautiful itinerary in this long tradition. Since antiquity we have at our disposal allegoric, symbolic, grammatical, moral, theological, and philosophical interpretations of myth. Every interpretation tries to show a new, different and profound fold in the fabric of myth. We can summarize some recurrent features in these very different readings of the myth of the sirens. Some have interpreted the Sirens as the harmony of the stars, others as the insidious force of the soul of the dead. There are those who understood the Sirens as representing the dangers of the pleasures that lead the soul to its destruction. Sirens have also been interpreted as the seductions of poetry and science.

One common feature among those different interpretations is that the Sirens represent the forgetfulness of mortal things in which mankind surrenders to the passion for the distant, for the love of "divine and celestial things." In most of those readings, Ulysses is presented as the wise soul capable of resisting the seduction of distance. The song of the Sirens has in these different contexts of interpretation been taken to represent the Western metaphysical fascination for the celestial, the

unpronounceable, or the unsurpassable that can only be experienced at the expense of the body (which is the purported home of the humans). This metaphysical passion cuts bones and bodies from the soul, separating them, and scattering them upon the sea. The song of the Sirens would then also mean a kind of song of the distant that seduces mankind beyond its proper finite state, beyond the corporeal, material, and perceptible universe.

In these kinds of traditional commentaries on Homer, the attention is generally focused on the terrible powers of the Sirens and the annihilating consequences of their song. Heraclitus (not the "obscure" Pre-Socratic, but an author who, in late antiquity, wrote the so-called "Homeric Allegories") made explicit the fundaments of the allegorical interpretation of myth. However, he was the only one in late antiquity who identified the song of the Sirens with "immemorial tales from archaic times." Some of his lines suggest that he has seen the song of the Sirens as myth itself. But in this case myth was defined as an archaic narrative form.

How should we read this long interpretative tradition concerning the myth of the Sirens, a tradition that sums up the thinking of the Stoics, Cynics, and all of the various Neo-Platonists? I would say that this long tradition has filled its own ears with wax. It has heard it said that the song of the Sirens was very dangerous, but they have not heard *what* they sing in *how* they sing. It is my conviction, as incredible as it may sound, that only Plato has heard what the sirens have sung. *They sang both the myth as myth and the myth of the myth.* When Plato banishes myth from his ideal polis, he is not really in opposition to Homer. Plato follows Homer, because Homer himself was the first to tell about the danger of myth. It is Homer, and not Plato, who declared that myth is aware of its own intrinsic danger.

More than two thousand years of Platonist and Platonic Western culture have transpired. Whitehead's statement that Western philosophical history is no more than a footnote to Plato's thought is well known. Almost every tale about Plato's philosophy affirms that with Plato the occidental tradition matured from myth in order to measure itself by the parameter of *logos*, of discursive rationality. We have all been taught that with Plato philosophy and poetry divorced each other forever. The proof is to be found in Plato's statements in the tenth and concluding book of the famous dialogue *Politeia* (the *Republic*) in which he banishes poetry in general and Homer in particular. Is not this more than enough proof? Why should we pursue this line of historiographic oppositional thinking?

But as every interpreter has to admit, Plato is a *misomythos* at the same time that he is a myth writer and hence in this sense also a *philomythos*.

While not neglecting this paradox[9] (that the poet Plato dismisses poetry), the majority of readings that take on the difficult task of discussing this problem in Plato, proceed by interpreting Homer from the point of view of Plato.[10] What would happen if we tried it the other way around? What if we interpret Plato from the point of view of Homer? What would happen if we dared write of Homer's Plato? The time has come to interpret Plato from the horizon of Homer. This was already Kafka's project. My contribution in this sense is very preliminary. But I will try to follow this transformed point of view, paying attention to the way in which the myth includes knowledge of its own danger. Once again, I can only see one path to follow, namely, that of the mythic tale.

* * * * *

The terrible and dangerous song of the Sirens is the myth. But who are the Sirens? In the three narratives of the myth that appear in the twelfth book of the *Odyssey*, the Sirens are named without epithets. This is unusual in Homer. All adjectives that occur relate to their song. We know that they sing, they seduce, they charm, they destroy, and they devour. We know that their song is sweet as honey (*aoidē ligurē*) and that it is divine (*thespēsia*). But we don't really know what they look like and what and who they really are. The only thing we do know is their name ("Siren"). We find the same situation when we try to define "myth."

Circe names the Sirens four times. She says *Seirenas*, *Seirenon*, *Seirenes*, which forms correspond to the accusative, genitive, and nominative forms of the feminine plural. We know therefore that they are in a plural and in the feminine form. The fourth time they are named, Circe uses the *dualis*—*Sireinoiin*—and therefore we can understand that they are in the plural, but that there are precisely two of them.[11] The Sirens are two in number and in the feminine. In Homer, the naming of the Sirens speaks to the question of duality. But besides specifying the duality, the name of the sirens tells us something else. We should never forget when we talk about myth, that the myth must be heard, that the audio associations belong essentially to myth. In myth the primacy belongs to listening, even when the only access to it is, as it is for us, through writing. It is perhaps even time to admit that the distinction between oral and the literary culture should not be seen as if they were two lands divided by an ideal customs. The myth reminds us that in writing there is listening, and that this is what we mean by "reading."

This is why writing can never completely suppress its audio associations, the echoes and resonances, the elements of listening. Only

listening (if we accept that a painter is one who is able to listen with his eyes and the musician one who can see with his ears) recognizes the difference in identity and the identity in difference—and it always does this at the same time. That is why sound associations also define myth. If we speak aloud, the old Homeric Greek word *he seirēn*, we can hear immediately another Greek word *he seirē*, *he seirā*, which means rope, ribbon, lace, string, and cord. This association is also attested to by Plato himself in the *Cratylos* (403de). *Seirēn*, *seirē*, *seirā*—these words are almost homonyms for rope and cord. Those two words are so alike that Homer cannot use *seirā* in order to say "rope." That is perhaps why he uses instead *desmos*, chain, and *desmotis*, prisoner, which have the same semantic structure that Plato deploys in his Allegory of the Cave.

Prima facie the Greek name "siren" says little more than the duality of the double and the possible homonym relation to rope and string. Yet this is already as such a rich site for reflective investigation. The episode of the Sirens consists of several dualities. It has multiple twosomes. Ulysses' self control depends on the crew, on these others; but among these others, only two tie him to the mast, Eurilokos and Perimedes.[12] Why is this doubling so important? Because in the name 'Siren'' are co-present the rope and the string, danger and salvation. Because how can Ulysses save himself from the danger of the Sirens' strings? By being tied to the mast by a rope, by *seirā*. By extension, how can one resist the danger of myth? By letting oneself be tied by the rope of myth. Only in myth is there salvation from the danger of myth.

This paradox of myth provides the basis for Plato's position on myth. To understand his position, it is not enough to read all passages in his dialogues that can argue for his misomythical statements against poetry and Homer. Again, we need to understand Plato with Homeric ears. This first becomes possible when we push ourselves towards Plato's horismatic ontology, which is Plato's ontology of the horizon. Our traditional Plato is the one who has bifurcated into the sensible and the supersensible (the intelligible, hyperouranic reality). We have been taught that Plato made us into metaphysical animals by separating a world of transient things (the domain of becoming) from a world of ideas (the domain of being). A metaphysical animal is one who is obsessed by the passion for the unlimited, seduced by the song of the distant, and convinced that principles and beginnings only exist in the heavens above or in profound oceans below. And all this is furthermore allegedly achieved through violent sacrifices of the body, by the self-control of the instincts and the ascetic denial of pleasure. Those who are obsessed with the eternal ideas are supposed to eschew all transient things. To comprehend and esteem a

human being as a metaphysical animal seems to have resulted in a metaphysical situation in which we exclusively contemplate the essence of things without seeing the actual things themselves.

But who has taught us such prejudices? One cannot really blame Plato, who was not really worried about a world of ideas, but concerned fundamentally with the life of difference, distinction, and separation. Plato's concern was difference in itself. He talks about *horismōs*—distinctions—as the horizon out of which things can appear, present themselves as they really are. Plato never sacrifices the presence of things. Plato taught us rather to look at the presence of things from the perspective of their presentation. The essence of a tree, of a stone, of a human being, of animals, of gods, is not altogether separate from the things themselves. The essences are not separate things or ideal things, but rather the horizon from which trees, stones, humans, and animals, can appear, that is, present themselves in their being.

Plato's ontology is an ontology of presentation.[13] He discovers that the possibility of being near things depends on first recognizing them as that which they are. The only possibility of recognizing things is for Plato when things appear in their impressive aspect, that is, in their physiognomy. We can only be near things by following their outlines, configurations, borderlines, forms, and aspects, which the classical Greek language expressed with the words *eidos* and *idēa*, the aorist forms of the verb *orāo*, to see, glance, and gaze. To follow the "idea" of things signifies following their outlines. But this can only happen when we take a step backwards, as a runner or dancer has to do in order to jump to the nearness of something. This step backward can, however, only be accomplished from a certain perspective. Plato's outstanding discovery was perhaps nothing more and nothing less than the discovery of a gaze simultaneously able to see the thing and its horizon.

Rarely do we look at the horizon. Rarely do we bring together the distances of the heavens and the oceans. The horizon intensifies our sight. And sight is intensified when it surpasses and goes beyond what is seen. It does so not to lose it, to let it slip out of sight, but, on the contrary, to see seeing itself in things, to see things within the horizon of their own appearance. What would happen to our crusty Platonic studies if the appearances and being of words were to be returned to their verbal significations, if we were to learn to pronounce them as the verbal appearance? (The conceptual conjunction of appearance and instant—*eidos* and *eiksafenes*—also attests to this fundamental sense of appearing.)

Plato is not really concerned about the transcendent. He is rather striving for a seeing with transcendence, that is, seeing what there is to see,

but from the horizon of wholeness. This clarifies, rather than explains, why we, when seeing a Platonic "one," always meet a "two." We simultaneously see things and their horizon. What Plato teaches us is rather that the finite is limited by an infinite and unlimited horizon. How could we conceive the limited without an unlimited openness? Plato shows us that the sum total of being is an outline within the openness of the horizon. Plato does not go beyond things. Rather he goes beyond the gaze that separates things from their horizon and therefore forgets that reality and horizon belong to each other as a dual form. Two Sirens, two—one.

The horizon is the open, unlimited space, which opens the limits of things. That could be a summary of Plato's discovering eyes. This seeing with transcendence, this seeing simultaneously of both horizon and things, the horizon as the reality of things, is also double in itself. In a sense it is an *Odyssey* of the sight, in which the eyes have to travel away from things in order to return to them with the whole horizon. In another sense, it is a connecting sight that has to tie itself to the limits of things in order not to get lost in the unlimited openness of the horizon. It has always been said that Ulysses'being fastened to the mast allegorizes the conceptual *logos*, the conceptual rationality.

To sail by the Sirens means to sail across the open horizon, to sail across the pure presence of things in their presentation, a deadly threat, because it really can happen that the sight can neglect things, neglect the real, and be swallowed up by the dispersion of the possible. The danger of the horizon's own openness is the danger of Platonism itself. In the same way as the myth knows its own danger, Plato knows his own danger. In order to be Platonic, that is, to be able to see things from the openness of their horizon, one must let oneself be tied to the base of the mast, to the base of concepts. This is the human beginning place. Is Ulysses, then, the one who lets himself be tied to the concept of *logos* and, because of this, is able to sail by the myth without being swallowed up by it? How can we understand Ulysses? Does he symbolize the rational survival of the seduction of myth? Who is Ulysses?

The abundance of names and epithets for glorious heroes and adored gods is typical for epic poetry. Ulysses is not merely a Greek name. He is the wisest, the most glorious, and the god-like; he is known to be noble and astute, fox-like, celebrated for his sly intelligence. The Greek name Odysseus belongs to the semantic region of the verb *odyssomai*, to become angry, to be irritated. Ulysses is angered and irritated and therefore dissatisfied. He is the dissatisfied one, the one who does not see better things, but rather the Good itself. I would summarize the humanity of Ulysses as the representation of loneliness in and as the human. He is not

the figure of a human utopia, but rather the representation of humanity as the strangest utopia. The human being is placelessness as such and not the one who seeks non-existent places.

* * * *

Let us follow the myth once again. In addition to tracing the name Odysseus and its etymological landscape it is important to follow the various verbs, that is, the actions that distinguish Ulysses. He is famous for his divine actions. In the twelfth song of the *Odyssey*, Ulysses is the one who listens to Circe's words and who remembers them. He must sail by, flee, and submit himself to trials. All those verbs apply not only to Ulysses, but also to his shipmates. There are, however, two verbs that in this twelfth song appear only in connection with Ulysses. The first one is the verb *ethēlo*, which means to desire, to tend towards something, to choose, wish or aim for a *telos* (a goal). This verb appears with another—to listen—in the sense of desiring to listen: "but if you wish to listen . . ." (line 49). The other verb that distinguishes Ulysses is the verb to tie, which is also used in the verbal composition, "let the men tie you in the lugger" (lines 49-51). To desire to listen and to let oneself be tied are two actions that are expressed each with two verbs. Once again, two opposite actions—one active—wishing, longing, and searching—and one passive—letting oneself be tied.

According to Homer's narrative, it is quite clear that Ulysses' freedom of choice, wisdom, and self-control, depends on his decision to let himself be tied to the mast by his crew. Ulysses' control over the situation on board his ship, Ulysses' control over myth itself, is actually a letting himself be sailed across. It is self-control and self-reliance. Ulysses' control over myth is described as his hearing Circe's advice, a listening to the admonishing words of the goddess, a listening to the myth. Ulysses way of control is to obey. If Ulysses stands for *logos* and reason, it is crucial for us to understand *how* he does so. He does so by letting himself be tied to the base of the mast in a very precise position. He lets himself be tied in a standing position; not able to untie himself, he allows the limits of the mast to become his own limits.

Where does this brief reading of Plato, from the point of view of the myth of the Sirens, take us? Plato doesn't criticize myth. In the same manner that Xenophanes and Heraclitus did, he criticizes the crude misunderstanding of what myth is. Myth is not really a tale or a narrative. Myth is the presentation of the real, the real presentation of the real. It is reality realized.