

WRITING GREECE: THE PLATONIC LEGACY OF  
MELETĒ THANATOU IN JACQUES DERRIDA'S  
APORETIC ATHENIAN THANATOGRAPHIES

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## ABSTRACT

Although he is commonly held to be a thinker of life, this dissertation argues that it is essential to read Jacques Derrida primarily as a thinker of death. Indeed, Derrida's work displays an ongoing engagement with Plato's definition of philosophy as a *meletē thanatou*, or careful reflection upon death. Reading Derrida's work on death in this way foregrounds its enacted dimension, through which the reader is drawn into an aporia which itself is constitutive of a *meletē thanatou*.

The first chapter of this dissertation frames deconstruction's key concepts around an understanding of death and the legacy of *meletē thanatou*. It places some of Derrida's earlier work into dialogue with his contemporary Jacques Lacan regarding the centrality of Sigmund Freud's death drive to the generation of meaning. It also critiques the neglect of the Platonic legacy in certain contemporary readings of Derrida's work on apophysis and metaphysics.

The second chapter consists of close readings of Derrida's 1975-1976 seminar *La vie la mort* and on *Aporias*, which show the extent to which Derrida's reception of the Platonic legacy of *meletē thanatou* is mediated by his engagement with the work of Martin Heidegger, Sigmund Freud, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

The third and final chapter discusses Derrida's work on *meletē thanatou* in relation to that of his French contemporaries, Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault. However, this chapter also places special emphasis on the heretofore neglected parallels between Czech philosopher Jan Patočka and Derrida, namely in the way that their

reception of Heidegger enables us to understand the centrality of a thinking of death to their thought on questions related to being, truth, and the European project.

This dissertation contends that it is necessary to read Derrida as a philosopher of death in order to qualify him as a philosopher of life, and that the thus far unexplored correspondences between his thinking and that of Jan Patočka are a rich and vital source for reinterpreting and understanding Derrida's philosophical inheritance from Plato to Heidegger and his place within that tradition.

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## INTRODUCTION

1. 'You know, I am (there is in me someone who feels) fascinated by the "Greeks", amorous, demanding, indebted, overwhelmed, exasperated, awaiting always more from their reserve, hanging on the enigma of their word'
2. 'And yet, or perhaps precisely because of this, I am (there is in me someone who feels) foreign, radically insensible or impervious to the "Greeks", uncomprehending, stunned, deaf before their word, incompetent, incapable of understanding them or of translating them, as if they figured for me the wholly other.'
3. 'And at the same time, or perhaps precisely because of this, I am (there is in me someone who feels) allergic to the "Greeks", allergic to this little people so sure of itself and so domineering, as General de Gaulle once said, if I remember correctly. At once unable and unwilling to bear witness for them, and still less to call them to bear witness, to hold them for the ultimate *witnesses*, I always feel within me a tendency to *contest* them, I would almost say to *detest* them.'<sup>1</sup>

In 1996, the Greek publishing house Olkos published an art book featuring a series of 34 black-and-white photographs of Athens taken by French photographer Jean-François Bonhomme.<sup>2</sup> These photographs show a series of archaeological sites and ruins from Antiquity, but they also show scenes from contemporary Athenian life. Several of the photographs show "ruins" of 20<sup>th</sup>-century technology, such as old machines or threadbare storefronts, while others juxtapose superannuated technological apparatuses with ruins of

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, "We Other Greeks," 38–39.

<sup>2</sup> Bonhomme and Derrida, *Athēna stē skia tēs Akropolēs. Athènes à l'ombre de l'Acropole*.

classical antiquity, such as images of old cameras being used at archaeological sites. The overall impression that emerges from these photographs is spectral and haunting. The lines between present and past, the dead and the living, become blurred in this series of photographs. What was once alive lives on, while what is now alive has already passed. Jacques Derrida was asked to write a commentary to these photographs, and his text, published in facing Greek translation to the French original in the first Greek edition, is divided into 20 *clichés* or “stills”, in the English translation<sup>3</sup>, is best known as the French philosopher’s most sustained reflection on photography. However, and perhaps more significantly, Derrida’s text, later republished in France by the publishing house Galilée under the title *Demeure, Athènes*, is also a sustained reflection on the Platonic tradition of *meletē thanatou* (μελέτη θανάτου) or the attentive contemplation of death, which is described by Plato, in the *Phaedo*, as the proper practice of philosophy.<sup>4</sup> This tradition, by which wisdom and truth can be found in the contemplation of the horizon, the frontier and the metaphysical reality of the unthinkable and ineffable passage into non-being, underpins the history of Western thought. Indeed, it is present not only in Ancient Greek thought, but it was fully recuperated by the Christian tradition under the name of *care of the soul* (or *for the soul*) and gave rise to a series of spiritual exercises designed to grant believers access to a metaphysical gnosis of their own mortality.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*; Platōn, *Phaidōn* (*ē Peri Psychēs*), secs. 80e–81a.

<sup>5</sup> On the history of the Christian recuperation of the Ancient Greek spiritual exercises and the practice of *meletē thanatou*, see in particular, Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*.

Derrida's relationship to this Platonic (and, by extension, Christian) tradition of defining philosophy—indeed the entire history and practice of European thought—as a deathly practice, a study of death, a search for truth that can only be found in death, is complex and uneven. In fact, deconstruction, the school of philosophy that Derrida fathered, is frequently described as a philosophy of life, a philosophy of survival. And yet, a reflection on the legacy of the Platonic *meletē thanatou* that could be said to haunt Western philosophy, is explicitly or implicitly present throughout Derrida's writings. Derrida receives Plato not only in the original Greek, but also filtered through his reception of a 19<sup>th</sup> century German Greece. Indeed, in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, a re-examining of the Greek legacy occurred in Europe, but particularly in Germany, that identified philosophy and the legacy of Greek philosophy not only as a practice of *care* and *attentive study* given towards death, in which the meaning or non-meaning of existence and the essence of subjecthood is to be found in death; but also, in parallel, by certain other figures, as an *orgiastic* practice, one in which the meaning of subjectivity and the essence of subjecthood are attained in moments of blood sacrifice and sexual frenzy. What is at stake in this dissertation project is not only looking at Derrida as a locus of the reception of Platonic and Ancient Greek thought distilled through 19<sup>th</sup>-century German philosophy and psychoanalysis in France (and Europe) in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, alongside his contemporaries Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault; but also the examination of questions related to the Greek inheritance of Europe and the legacy of Christianity in structuring the European project and European philosophy, which emerge in Derrida's confrontation with the work of Martin Heidegger and Jan Patočka, in particular. What emerges from this confrontation is not necessarily Derrida's providing

an explicit formulation of an answer to these problems, but rather the creation of an aporetic experience for the reader, one that in itself grants access to a philosophical meditation on the subject of lifedeath and of mortality: in sum, the *meletē thanatou* itself.

Nonetheless, this exercise is not straightforward because of a number of complications: firstly, Derrida identifies himself and his thought as squarely placed under the banner of Nietzsche and his affirmation of life. It is a relatively well-known fact that Derrida's career was launched into international visibility thanks to his intervention at a conference on structuralism at John's Hopkins University in 1969, at which he boldly asserted that his thought was a philosophy of life and was aligned with the "Nietzschean affirmation".<sup>6</sup> Moreover, In Derrida's last interview, given to journalist Jean Birnbaum just before his death and published in *Le Monde* in 2004, he unconditionally states: "my discourse is not a discourse of death."<sup>7</sup> It is easy to conclude, as many have done, that Derrida's position is one of either opposition to, or discarding of, a tradition that equates the proper practice of philosophy with the study and practice of death.

And yet, this is not the case. Derrida assiduously engaged in both a thinking of death, and also in an engagement with Plato, throughout his career.<sup>8</sup> One of his earliest direct forays into the Classical tradition is *La pharmacie de Platon*, in which he proposes

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<sup>6</sup> Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," 292. See discussion in chap. 1, *infra*.

<sup>7</sup> Derrida and Birnbaum, *Learning to Live Finally*, 50.

<sup>8</sup> "'Platonism' is not only an example of this movement, the first 'in' in the whole history of philosophy. It commands it, it commands this *whole* history. A philosophy as such would henceforth always be 'Platonic'. Hence the necessity to continue to try to think what take place in Plato, with Plato, what is shown there, what is hidden, so as to win there or to lose there." Derrida, "Khōra," 121.

a novel reading of Plato's *Phaedrus*, and another relatively-early text in which Derrida directly takes up the legacy of Platonism is *La carte postale*.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, Plato is a major subject of preoccupation for Derrida, and remains so throughout his career, as evinced by one of his later works, *Khôra*, an example of the French philosopher's ongoing knack for discovering new meaning in ancient texts.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Derrida himself agreed that he “‘privileged in many ways’ the Platonic corpus.”<sup>11</sup> And yet, despite directly engaging with Plato's works in the original Greek, Derrida constantly thinks of Plato's legacy as an inheritance and a haunting through his successive readings of Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger, in particular, all of whose thinking on the subject of death, and on the Platonic legacy, is of central importance for Derrida. Moreover, Derrida's thinking on this subject is in certain ways aligned with, and in other ways divergent from, that of his contemporaries Michel Foucault and Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, in particular, both of whom engaged extensively with the Platonic legacy and who are important figures of the reception of Plato in 20<sup>th</sup> century European philosophy.

In this respect, particularly in his engagement with Heidegger, Foucault and Patočka, I argue, Derrida places himself on the side of a rationalized and ethical discourse on the value of thinking death and sacrifice, unlike some other French receptions of Nietzsche (such as by G. Bataille and G. Deleuze, in particular), which tend to privilege the orgiastic and radically asubjectivizing and desubjectivizing potentialities of

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<sup>9</sup> Derrida, *La carte postale*. See also: Willis, “Eros in the Age of Technical Reproductibility.”

<sup>10</sup> Allen Miller, “The Platonic Remainder.”

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, “We Other Greeks,” 34.

Nietzsche. Generally, Derrida is portrayed as an iconoclastic and perhaps irreverent, even dangerous and destructive, postmodern thinker, one who has little use for tradition, and in whose arcane and incomprehensible writings everything from “the canon” to Structuralism is demolished and “deconstructed” with the result that all truths are relative, that nothing can be affirmed with any certainty and, as a result, one is left with nothing but half-truths and universal relativism.<sup>12</sup> Although a relatively widespread prejudice, this is perfectly untrue. Derrida was a thinker whose engagement with “the canon” (both literary and philosophic) was sustained and profound. Likewise, Derrida is a profoundly moral thinker, and the prejudice that in his work all truth dissolves away into a universal relativism is simply unfounded. Derrida’s ethics—and particularly a certain ethics surrounding the *meletē thanatou*, sacrifice, metaphysics—is in no small part influenced by Heidegger, in whose work the *meletē thanatou* appears as “being-towards-death,” the English translation of the original term *Sein-zum-Tode*, a mode of being in which Da-sein can realize its utmost selfhood at the frontier precisely where it ceases to exist as such. This perspective also influenced other 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers who were contemporaries of Derrida, particularly Jan Patočka, and especially in his *Heretical Essays*, in which he reckons with the ethics of sacrifice and the metaphysical aspect of being as revealed in death; but also Michel Foucault, in the second and third volumes of the *Histoire de la sexualité*, where emphasis is placed on the importance of a self-directed

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, *The New York Times*’ disparaging front-page obituary of Jacques Derrida, which describes him as an “abstruse theorist”, and deconstruction as a “fashionable, slippery philosoph[y]”, while casting aspersions on “Mr. Derrida’s murky explanations of his philosophy” and his “turgid and baffling” prose. (Kandell, “Jacques Derrida, Abstruse Theorist, Dies in Paris at 74.”)

ethics, one that stresses the importance of a non-orgiastic use of sexuality and death as a means to approach a metaphysical truth about being. For both Patočka and Foucault, that truth is to be attained through sexuality and death but in a rationalized and ethical way. Derrida is at once closer to these figures than to a Georges Bataille and his orgiastic and sanguinary philosophy, but Derrida is careful to distance himself from what he identifies as the Christian element in the thought of Heidegger and Patočka, in particular, but also implicitly in Foucault. Moreover, Derrida takes distance from the discourse of Eurocentrism (or even a discourse of Euro-supremacism and anti-Semitism) that could emerge out of a tradition that holds that it possesses the exclusive truth of philosophy, that indeed, philosophy (and history) are solely European.

What is at stake in this dissertation is not only sketching out diachronically and topically the avenues and progression of Derrida's thought on death and on the Platonic legacy, but it is also to complicate it, with reference particularly to atheism and to metaphysics, be it an atheist Platonism, an atheist metaphysics, or an atheist Christianity. Derrida is an atheist thinker, yet he is also a thinker of a certain atheist metaphysics, a certain atheist ethics, and he has a particular conception of the ineffable that has led him to be identified as a thinker of a neo-Platonist God of the ineffable. And yet, situating Derrida's thought on these topics is no easy feat. The researcher must reckon not only with the sheer mass of published work by Derrida, whose bibliography counts over 55 monographs, but also with the fact that Derrida's thought on these topics (the legacy of Platonism, death and metaphysics, etc.) is not uniform: his perspective seems to change throughout his career and also even sometimes within the same work. It is not only a question of situating Derrida within the narrow confines of the question regarding Plato's injunction that the

correct philosophy is one of attentive care given to death, but it is indeed one of locating Derrida within a much broader context of a French tradition of thinking of death and meaning in relation to humanism and the Western philosophical tradition, a tradition that took on particular importance in the twentieth century—perhaps even to the extent that one might say that French twentieth-century thought is entirely consumed by the question of the meaning of “life” (or “being” or “humanism” or indeed “meaning”) seen through the prism of, or in relation to, the meaning of “death” (or “non-being” or “anti-humanism” or “the ineffable”).<sup>13</sup> In this respect, this dissertation seeks to emphasize the importance of not ignoring Derrida’s engagement with Plato and the legacy of Platonism (the *meletē thanatou*) via Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Freud, but also to identify what distinguishes Derrida from a thinker of an “atheist Christianity” such as Patočka. Namely, I assert that Derrida plunges the reader into an *aporetic experience* of lifedeath.

Although these questions of style and of substance will be explored in the three chapters that compose the body of this dissertation, in this introduction, I want to situate Derrida both within a legacy of specifically French receptions of Greece from the Renaissance through the mid-twentieth century, but also within the history of French receptions of German thought more-or-less directly related to Greece (Heidegger, Freud, Nietzsche, in particular). This summary and diachronic exposé of ideas and foci of French attitudes towards Greece helps us to understand the intellectual legacy and currents out of which

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<sup>13</sup> Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought*.

Derrida's work emerged, and in particular with respect in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the Platonic legacy of *meletē thanatou*, which is so central to Freud, Nietzsche and Heidegger.

### **French receptions of Ancient Greece from the Renaissance to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

Often, when the relevance of Ancient Greece to the culture of France is mentioned, some version of the following question is raised in objection: "Why Greece and not Rome? For France, as a Romance country, is surely more marked by the Roman heritage than by the Greek one!". Indeed, although originally it had nothing to do with the French context in particular, perhaps no better answer can be provided than citing Hannah Arendt's sage remarks from an essay entitled "Tradition and the Modern Age":

Indeed, only twice in our history do we encounter periods in which men are conscious and over-conscious of the fact of tradition, identifying age as such with authority. This happened, first, when the Romans adopted classical Greek thought and culture as their own spiritual tradition and thereby decided historically that tradition was to have a permanent formative influence on European civilization. Before the Romans, such a thing as tradition was unknown; with them, it became and after them it remained the guiding thread through the past and the chain to which each generation knowingly or unknowingly was bound in its understanding of the world and its own experience. Not until the Romantic period do we again encounter an exalted consciousness and glorification of tradition. (The discovery of Antiquity in the Renaissance was a first attempt to break the fetters of tradition, and by going to the sources themselves to establish a past over which tradition would have no hold.)<sup>14</sup>

Arendt's observation that the Romans "adopted classical Greek thought and culture as their own spiritual tradition" is the reason why any discussion of France's cultural inheritance from Antiquity cannot stop at Rome, or take Rome without Greece, for Rome

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<sup>14</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 25.

is, culturally and spiritually, both the prolongation and the offspring of Athens. Linguistically, aesthetically, poetically, and philosophically, the Romans were Greeks and therefore, by extension, in some way, the Roman cultural inheritance is indeed a Greek one.

It was of course during the Renaissance that the “cultural inheritance” of Antiquity began to be understood as such and reinterpreted afresh. However, the French Renaissance is particular with regard to Greece, for Greece held a special and unique fascination for the French intelligentsia, who saw Greece as being particularly relevant to France and French culture. Indeed, during the Renaissance, a period which Arendt remarks was not so much marked by its return to tradition, but rather by a break therefrom, by returning to the sources in order to refashion a past unbound by tradition, French intellectuals turned to Greece as a source capable of providing an authentically French identity, clear of any Roman inheritances. From a linguistic standpoint, with the declaration of French as the official language of the Kingdom by the 1539 Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts, the newfound primacy of the French language over Latin in legal and other official contexts led a number of humanists, the most famous of whom today is Joachim du Bellay, to theorize ways in which the French vernacular could be improved and enhanced in order to make it as expressive and as complete a language as Latin.<sup>15</sup> But, rather than emulate the Italians—with whom French intellectuals felt intense cultural and linguistic competition—who had been expanding vernacular Italian by borrowing from Latin in accordance with the recommendations of Dante’s 14<sup>th</sup> century treatise

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<sup>15</sup> See, « Défense et illustration de la langue française » in Du Bellay, *Les regrets*.

entitled *De vulgari eloquentia*, a number of prominent French humanists believed that French should borrow from Greek, rather than Latin, in its efforts to standardize its orthography and expand its vocabulary.<sup>16</sup> These intellectuals based their arguments on the fallacious idea that prior to the Roman conquest, Gaul was populated by descendants of the Greek colonies on the French shores of the Mediterranean. In their view, the Romans had imported a foreign language and culture to France when they conquered Gaul. By expanding French using Greek neologisms, they believed that they would be purifying the French language of the foreign admixture of Latin.<sup>17</sup> Guillaume Budé petitioned François I to promote the teaching of Greek and Hebrew (the teaching of which had until then been forbidden by the Sorbonne because they would allow learners to perform unauthorized translations of the Old and the New Testaments) by founding the Collège de France, which was founded as an institution for the teaching of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Budé's enthusiasm for the Greek language inspired Joachim Périon's 1555 etymological dictionary *Dialogues de l'origine du français et de son parenté avec le grec*,<sup>18</sup> which in turn inspired Henri Estienne to write his 1569 *Traité de la conformité du langage françois avec le grec*,<sup>19</sup> and Léon Trippault his 1581 etymological dictionary

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<sup>16</sup> Huchon, *Histoire de la langue française*, 139–40.

<sup>17</sup> Huchon, 35.

<sup>18</sup> Périon, *Dialogues*. See also editors' introduction (*ibid.* pp. 22ff), where we read that Périon's attempt to show the “parenté [de la langue française] avec la noble langue grecque [...] a des analogies avec l'effort d'Henri II qui defend la France et restaure l'ancien rayonnement de la langue française” and confirms the etymological influence Périon had on French orthography and diacritics: “[il] s'intéresse surtout, dit-il, au système de ce qu'on nomme les accents, à celui des diptongues, et des graphies correctes.”

<sup>19</sup> Estienne, *Conformité du langage françois avec le grec*.

*Celt'-hellenisme*,<sup>20</sup> in which, to prove Arendt's point about the liberties this period took with tradition, we read that the Celts were in fact Greeks! An enduring sign of this free reinterpretation of the tradition by these Renaissance intellectuals is our inheritance of their polytonic accentuation system for writing French, with its acute, grave, and circumflex accents, which they calqued from the polytonic accentuation system used by Byzantine scribes to write the Greek language.

This 16<sup>th</sup> century privileging of Greek antiquity over Roman antiquity, continued into the 17<sup>th</sup> century in a different form, namely that of the famous *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, as Arendt correctly states, it was not until the Romantic period in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that Greece once again figured at the forefront of the intellectual and artistic preoccupations of the age. Indeed, with the Greek War of Independence from the Ottoman Empire, Europeans began to travel to Greece again in significant numbers for the first time since the Crusades. There was a unique French appreciation of modern Greece that began in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

First of all, and the best known example from this period, is Chateaubriand's *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem*, in which he describes his passage through Greece in 1806 on his way to Jerusalem.<sup>22</sup> Like many travelers to Greece of his time, Chateaubriand paid most attention in his writing to the beauty of the classical antiquities he had come to

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<sup>20</sup> Trippault, *Celt'-hellenisme*. However, Du Bellay's *Défense et illustration...* is also full of references to this supposed Greek origin of the French and, reading his conclusion, he intended his entire work to be an exhortation to the French to re-become the "Gallogrecs" their ancestors once were. Du Bellay, *Les regrets*, 292.

<sup>21</sup> See, esp., Fumaroli, "Les abeilles et les araignées."

<sup>22</sup> Chateaubriand, *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem*.

Greece to admire, and focused little on the inhabitants of Greece, their language, and their customs. However, when he did deign to comment on the Greeks themselves, Chateaubriand often did so in withering terms, denigrating their customs and especially their language, which had deviated from the Classical Greek language in which he had been educated. “*Cette indifférence des Grecs touchant leur patrie est aussi déplorable qu’elle est honteuse ; non seulement ils ne savent pas leur histoire, mais ils ignorent presque tous la langue qui fait leur gloire : on a vu un Anglais poussé d’un saint zèle, vouloir s’établir à Athènes, pour y donner des leçons de grec ancien.*”<sup>23</sup>

In the 1820s, more positive representations of the Modern Greeks began to emerge as the press began to portray them as heroes in their struggle for independence. We see paintings by Delacroix at this time glorifying the Greek freedom fighters, such as *Les Scènes des Massacres de Scio* (1824) and *La Grèce sur les ruines de Missolonghi* (1826). But highly noteworthy, and unique in its genre but also in its significance to the extent to which the French popular imagination was captivated by Greece at this time, is the preponderance of poems having a Greek theme submitted to the *Jeux Floraux*, an poetry competition held in the city of Toulouse every year since 1324.<sup>24</sup> In addition, in reaction to the Greek War of Independence, Claude Fauriel published the first volume of his *Chants populaires de la Grèce moderne* in 1824, the first time in history that popular

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<sup>23</sup> Chateaubriand, 126.

<sup>24</sup> On the preponderance of Greek-themed submissions to the *Jeux floraux* in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, see Papageōrgiou-Provata, *Peri ton Gallikon Filellēnismōn tēs Toulouzēs*.

songs and poems were the subject of a published volume.<sup>25</sup> And yet, this positive view taken of Ancient Greece by French travelers, artists, poets and littérateurs in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not to last. A rather negative view of contemporary Greece dominated the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in France, and during this time, the French visitors to Greece rather saw themselves, like Chateaubriand, as the guardian of a classical Antiquity that the Greeks themselves had forgotten in their present, regrettable state of barbarousness.<sup>26</sup>

### **Late-19<sup>th</sup> century revisions of Hellenism and their philosophical repercussions**

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, an entirely different perspective on Greece began to predominate. I would argue that this is the period most applicable to the perspective that Arendt references when she makes reference to the exalted importance and glorification of tradition that occurred during the Romantic period. Although Philhellene writers such as Renan certainly attributed exalted importance to and glorified Greek antiquity,<sup>27</sup> during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ancient Greece took on an entirely different level

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<sup>25</sup> Fauriel, *Chants populaires de la Grèce moderne*, 1824; Fauriel, *Chants populaires de la Grèce moderne*, 1825.

<sup>26</sup> For a thorough account of this phenomenon and of the vicissitudes of French attitudes towards Greece during this period, see Basch and Farnoux, *Le voyage en Grèce*.

<sup>27</sup> Renan's dithyrambic disquisition upon the Acropolis ("*Prière sur l'Acropole*") is one of the most well-known paeans to Greek antiquity and is an excellent example of this part of the Romantic tradition. See: Renan, *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse*, 44 et passim.

of importance: it became seen as an inheritance that indeed had a defining and ongoing impact on the present day; moreover, by examining the Ancient Greek past, one could uncover hidden truths about the nature of man and of civilization. This perspective was foundationally based upon the 19<sup>th</sup>-century fields of human sciences and archaeology, which brought to light surprising facets and reinterpretations of Greek (and Roman) society during the classical and, importantly, pre-classical periods.<sup>28</sup> Yet, this perspective was given philosophical and existential relevancy on a global scale by the colossal trio of Freud, Nietzsche, and Heidegger.<sup>29</sup> It is important to detail what these new perspectives on Greece were, what their philosophical elaborations entail, and, importantly, how they were received in France and what resonance they went on to have in the French context. By doing this, I intend to show that Derrida is a major figure of the (difficult) reception in France of the Greece (and the Plato) of Freud, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, in particular, and that therefore Derrida's reception of Plato's injunction regarding the importance of death in the practice of philosophy (and therefore in both the meaning of life and the leading of a good life) is an inheritance that is at once Freudian, Nietzschean and Heideggerian.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Three of the most important works in this respect are, to my mind: Frazer, *The Golden Bough*; Fustel de Coulanges, *La cité antique*; Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*.

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., Armstrong, *A Compulsion for Antiquity*; Most, "Heidegger's Greeks"; Silk, "Nietzsche, Decadence, and the Greeks."

<sup>30</sup> Derrida himself, discussing his relationship to the Greeks, classifies himself in relation specifically to the three thinkers Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Freud, asserting that although he has inherited a tradition that includes them, he has been less faithful than those three to the tradition as a whole. See: Derrida, "We Other Greeks." Nonetheless, Derrida's stance towards Greece and towards the "tradition" is quite [self-] consciously measured against these three figures in particular.

“*Les sciences humaines*” and archaeology

The late 19<sup>th</sup> century abounded in studies in the nascent disciplines of ethnology, comparative religion, psychology and sociology (*les sciences humaines*) that drew links between contemporary Europe, ‘primitive’ cultures of, on the one hand, Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Oceania, and, on the other, Ancient Greece. Initially disseminated within academic circles, many of these works gained a broader readership and were the impetus for artistic and philosophic reevaluations of the modernity of classical antiquity. At the time that these studies were being written during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, archaeological digs were bringing to surface a pre-Classical Greek reality that brought to light a culture whose religious practices encompassed human sacrifice, animal gods, tree and snake worship, and forms of art that resembled the “primitive” arts that Europeans had discovered in their African and Oceanian colonies. Examples of these are Heinrich Schliemann’s excavations of Troy from 1870-1874 (further excavations were performed until 1890), of Mycenae in 1874, and Tiryns in 1884. Arthur Evans led work on excavations that unearthed the Minoan civilization at Knossos on Crete from 1900-1905. These discoveries complicated the traditional, Renaissance, humanistic understanding of Greece as a source and a model of aesthetic and rational purity and excellence and made the origins of Greek culture seem extremely unfamiliar, foreign, and primitive.<sup>31</sup> Together

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<sup>31</sup> A detailed discussion of these excavations and of the extent of their implications is beyond the scope of the present discussion. Of particular relevance is a further exploration of the ideological

with these archaeological discoveries, research into Ancient Greek religious and societal practices contributed to this distancing and making-foreign of the Greek legacy, and troubled the discourse of European cultural supremacy, which had in part been based on the descendance of European culture from Greek culture. If Europeans had been able to attain their level of cultural “superiority”, emerging as they had from such strange and blood-spattered roots, who could say that the “primitive” African or Aboriginal tribes Europeans encountered on their colonial adventures could not achieve the same if left to their own devices?<sup>32</sup> The increasing awareness of the strangeness of the origins of Western cultures served to increase anxiety about the growing unfamiliarity of the familiar (the *Unheimlich*), but it also provided an unexpected source of inspiration for those who wished to challenge the smug paradigms of late-19<sup>th</sup>-century Eurocentric humanism. Moreover, during this time, Nietzsche published his *Birth of Tragedy* in 1872, a work which posited and described a “Dionysian” side to Ancient Greek tragedy and culture, involving transports of blood and of the flesh, which was totally alien to the prevailing concept of Ancient Greece as that harmonious, rational, logical society so profoundly foundational to “Civilization”.

Before turning to Nietzsche, however, a look at late 19<sup>th</sup>-century developments in fields as varied as sociology, comparative religion, and historiography, will help us to

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underpinnings of Arthur Evans’ “recreation” of Knossos. See on this topic: Gere, *Knossos and the Prophets of Modernism*.

<sup>32</sup> For an account of the successive and mutually-incoherent theories developed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a futile and desperate attempt to justify ethnic and racial superiority, see: Gould, *Ever since Darwin*, chaps. 26–28.

understand the reception of Nietzsche's Greece in France, as these scientific works helped "fill in" and lend credence to many of Nietzsche's theories about the Dionysiac. One of the most influential works revealing the strangeness of the origins of European culture in Ancient Greece, and the first we shall consider, is George Frazer's 1890 monograph *The Golden Bough*. This multi-volume treatise is a comparative study of magic and religion that draws links between the beliefs and practices of 'primitives' with those of contemporary Europeans. An example of Frazer's influential findings is the relationship between tree-worship in animistic societies, Ancient Greece, and May Day ceremonies in Europe. He illustrates how the abundant "proofs of the prevalence of tree-worship in Ancient Greece and Italy," and the fact that for the German tribes, "the oldest sanctuaries were natural woods," are based on the belief that "to the savage the world in general is animate, and trees and plants are no exception to this rule [...] he thinks that they have souls like his own and he treats them accordingly."<sup>33</sup> An earlier study by Karl Böttischer in 1852 argued that the tree was the first sanctuary of the Greek gods, and that temples, whose columns were metonymical representations of the sacred trees, developed out of devotional practices of worship of a sacred tree, which involved suspending sacrificial victims and other offerings from the tree's boughs.<sup>34</sup> According to Frazer, these beliefs persist in May Day rituals in various regions of Europe, which involve tree branches and sacred trees, demonstrating the persistence of animist beliefs in the heart of

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<sup>33</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 83–84.

<sup>34</sup> Papapetros, "« L'âme est l'architecte de son propre corps »."

‘civilized’ Europe.<sup>35</sup> Other areas in which Frazer linked the religious customs of Ancient Greece to folk superstitions of contemporary Europe were in the areas of beliefs relating to the sacrifice of an animal or entombment of a man’s shadow in the foundation of a building, a practice that persisted in Europe of Frazer’s time and which derived from the Ancient Greek custom of burying the corpse of a sacrificial victim in the foundation of a new building, which was supposed to give it strength and stability. In general, Frazer systematically draws links between ‘primitive’ beliefs in magic and animism to show how these beliefs continue to persist in the minds of ‘civilized’ men, making it all too apparent that the superiority of the ‘civilized’ man over the ‘primitive’ is illusory, and that Europeans, far from being descendants of the civilization that bore witness to the ‘Greek miracle,’ and therefore endowed with exceptional capacities of rationality and esthetic perfection, were descended from a Greek people whose beliefs closely mirrored those of the ‘primitives’. Frazer’s most daring argument was to link the crucifixion of the Christ to the annual ritual murder of the representative of a god, positing that the rapid spread of Christianity and the belief in the deification of Christ was linked to this ritual tradition.<sup>36</sup> Even Christianity, which was then being zealously exported by European missionaries to the farthest reaches of the globe, was seen as originating from and continuing to replicate elements akin to those of the tribes being evangelized.

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<sup>35</sup> Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 88–97.

<sup>36</sup> Frazer, 666–76.

Another very influential study for the French reception of Nietzsche was , Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss' 1898 study, *Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice* published in *L'Année sociologique*. In this study, the authors linked the ancient rituals of sacrifice to Christianity, arguing that Christian "priests seek almost the same effects as our most remote ancestors. The mechanism of consecration in the Catholic mass is, in its general form, the same as that of the Hindu sacrifices. [...] The Christian imagination has built upon ancient models."<sup>37</sup> But beyond revealing the sacrificial impulses at work in the Christian mystery of transubstantiation daily reenacted by Catholic and Orthodox priests, Hubert and Mauss identified an ambivalence in the nature of both the officiant and the victim in the sacrificial ritual. This ambivalence, which would later be forcefully challenged by René Girard in his study *La violence et le sacré*<sup>38</sup>, was identified by Hubert and Mauss as a change that occurred in both victim and officiant: the victim became sanctified as a result of the ritual, thereby becoming imbued with the divine prior to the moment of its being put to death; whereas the officiant also gives up part of himself to the divine in the act of offering the victim for sacrifice (depriving himself of something useful or valuable), but sparing his life, hopes to receive a durable change as a result of his votive offering.<sup>39</sup> This ambivalence, going beyond the immanent plane of empirical reality and containing a dose of the metaphysical, made this study a very important element in understanding the nature of religious belief and sacrifice, establishing the

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<sup>37</sup> Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, 93–94.

<sup>38</sup> *op. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, 97–100.

latter as a fundamental means of transcending the limitations of particulate individuality and the immanence of the phenomenon.

The last study that I will cite here is Émile Durkheim's *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, first published in 1912. Drawing heavily on Freudian notions of the unconscious, the repressed, and phylogenetics, and providing an early model for structuralist models of ethnographic and sociological research, Durkheim sets out to establish that primitive forms of religious life can be observed in order to glean information on the fundamental nature of religious belief. No other study makes so forcefully the explicit argument that past forms of religious life not only subsist in the present, but also that the essential nature of religious belief is common to all human societies at all times and in all places. Durkheim almost aggressively asserts that "Christianity consists of the same superstitions and rests on the same errors [...] as the crude cults of the Australian tribes."<sup>40</sup> Simply, in accordance with psychoanalytic theory, just as the root causes of a mental illness tend to be hidden in the unconscious mind, expressing themselves in ways that are radically different from the etiology, so has history intervened in the structuration of 'advanced' religions so as to "repress the original state into the unconscious and replace it with others, often making the original difficult to find."<sup>41</sup> Durkheim argues that time functions for the mental life of the individual, like for the society, in such a way that "states of consciousness that we have

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<sup>40</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 4.

<sup>41</sup> Durkheim, 9.

already experienced can be reproduced in the same order in which they originally occurred; and so parts of our past become present to us again [...] for time is not merely a partial or total commemoration of our past life; it is an abstract and impersonal framework that encompasses not only our original existence but that of humanity.<sup>42</sup>

These parts of the past that make up both the individual concept of historicity as well as the collective notion of temporality are myths for Durkheim, for myths are systems in which “it is axiomatic that the part is equal to the whole.”<sup>43</sup> This allows Durkheim, following Freud’s theorization of the ego and the super-ego to assert that “man is twofold. Within him are two beings: an individual being [...] and a social being that represents within us the higher reality of the intellectual and moral order.”<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, Durkheim also acknowledges that there is an Id at work within the human mind, which “is why, when we try, even deep inside ourselves, to shake off these fundamental notions, we feel that we are not completely free, that something resists us, inside and outside. [...] since society is also represented within us, it sets itself against these revolutionary impulses from within. We have the feeling that if we abandon these constraints, our thought will cease to be truly human.”<sup>45</sup> We are left to wonder, between the collective/social element and the primitive/Id element, what is left for the *individual*.

Durkheim considers like the others that religious experience is a form of contact not only

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<sup>42</sup> Durkheim, 12, emphasis mine.

<sup>43</sup> Durkheim, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Durkheim, 18.

<sup>45</sup> Durkheim, 19.

with the past, which becomes present, but also with the *beyond* of the immanent, of subjectivity. The question of anti-humanism is, of course, fundamental in considering all subsequent 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century reinterpretations of Greece's relevance to the present day, and this perspective is one in which the French reception of Nietzsche will flourish.

### *Freudian and Nietzschean Greece*

Now, let us turn to Friedrich Nietzsche, and especially to his seminal 1874 text *The Birth of Tragedy*. I will argue that *The Birth of Tragedy* is an essential text which gives a philosophic relevance to studies such as those cited above by Durkheim, Mauss and Frazier. Indeed, by exposing data about religious practices, the psychology of religious life, and the nature and meaning of sacrifice, these authors lent a degree of material credence to Nietzsche's theory of the Dionysiac. Nietzsche's text was indeed extremely influential: as Kathy Gere remarks, although Nietzsche's text participated in a greater contemporary movement of seeking clues to the present and the future in ancient texts,<sup>46</sup> they had an exceptionally powerful prophetic and uncanny divinatory quality that level "a critique of modernity so powerful and oracular that [they shape] the future".<sup>47</sup> For Gere, Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* was a particularly significant text for the history of modernism, for, due to it, "preclassical Greece became one site for the modernist

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<sup>46</sup> It may be noted that this is a proto-psychoanalytic approach to the relationship between past events and their consequences on the present and future.

<sup>47</sup> Gere, *Knossos and the Prophets of Modernism*, 33.

rebellion against the rationalist, bourgeois nineteenth century.”<sup>48</sup> The particular contribution of Nietzsche’s essay was to identify, beyond the cool, superficial formality of Ancient Greek drama – which was widely seen as the ‘gold standard’ for the aesthetics of a theatrical work – there existed a metaphysical access to a world of frenzied sexuality and unbridled vital energy with no uncertain religious significance that existed alongside, and as the necessary counterpart to, the orderly formalism, which Nietzsche calls Apollonian, of the Greek tragedy. Nietzsche argues that the Apollonian Greeks were separated from the Dionysian barbarians by the fact that the latter, in their worship ceremonies, abandoned themselves to “a complete sexual promiscuity overriding every form of established tribal law; all the savage urges of the mind were unleashed on those occasions until they reached [a] paroxysm of lust and cruelty.”<sup>49</sup> The Greeks, however, dominated by the rationality of the god Apollo, were nonetheless aware of the Dionysian undercurrents in their unconscious minds, and that their “Apollonian consciousness was but a thin veil hiding [them] from the whole Dionysiac realm.”<sup>50</sup> The entire edifice of Greek tragedy, according to Nietzsche, is then a construction intended to succinctly portray this tension that exists between the orderly, rational, controlled facet of human culture and the deep, lustful, violent, wild tendencies of his inner desires.<sup>51</sup> In sum, writes

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<sup>48</sup> Gere, 37.

<sup>49</sup> Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” 1990, 25–26.

<sup>50</sup> Nietzsche, 28.

<sup>51</sup> Note similarities between Freud’s theory of the super-ego/ego and the id.

Nietzsche, “to understand tragic myth, we must see it as Dionysiac wisdom made concrete through Apollonian artifice.”<sup>52</sup>

Nietzsche identifies the ‘Dionysiac rapture’ as a “shattering of the *principium individuationis*,” an intensity of feeling in which “the individual forgets himself completely.”<sup>53</sup> Within the intensity of the Dionysiac celebration, the participants “realize [their] great good fortune in having life—not as individuals, but as part of the life force with whose procreative lust [they] have become one.”<sup>54</sup> The Dionysiac “engulfs this entire world of phenomena,” by which we must understand the world of empiric phenomenological reality, and opens an access to the world of dreams in which the individual exists, but in a non-empiric way,<sup>55</sup> and “reveal[s] behind it a sublime esthetic joy in the heart of original Oneness.”<sup>56</sup> Highlighting the essential violence of this movement of going beyond the boundaries of empiric reality and of individual consciousness, the final line of Nietzsche’s text makes reference to “sacrifice in the temple of both gods.”<sup>57</sup> In striking a fatal blow to the way in which the Classics had been read and received in Europe since the Renaissance, Nietzsche also opens up the door to the search for a third way out of the binary pairs noted above. Suggesting that there

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<sup>52</sup> Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” 1990, 132.

<sup>53</sup> Nietzsche, 22.

<sup>54</sup> Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” 103.

<sup>55</sup> See, *Ibid.*, 24, on dreams, and *Ibid.*, 109ff on limits of Socratic empiricism.

<sup>56</sup> Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” 133.

<sup>57</sup> Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” 146. The centrality of the notion of sacrifice to the “Dionysian” will be made apparent later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and will take on a determining role in the thought of Georges Bataille.

would be a possibility of existence beyond self and other, inside and outside, consciousness and unconsciousness, light and dark, and good and evil, it is perhaps not surprising that Gere has asserted that Nietzsche's text, in which the Ancients become more modern than the moderns, became a beacon of intellectual insight for modernist attacks on the positivist nineteenth century.

In parallel to Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud's discoveries in the field of medicine had an influence far beyond psychology: indeed, Freud's theories initiated a serious reexamination of the basic tenets of Western thought about subjectivity itself. Freud asserted that subjectivity was not determined only by the autonomous will of the subject and by an independent assessment of phenomena, but rather that subjectivity was in a large part located in the *unconscious* mind, whose contents were inaccessible to the conscious subject under normal conditions and which had a significant influence on the behavior and desires of the subject. The constitutive duality of the subject is therefore no longer between the mind and the body, but is rather displaced to within the mind itself, the consciously accessible portion of the mind, and of the self, is merely the 'tip of an iceberg', the greater mass of which is located underwater, invisible to the person who remains above the surface of the waves, and moreover governed by powerful forces and laws that are alien to the motivations of the conscious mind. Indeed, although Freud rejected any link to philosophy in general, and especially to Nietzsche (but also Schopenhauer), whose conclusions were astonishingly close to his own, it is undeniable that Nietzsche's articulation of the principles of the *Dionysiac* and the *Apollonian*, bear close resemblance to Freud's own

theories of the conscious and unconscious minds, of the *ego/super-ego* and the *id*.<sup>58</sup> Although the idea that the subject cannot entirely know itself was not created by Freud, his theory of repression – according to which the mind hides material it cannot cope with in the unconscious, where nonetheless it continues to produce unexpected and undesirable effects – according to Derrida, *boulverse la logique implicite en toute philosophie : il fait qu'un plaisir peut être – par le Moi – ressenti comme déplaisir*.<sup>59</sup> Freud's practice of psychoanalysis adopted an archaeological approach in which layers of repressed memories could be progressively unearthed in order to arrive at the primal scene or the kernel of the patient's neurosis.

However, according to Freud, there also exists a kernel of data within the unconscious mind inherited from man's primitive ancestors. Freud's belief in the *continuity* and *direct determinate relevance* of past beings on present beings determined his articulation of the theory of the *death drive* later in his career. Initially, Freud had posited, following Darwin, that human beings were driven by two principal drives: the desire to survive on the individual level and the desire to propagate their species. Therefore, the two main drives were self-preservation and reproduction. Later in his career, however, Freud realized it was impossible to reconcile these self-serving desires

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<sup>58</sup> Freud writes: Even when I have moved away from observation, I have carefully avoided any contact with philosophy proper. [...] The large extent to which psychoanalysis coincides with the philosophy of Schopenhauer [...] is not to be traced to my acquaintance with his teaching. [...] Nietzsche, another philosopher whose guesses and intuitions often agree in the most astonishing way with the laborious findings of psychoanalysis, was for a long time avoided by me on that very account. (Freud, "An Autobiographical Study," 59–60.) On the topic of Nietzsche and Freud, see in particular, Assoun, *Freud et Nietzsche*; Russell, *Nietzsche and the Clinic*.

<sup>59</sup> Derrida, *La carte postale*, 295.

with the pleasure derived from self-harm that characterized the behavior of many of his neurotic patients. Furthermore, Freud was challenged by Romain Rolland, but also by Carl Jung, to explain the generalized prevalence amongst humanity of the phenomenon of religion. Religion, with its mystical, sacrificial, even Dionysian, components, was not compatible with Freud's theories of survival and reproduction as the two driving forces in the human psyche. Freud would first grapple with the re-elaboration of this theory in his 1915 essay *Instincts and their Vicissitudes*, and would perfect its formulation in the 1920 *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In *Instincts and their Vicissitudes*,<sup>60</sup> Freud admitted that his earlier formulation of the tension between the drive for self-preservation (the ego) and the drive for sexual fulfillment, needed to be reformulated as it was insufficient, especially when faced with the binary pairs of sadism-masochism and scopophilia-exhibitionism.<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, Freud expands these pairs to the binary of love-hatred, and theorizes that "love so frequently manifests itself as 'ambivalent'—i.e. as accompanied by impulses of hate against the same object."<sup>62</sup> Each of these binary pairs, nonetheless, has a third term, which Freud describes using the term "middle voice" drawn from Ancient Greek grammar, and therefore sadism-masochism contains a third, reflexive

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<sup>60</sup> "Instincts," in the title of this article, is an unusual translation of the German term *Trieb*, which is much more commonly translated into English as "drive". This is why we refer to the Death Drive and not the Death Instinct (*Todestrieb*), and I will refer to Freud's discussion of the "instincts" as drives for the sake of consistency, despite the inconsistent translation adopted throughout the English version of the 1915 article.

<sup>61</sup> Freud, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," 124–28.

<sup>62</sup> Freud, 139.

term, which is self-torture and self-punishment; scopophilia-exhibitionism turns into the desire to look at one's own sexual organ; and love-hatred turns into indifference.<sup>63</sup>

In 1920, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud therefore revised his theory of the drives. He conflated the self-preservation and reproductive instincts into a single *pleasure principle* that he called *Eros*, and opposed it with the *death drive*, or *Thanatos*. He based this revision on the biological premise that the first unicellular organism reproduced via cellular division and was therefore simultaneously immortal due to the fact of its dying a non-death in the act of reproduction. The individual unicellular organism therefore needed to cease to exist individually in order to reproduce itself, and yet continued “living” in a different form in the two successor organisms that resulted from this division.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, Freud posited, all life is in a certain sense bound up in this deathly impulse, which doubles and mirrors the instinct towards pleasure and towards life itself. Freud writes that due to the deathliness that inheres in the reproduction of the most basic, primary forms of life on Earth, and by extension, in the sex act, whose climax in French is known as *la petite mort*, “*the aim of all life is death*.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, within the ecstatic and depersonalizing climax of the act of reproduction, as in the moment of death, the individual ceases to exist in the very act via which life is able to continue. Freud's conclusion that “the pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts,”<sup>66</sup> was a

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<sup>63</sup> Freud, 128ff.

<sup>64</sup> Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” 55.

<sup>65</sup> Freud, 46.. Emphasis in original.

<sup>66</sup> Freud, 77..

way out of his impasse that he had reached Schopenhauer's conclusion that death is the true aim of life and that the sexual instinct, as an expression of the Will, was a resistance to that inevitability.<sup>67</sup> Death and destruction then become the spectral double, the other side of the Möbius strip, of pleasure and of sexuality, just as for Nietzsche, the Apollonian and the Dionysiac are the two equal and opposed facets of the human psyche.

Nonetheless, Freud went one step further in identifying a pre-Socratic justification to his death drive: in a fragment of Empedocles from the Strasburg Papyrus, the pre-Socratic philosopher wrote that life was bound up in a tension between the dual forces of love and strife (*φιλότης* and *νεῖκος*), which “have power in turn as the circle revolves, and they decline into one another and increase in their allotted turn. But insofar as they never cease their continual change, to that extent they exist forever, unmoving in a circle.”<sup>68</sup> Freud therefore was able to find a “phylogenetic” justification to his revised theory: if the Greeks had recognized this truth, it was something present in the European psyche in ancient times, and therefore was part of the kernel of the unconscious inherited from the past. Freud was simply dusting it off and bringing it to light (again, the link to Nietzsche's approach is evident) in an evidently archeological approach to the origins of the psyche.

This also allowed Freud to find a justification to the phenomenon of religion itself that also bypassed Schopenhauer's Oriental mysticism, for which Freud felt a strong distaste, by identifying a third way out of the tension between death and life within pre-

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<sup>67</sup> Freud, 59.

<sup>68</sup> Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 125.

Socratic philosophy: Freud's conclusion is that death and life are part of the same cycle, that they are two opposing and equipotent forces that maintain each other in check.

Because Rolland had described the feeling of awareness of the Divine as an "oceanic feeling,"<sup>69</sup> Freud explained this feeling (to which he nonetheless declared himself numb) as a desire to return to the ocean of the womb, a time before existence. Rather than representing an opposition to death, the peak of sexual pleasure is actually a moment in which the individual is at once closest to both life and to death, to the moment of melding into an existence beyond the particulate nature of his individuality, in a heightened experience of the oceanic feeling described by Rolland.<sup>70</sup> The drive to a neutralization of the tensions created by the drive to pleasure is therefore a drive to attain the serenity, peacefulness, and tranquility of pre-existence or non-existence; a desire to return to the womb / tomb of a past that remains the ideal and omnipresent precursor of the present day. Moreover, by resorting to Ancient Greek philosophy to draw these "Occidental solutions" to an "Oriental question," Freud fulfills the "*need to restore an earlier state of things*,"<sup>71</sup> which potentially comes from, as Richard Armstrong suggests, Freud's admiration for Jacob Burckhardt, who wrote, "all subsequent objective perception of the

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<sup>69</sup> In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Rolland is reported by Freud to have described the "oceanic feeling" in the following terms: "[...] a peculiar feeling, which he himself is never without, which he finds confirmed by many others, and which he may suppose is present in millions of people. It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of 'eternity', a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, 'oceanic'. This feeling [...] is the source of the religious energy that is seized upon by the various Churches and religious systems [...]. One may [...] rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone, even if one rejects every belief and every illusion." (*op. cit.*, p. 25)

<sup>70</sup> Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 76.

<sup>71</sup> Freud, 69.

world is only elaboration on the framework the Greeks began. We see with the eyes of the Greeks and use their phrases when we speak.”<sup>72</sup>

Antiquity is as important to Freud as it was to Nietzsche, for in their writings temporality and subjectivity are linked in a way that makes the past extremely relevant to the present, and *subjects* the subject to a past beyond memory and preceding birth that in many ways is determinate of subjectivity itself, in both its subjected and subjective experience. We can see in these examples the extent to which our subject—Hellenism—becomes interwoven with philosophy and the philosophy of (a)subjectivity during this period. The “human” is decentered in consciousness, in subjectivity, in temporality, the place for the “individual” and the “rational” and “free will” becomes reduced. Greece, which had, from the Renaissance to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, served as the model of all that was good, rational, pure about humankind and about Europe, became repurposed during the late-19<sup>th</sup> century to become the basis for a countermodel of understanding of Europe and of humanity. These ideas, which philosophically originated in Germany, were imported into France slowly and with great difficulty. Nonetheless, once they were imported into France, they flourished and enjoyed a true intellectual flowering. On one hand, they gave rise to Surrealism and the figures peripheral to the Surrealist movement, Georges Bataille and his cadre in particular, and on the other, to Lacan and the “return to Freud” in France. But Heidegger, too, is a figure of such reception, and it could be said that Derrida is one of the major thinkers of Heidegger in 20<sup>th</sup>-century France, and that he wrote, to some extent, if not

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<sup>72</sup> Cited in Armstrong, *A Compulsion for Antiquity*, 100.

against, at least against the background of an intellectual scene highly marked by Lacan, who himself in his early years was very influenced by Georges Bataille and by Surrealism. The new subjectivity—a decentered subjectivity, a subjectivity focused on death and on the metaphysical *beyond* of individual subjectivity—is intimately linked to the French reception of Freud, of Nietzsche, and of Heidegger. Although the topic is much broader than the scope of this dissertation, much less this introduction, I will present below certain elements of this history of reception that I feel are most important for framing the ensuing discussion about Derrida in this respect.

### **The difficult reception of Freud, Heidegger and Nietzsche in France**

In *An atheism that is not humanist emerges in French thought*, Stephanos Geroulanos charts the development of anti-humanist thought in France in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, describing how the intellectual landscape of early-20<sup>th</sup>-century France, where philosophical thought was still dominated by Kantian paradigms, was backward in comparison with neighboring Germany, where philosophers such as Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger, had cast aside the philosophical questions of the Enlightenment period to return to the pre-Socratic definition of philosophy as a set of questions about “what does it mean to be?” or “what is the truth of being?”.<sup>73</sup> As Stefanos Geroulanos has analyzed in great detail, these German thinkers, along with Hegel and Freud<sup>74</sup>, inspired a philosophical

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<sup>73</sup> Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought*, 49–99.

<sup>74</sup> Geroulanos (*op. cit.*) does not extensively deal with the question of the reception of Freud in France, but other research has amply shown the depth of anti-German and anti-Semitic feeling in France that prevented French thinkers from being open to psychoanalysis: routinely invoking an

revolution in France, which is termed an “atheism that is not humanist” – neither man nor God are reference points for understanding being: the truth lies beyond a human, lived anthropocentric reality, perhaps in death itself. The Nietzschean postulates of the death of God and of the Dionysian in particular, alongside the Freudian idea of the death drive, were two ideas that were particularly influential on the generation of the 1930s, and especially on Georges Bataille, one of the major figures of the reception of Nietzsche in France, and also a major influence on Lacan. However, the Dionysian and the death drive are also related to a certain German reception of Ancient Greece which entered the French discourse *via* thinkers such as Bataille and other of his close associates, and which Derrida inherited, in a sense, both philosophically and culturally.

*The embrace of “German-Jewish” ideas in France*

Initially, as concerns psychoanalysis, the reception of Freudian ideas occurred in France through the vector of the Surrealist group, formed around André Breton, and those close to it.<sup>75</sup> Concerning Nietzsche, although he had been in vogue in France since the late 1890s, the particular reception of Nietzsche that was important for 20<sup>th</sup> century thought in

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ethnic Gallic or “Latin” mindset and sensitivity native to France to reject German ideas on philosophy or psychology, France became parochialized until the Surrealists’ wholesale acceptance of (a certain idea of) psychoanalysis and the founding of the *Société française de psychanalyse*. See, esp.: Mordier, *Les débuts de la psychanalyse en France : 1895-1926*; Roudinesco, *Histoire de La Psychanalyse in France*, 1986; Roudinesco, *Histoire de La Psychanalyse in France*, 1986; Smirnoff, “De Vienne à Paris.”

<sup>75</sup> Roudinesco, *Histoire de La Psychanalyse in France*, 1986, 2:21–50.

France also occurred through figures connected with the Surrealist group.<sup>76</sup> This reception of German and German-Jewish thinkers was peculiar, especially in the case of Freud, who was received in France not by the psychiatric establishment, but rather by a group of avant-garde artists, poets, and thinkers who believed in Freudian ideas as having the potential to completely revolutionize society, placing Freud on the same level as Marx in terms of the radicalism of their ideas. The psychiatric establishment, as noted above, more-or-less refused to accept Freudian ideas on the grounds of incompatibility of Freud's German-Jewish mindset and approach with the "Latin spirit" of the French "ethnos".<sup>77</sup> It was only well after the end of the First World War that the Paris Psychoanalytic Society was founded in 1926 by a few daring practitioners of Freud's methods who were brave enough to buck the French academic and medical rejection of psychoanalysis. This was extremely late in comparison to other major Western countries, as psychoanalytic societies were established in Germany, Switzerland, England, and the United States prior to the War.

The founder of the Surrealist movement, André Breton, had become exposed both to Freud's ideas and to real-life cases of psychic disturbance while serving during the War

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<sup>76</sup> See, on initial reception of Nietzsche in France: Forth, *Zarathustra in Paris*.

<sup>77</sup> However much the spokesmen of the psychiatric establishment believed these "ethnological" grounds for refusing Freud, this outward justification belied the tacit reason behind this refusal: by refusing Freud, the French establishment protected their "French" approach to psychiatric treatment against the foreign import of Freud, which would have undermined the authority and prestige of the students of Janet and Charcot, who had been the founders of this "French" approach. See, for example, Mordier, *Les débuts de la psychanalyse en France : 1895-1926*; Scheidhauer, "Freud et le rêve en France : 1900-1914."

in a military hospital caring for shell-shocked soldiers. Breton was fascinated by Freud's theories of dreams and of repression, but also of sublimation—the ability to transform destructive and partial impulses into creative activity.<sup>78</sup> Breton saw Surrealism as a practice of liberation of unconscious desire (*viz.* libido), which would ultimately lead to individual and societal revolution.<sup>79</sup> Although today perhaps it is not easy to recapture the excitement and energy that accompanied the birth of the Surrealist movement, and their

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<sup>78</sup> Although to contemporary readers it might seem that a focus on ecstatic and erotic liberation is anomalous and relatively extraneous both to psychoanalysis as a whole and to Freud's thought in particular, indeed, in 1921 Freud described libido as "the energy [...] of those instincts which have to do with all that may be comprised under the word 'love'." (Freud, "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego," 90.) This includes "love for parents, children, friendship, and love for humanity in general, also devotion to concrete objects and abstract ideas." (*Ibid.*) Libido is equivalent to Eros, the energy and desire that led some to characterize psychoanalysis as pan-sexual. (*Ibid.*, 91) Indeed, psychoanalysis *is* pan-sexual in the sense that the underlying *energy* (i.e., libido) giving rise to the highest products of the human mind—art, literature, philosophy, music, self-sacrifice for the greater good—is seen by Freud as exactly the same as that present in the basest and most bestial expressions of human sexuality.

<sup>79</sup> Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme*; Chénieux-Gendron, *Surrealism*, 180; Mundy, *Surrealism*.

Andreas Embeirikos, the first Greek psychoanalysis and Surrealist poet, wrote of Breton, a close friend of his, in a letter dated 24 January 1958 to fellow poet Nanos Valaoritis: "*Once again, regarding Breton and Freud, I might say that Breton understood Freud; Freud neither understood nor esteemed sufficiently Breton's work, for, despite his exceptional intellectual abilities, Freud was a revolutionary only in his discoveries and in his therapeutics. In all the rest — art, pleasure, mores — despite the revolutionary nature of psychoanalysis as a method and a theory, Freud, as an individual, was both bourgeois and conservative, incapable of accepting beyond a certain point (especially as concerns therapy) the effects of his ideas and the monstrous importance of his discoveries, perhaps fearing the extent and the depth of the changes in the life of humankind that his tenets and his theories could engender. I think that the realization that it was possible not just to harness a therapeutics, but precisely those elements of the psyche, which, once freely recomposed and reorganized, will transform the average conformist (who was, until then, both before and after Marxism, essentially a slave), making him at last truly free and in possession of mental powers as potent as nuclear weapons... I think that such a realization can cause even a great genius anxiety of greater or lesser duration. Perhaps it was just this type of anxiety that shook even our great and so beloved Freud at certain moments in his life, and I believe that one of those was the crucial moment when he met André Breton, when the genius, yet conformist (in his personal life) Jewish scientist, met the nonconformist, great French poet, who thirsted after all of life's transcendental beauties, André Breton.*" Embeirikos and Valaōritis, "Anekdotia Grammata," 32–33. Translation mine.

own excitement and energy at discovering the revolutionary potential in Freud's work, we can appreciate it through the words of Walter Benjamin: "Since Bakunin, Europe has lacked a radical concept of freedom. The Surrealists have one."<sup>80</sup>

The thinkers within the Surrealist movement who most specifically addressed the themes germane to this dissertation, and in particular the question of *meletē thanatou*, of sacrifice and of life/death, as well as the legacy of Ancient Greece, gravitated around Georges Bataille and the *Collège de sociologie* which he founded in the 1930s.<sup>81</sup> It is possible to read Bataille's journal *Acéphale*, the public outlet of a secret society Bataille founded along with Pierre Klossowski and André Masson, as an expression of the Nietzschean "Dionysiac", a space of sexuality and sacrifice in which the individual ceases to exist and merges with the collective. André Masson's cover image for *Acéphale* depicts a headless man, with a skull covering his genitalia. The message is clear: here, reason no longer

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<sup>80</sup> Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia.," 54.

<sup>81</sup> It is important here to note the foundational impact of Alexandre Kojève on Bataille and on the whole generation of the 1930s. Bataille and Raymond Queneau are some of the figures who attended Kojève's lectures (Queneau, incidentally, also contributed to the *Voyage en Grèce* journal referenced above). Kojève had incidentally a "philosophical obsession" (Geroulanos, 131) with the Eastern Orthodox concept of *theanthropy* (see Ware, cited *infra* on the other name for this concept, *theosis*), by which man becomes a living God, yet "a finite god, and thus becomes one with nature, with Being." (*Ibid.*) The figure of Jesus Christ is a model of the *theanthropos*, and yet the *theanthropos*, for Kojève, is not living: although he is like the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, and the Hegelian Napoléon as the embodiment of history, the *theanthropos* is a "living dead [man]" (Geroulanos, 161). This is a novel interpretation of both Nietzsche and Hegel, and certainly colored Bataille's reading of Nietzsche's Greece, for example. See, for a much more detailed discussion of Kojève, and particularly his influence on Bataille and others, Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought*, chap. 3. See also, Derrida on Kojève in *Spectres de Marx*.

holds sway, rationality and man have been swept away. In their stead, sexuality and death, which are one and the same, for in both, the individual cedes to the beyond.

This vision of Greece as a Dionysiac place of primeval instinctiveness even enjoyed some commercial success in the 1930s. Hercule Joannidès, owner of Parisian travel agency Neptos, began to bring together famous authors, artists, archaeologists, and architects in order to promote a series of archaeologically and culturally themed cruises to Greece, destined to the Parisian intellectual élite.<sup>82</sup> There was a public showcase for these cruises in the form of a luxury journal entitled *Le Voyage en Grèce*, and this publication highlighted the new vision of Greece that predominated in avant-garde circles in the 1930s.<sup>83</sup> The journal regularly featured references to Nietzsche, and even published untranslated fragments of Nietzsche's thought, showing how important the German philosopher was to the avant-garde understanding of the significance of Greece at this time.<sup>84</sup> An article by Michel Leiris in the fifth issue of this publication perfectly summarizes the role and value of Greece for the progressive French intelligentsia of the 1930s:

*Il n'est plus possible aujourd'hui d'écrire une nouvelle Prière sur l'Acropole, [...] Voilà que s'est révélée une Grèce toute de perdition et de cruauté [...]. Lautréamont semble l'évoquer quand il parle de « paroles insensées quoique pleines d'une infernale grandeur ». Usages sanguinaires et acharnés, comme la*

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<sup>82</sup> Basch and Farnoux, *Le voyage en Grèce*.

<sup>83</sup> The list of contributors to this journal is like a "who's who" of the intelligentsia of the period: Marguerite Yourcenar, Georges Bataille, Fernand Léger, Michel Leiris, Jean Cocteau, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, Raymond Queneau, André Derain, Amedée Ozenfants, Le Corbusier, Roger Caillois, Georges Braque, Roger Vitrac, Pierre Reverdy.

<sup>84</sup> Nietzsche, "Intraduits de Nietzsche."

*mutilation des cadavres dont on attache les extrémités coupées, sous l'aisselle, avec une corde, déesses en balançoire pour les rites de fécondité, souillures héréditaires, cérémonies d'exécutions publiques ou expulsions des individus 'imprégnés comme des éponges' des péchés de la cité, évocations diurnes de démons sujets de la Dame des Fauves.....ici et là dominant souverainement les forces telluriques et elles ne paraissent dans les deux cas ne soutenir la conscience claire qu'à la manière dont la corde soutient le pendu. Entre le monde actuel, qui se penche avec passion sur les instincts élémentaires et cette antiquité qui les a érigés, pour ainsi dire, en principes de civilisation, la rencontre est inévitable, la complicité assurée d'avance, l'enjeu singulièrement attachant. Mais pour que le rideau se lève sur ce nouvel épisode de l'influence grecque, celui où la partie se jouera le plus profondément, il faut que celle-ci parvienne à vaincre cette image d'elle-même encore trop répandue et qui l'appauvrit sous prétexte de l'idéaliser. Il faut que la trop poétique Séléné ne masque plus dorénavant la puissante Hécate des carrefours, car la terre des dieux appartient moins à Minerve qu'à Bélphégor.<sup>85</sup>*

This telluric and dark vision of a pre-classical Greece with its erotic and sacrificial rituals was certainly that of the Surrealists; it is, by extension, also that of the reception of Nietzsche and Freud in France, for if it was the Surrealists who first demonstrated openness to Freud's ideas about the unconscious and also to the German philosophy of Nietzsche, it was, by extension, Lacan who truly nativized both Freud and Nietzsche, but also Heidegger,<sup>86</sup> to a certain extent—and a certain “German” philosophy and thought more largely—and made them palatably “French” (following in the footsteps of Kojève and Koyré<sup>87</sup>) to the generation of intellectuals of which Derrida was certainly part.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Leiris, “Qu’attendiez-vous de la Grèce ?”

<sup>86</sup> See account of Lacan’s meeting with Heidegger in: Millot, *La vie avec Lacan*.

<sup>87</sup> See, for example, Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy’s Perpetual War*.

<sup>88</sup> Although the claim that Lacan’s work was influenced by Surrealism is slightly controversial, the following work charts Lacan’s involvement with Surrealism both thoroughly and (to my mind) convincingly: Macey, *Lacan in Contexts*. See also: Greenshields, “Lacan Contra the Surrealists.”

Although the relationship between Derrida and Lacan is the subject of some obscurity and some controversy, we know that Derrida was, up until the better-publicized (and semi-public) rancor between the two figures, favorable to Lacan and was even instrumental in Lacan's being granted a prestigious position within the newly-created Faculté de Vincennes.<sup>89</sup> In any case, no matter what answer might be given to the nature of Lacan's relationship with and influence on Derrida, both real and intellectual, it is not in dispute that in the history of the reception of German ideas (and therefore German ideas about Greek antiquity) in France, Lacan was Derrida's predecessor and forbear. This means that, at least from a temporal perspective, Derrida was operating in the wake of Lacan's theoretical and linguistic *coup d'éclat* in the Parisian intellectual scene. More significantly however, is the critique that figures such as Derrida (but also Foucault) leveled of the attempt of the generation of the 1930s to establish an atheist non-humanism, and Derrida *et al.* level this critique in a very different way from figures such as Lacan and structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss.<sup>90</sup> Although Derrida stands on the shoulders of these predecessors, he critiques notably their failure to totally achieve a non-humanism, identifying in Heidegger, in particular, a latent Catholicism in his approach to thinking death. Derrida will inherit Plato's *meletē thanatou* filtered through the thought of Freud, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, and he will simultaneously distance himself from the perspective of those of his generation who were perhaps more influenced by structuralism

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<sup>89</sup> On the history, see: Peeters, *Derrida*, s.v. Lacan. On the theoretical affinities and differences, see, e.g.: Major, *Lacan avec Derrida: analyse désistentielle*; Miller, "The Classical Roots of Poststructuralism"; Staten, "The Difference between Lacan and Derrida."; Johnson, "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida."

<sup>90</sup> Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought*, 306, 309.

and Kojève's interpretation of Hegel, but also from the totalitarian and Catholic undertones he detects in the approach towards death and meaning in Heidegger and some of his followers, such as Patočka.

This dissertation argues that Derrida's work, contrary to the frequent assertions that deconstruction is a philosophy of life, in fact sustains an ongoing engagement with the Platonic legacy of *meletē thanatou* as a concept that haunts European philosophy and the European project as a whole. Derrida inherits this concept through his evolving readings of Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger. His continuous grappling with the question and implications of this legacy of *meletē thanatou* begins at the very start of his career and continues through to the end of his life. I argue that one of Derrida's most significant contributions, through his meandering and changing appreciation of this legacy, is the creation of an aporetic experience for the reader, one which offers the opportunity of considering for oneself the very nature of the ineffable; in other words, Derrida's work achieves the Platonic injunction of *meletē thanatou* as properly philosophizing and is, for that reason, a milestone both in the 20th century reception of Platonic thought, but also in European philosophy as a whole.

The first chapter of this dissertation examines the generation of meaning and the question of meaning in Derrida's work. It attempts to synthesize Derrida's novel approach to subjectivity and the psychic realm taken from his original reading of Freud. It shows how this reading is related to both the question of meaning and the question of death. If death and meaning are inherently imbricated, the space of apophysis and the ineffable opens. This leads to the closing discussion of Chapter I, in which I argue that

Martin Hägglund's approach to understanding apophysis in Derrida's work is flawed in so far as it neglects the importance of Plato and the tradition of *meletē thanatou* to Derrida's own thought on this subject.

The second chapter of this dissertation seeks to summarize changes in Derrida's thought and writings on the subject of death diachronically. It seeks to examine first Derrida's understanding of death *with* Freud, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. It then seeks to examine Derrida's understanding of death and subjectivity *contra* an orgiastic approach to the metaphysics of the beyond, with a discussion of his relationship to the death of Socrates, to the idea of a "good" death or a "wisdom" of death. This introduces the thought of Jan Patočka on this subject and leads to the beginning of an examination of the philosophical affinities and divergences between the Czech and the French thinker.

The third and final chapter of this dissertation continues the discussion of Jan Patočka's thought, but it begins with a discussion of Michel Foucault's contemporaneous reception of the Platonic tradition of *meletē thanatou* and, in particular, with reference to his works on the *souci de soi*. It argues that Foucault's interpretation of the tradition of *meletē thanatou* is deficient because of the emphasis placed on "self" care and "self" improvement. This chapter continues with a discussion of Pierre Hadot's work on the tradition of spiritual exercises, which, I argue, constitute a basis for a counter-reading of Derrida's critique of Heidegger's latent Catholicism, arguing that what is Catholic in that regard, is in fact originally Greek. The ensuing discussion of Patočka and Heidegger seeks to examine both the affinities between Patočka's thought and that of Derrida, and also to critique the legacy of anti-Semitism that is inherent in the thinking of a history and a metaphysics of being inherent in the *meletē thanatou*. This chapter argues that although

Derrida and Patočka share more affinities than Derrida admits in *The Gift of Death*, and that therefore a reading of Patočka is an important cipher for understanding Derrida's thought on death and metaphysics, the way in which Derrida explicates this difference constitutes a novel French reception of the German-Platonic tradition of *meletē thanatou*, specifically insofar as it creates a lived experience of the aporetic.

## CHAPTER ONE: THEORETICAL PREMISES. DERRIDA AND THE QUESTION OF MEANING.

*«ή τέχνη κι' ή ποίηση δέν μᾶς βοηθοῦν νά  
ζήσουμε:  
ή τέχνη καί ή ποίησις μᾶς βοηθοῦνε  
νά πεθάνουμε»<sup>91</sup>*

### **Deconstruction: a philosophy of Life and its apprehension of Death**

Jacques Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction is said to be a philosophy of life. In 1969, Derrida presented a paper entitled "Structure, Sign, and Play" at a conference at Johns Hopkins University. This conference was supposed to be a crowning moment and a sort of apotheosis of Structuralism's dominance over the intellectual landscape of the time. This paper, presented by a relatively unknown academic, a young French Jew from Algeria, represented a major affront to the intellectual heavyweights of the Structuralist school of thought present at this conference, and particularly their figurehead, Claude Lévi-Strauss. Derrida's paper challenged a number of aspects of Structuralism, particularly its reliance on a problematic tradition of European metaphysics and the inability of Structuralist theories to conceive of an "event" that would bring a structure into being or change it, thereby adopting a limitative perspective excluding the possibility of free play. This paper ends notably with a polemical coda criticizing Structuralism's

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<sup>91</sup> ["Art and poetry don't help us to live: / art and poetry help us / to die."] «Νέα περί τοῦ θανάτου τοῦ Ισπανοῦ ποιητοῦ Φεντερίκο Γκαρθία Λόρκα στίς 19 Αυγούστου τοῦ 1936 μέσα στό χαντάκι τοῦ Καμίνου ντε λα Φούεντε.» Engonopulos, *Poiēmata*, 315.

“thematic of broken immediacy [...] the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play.”<sup>92</sup> Instead, Derrida proposes an embrace of “the Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation.”<sup>93</sup> The beginning of Derrida’s career is therefore inscribed under the affirmation of life, of play, of innocence, of a prelapsarian state of grace that elides the mythology of origin stories, but one that eschews a narrative of origin that would divide being into positive and negative poles of innocence and guilt, of before and after, that the story of the Fall entails.

Just as this early text puts Derrida and his thinking on the side of life, so does Derrida’s last interview in 2004 with Jean Birnbaum, a journalist from *Le Monde*, published under the title “*Apprendre à vivre, enfin*” [“Learning to live, finally”]. At the very end of this interview, Derrida plainly states, “Everything I say [...] about survival as a complication of the opposition life/death proceeds in me from an unconditional affirmation of life. This surviving is life beyond life, life more than life, and *my discourse is not a discourse of death*, but, on the contrary, the affirmation of a living being who prefers living and thus surviving to death, because survival is not simply that which remains but the most intense life possible.”<sup>94</sup> For Derrida, survival is life: the space during which life goes on despite the always-already-present debt that is owed to death,

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<sup>92</sup> Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play,” 292.

<sup>93</sup> Derrida, 292.

<sup>94</sup> Derrida and Birnbaum, *Learning to Live Finally*, 50–51. Emphasis mine.

even before life itself has begun. Although the correct practice of philosophy in Plato is the attentive study of death, indeed, correctly philosophizing means learning to die, Derrida states that he “believe[s] in this truth without being able to resign [him]self to it.”<sup>95</sup> Life, for Derrida, means surviving through the end.

And yet, despite these affirmations of life, Derrida’s thought is importantly about death, for there is no life without death; no death without life. Indeed, in a broader sense, it might be possible to read all of Derrida’s work, be it explicitly about language, responsibility, metaphysics, Structuralism, Europe, Jewishness, inheritance, time, origins, etc., as an intervention in exploring the concept of lifedeath (*lavielamort*). To read all of Derrida, in fact, as an attempt to deconstruct and dismount, as the mechanism of a carefully-constructed watch, the seemingly implacable dialectic of life-becoming-death and death-becoming-life that underpin existence, time, and survival. Life, perhaps, but life as a *sursis*, a stay of execution, a survivance, a debt that must be paid and that opens the interstitial space in non-life within which life is possible. Above all, lifedeath as an *aporia*, a question from which there is no possible exit, no passage, no evasion. Just as life itself is a debt which must eventually be repaid, and from which there is no possible escape, the philosophical examination of these questions, too, must necessarily be *aporetic*: without exit.

These questions regarding aporia, the legacy of *meletē thanatou*, the debt of mortality, the legacy of Greece itself, haunting, permanence and impermanence, technology and being, time, and lifedeath, are all explored explicitly in one of Derrida’s

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<sup>95</sup> Derrida and Birnbaum, 24.

lesser-known works, *Demeure, Athènes* [*Athens, Still Remains*]. *Demeure, Athènes* is an extended meditation on a series of photographs taken of Athens by French photographer Jean-François Bonhomme. Originally published by the Greek publishing house Olkos in 1996 in French with a facing Modern Greek translation, this text is one of Derrida's shorter works, but perhaps one of his most meditatively profound. It begins with the words "*Nous nous devons à la mort*," a statement that can be translated not only as "we owe ourselves to death," as "we must devote ourselves to death," or even, "we owe each other to death" or "we owe one another to death."<sup>96</sup> In the former case, "we owe ourselves to death," the reader is drawn backwards in time to Nietzsche, to his law of eternal return, but also to Freud and his postulate of the death drive, to Heidegger and his concept of being-toward-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*) and even further in time, back to the Greeks, to Plato, the Neo-Platonicians, the pre-Socratics, and the long tradition within Byzantine and Greek thought that they inspired.<sup>97</sup> In the latter translation "we owe each other to death," and "we owe one another to death," the reader familiar with Heidegger will immediately recall the concept of *Mitdasein* and its interrelationship with the concept

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<sup>96</sup> Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*, 1n1. We must also be reminded of the "debt" of a rooster ("devoir" or "dette" in French) that Socrates reminded his follower Crito to pay to Asclepius ("τῷ Ασκληπιῷ ὀφείλομεν ἀλεκτρύονα· ἀλλὰ ἀπόδοτε καὶ μὴ ἀμελήσητε." Platōn, *Phaidōn* (*ē Peri Psychēs*), sec. 118.). Significantly, this reminder to pay a debt that "we owe" were his last words, according to Plato in the *Phaedo*.

<sup>97</sup> There is also in this formulation an implicit reference to a piece of dialogue in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* between King Hal and Falstaff that reads as follows:

Hal: Why, thou owest God a death.

Falstaff: 'T is not due yet: I would be loath to pay him before his day. What need I be so forward with him that calls not on me?

(Shakespeare, "Henry IV (First Part)," pts. 1, Act 5, Sc. 1.)

of *Sein-zum-Tode*, together which represent the interplay inherent in life itself, for life is never monadic but always in relation with what is Other, both existentially and temporally (as well as intrapsychically if one includes an understanding of the unconscious) at every stage of existence. Simultaneously, however, the reader of Derrida's *nous nous devons à la mort*, understanding it as an interplay in the Heideggerian sense, will also perhaps be reminded of Bataille's reading of Nietzsche that opens onto sacrifice and the ecstatic experience inherent in both sexual reproduction and sacrifice of devoting the other to death: reproduction as sacrifice. Derrida also seems to reference Jacques Lacan and his mirror stage as the predicate to the emergence of subjectivity, when he writes that the first *nous* in the reflexive or pronominal construction of the affirmation *nous nous devons à la mort* "constitute[s] itself as 'subject' only after having reflected the 'second' *nous*, which is itself constituted as an 'object' [...] we appear to ourselves, we relate to ourselves, we take ourselves in view as what is due [*dû*], taken by a debt or duty that precedes us and institutes us, a debt that contracts us even before we have contracted it."<sup>98</sup> Of course, this debt or duty is the debt and duty each being has towards death, the debt that must be repaid to the death out of which all life is issued. However, alongside this primary reading, one can also consider Lacan's teaching that the subject is always-already captured within language even before its emergence, the subject is destined to enter into this contract, to contract this debt that enables it to be available to itself as such (i.e. access to language, *viz.* to the symbolic realm, is the precondition of the emergence of subjectivity), but that by the same token this entering

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<sup>98</sup> Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*, 61; Derrida, *Demeure, Athènes*, 53–54.

into the symbolic splits it and renders it essentially unavailable to itself in the misrecognition that is its image in the mirror, its false-self-recognition in the signifier that is “I” while also opening up a cycle of repetition and of deferral that structurally implicates the speaking being (*le parlêtre*) in a chain of death.

At the same time, the presence of the second understanding of “*nous nous devons à la mort*” as “we must devote ourselves to death,” in the sense of a Socratic *meletē thanatou*, a devotion or care given to death, a preparation and study of one’s own death as the practice of true philosophy, also allows the reader to envisage a new possibility, one that in Derrida’s own words:

did not necessarily have to be understood in the great post-Socratic and sacrificial tradition of being-for-death, this ethics of dedication or devotion that immediately comes to take this sentence into its purview in order to say, we must devote ourselves to death, we have duties with regard to death, we must dedicate our meditations to it, our care, our concern, our exercises, and our practice (*epimeleia tou thanatou*, *meletē thanatou*, as it is said at *Phaedo* 81a [...]), we must devote ourselves to the death to which we are destined, and so on. In addition, one must respect the dead (so as, the implication would be, to keep death at a respectful distance, out of a respect for life.)<sup>99</sup>

All philosophy, in Socrates’ words, “is the practice (or study) of death” (*Phaedo*, 81a)<sup>100</sup>, the *μελέτη θανάτου*, in which *μελέτη* can be translated as care, attention, practice, exercise, and usage, from the verb *μελετάω*, defined by Liddell & Scott as: to take thought or care for, to attend to, to study, to pursue, to exercise, to be accustomed. Philosophy then – correctly philosophizing (*ὁρθῶς φιλοσοφοῦσα* in *Phaedo* 80e)<sup>101</sup> –

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<sup>99</sup> Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*, 59; Derrida, *Demeure, Athènes*, 52–53.

<sup>100</sup> “training to die easily...training for death” in *Phaedo*, sec. 81a.

<sup>101</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, “practising philosophy in the right way,” §80e.

means constantly studying death, attending to death, caring for death, practicing death, and becoming accustomed to death. In Derrida's own words, "it is attentive anticipation of death, care brought to bear upon dying, meditation on the best way to receive, give, or give oneself death, experience of a *vigil* over the possibility of death, and over the possibility of death as impossibility."<sup>102</sup> In other words, every concept, every author, every philosophy that Derrida engages with, is haunted by the legacy of the *meletē thanatou*, from which there is quite literally no escape.

It is evident that the cryptic affirmation "*Nous nous devons à la mort*" opens myriad avenues for evaluating the place and importance of Derrida's "affirmation of life" within his philosophy, particularly in relationship to his thinking of death. For, I argue, there is indeed a constant, ever-present and foundational thinking of death in Derrida, despite his own affirmation at the end of his career that despite the platonic injunction that to philosophize is to learn to die, and despite "believ[ing] in this truth," he had "never learned to accept it [...]," and remained "uneducable when it comes to any kind of wisdom about knowing-how-to-die."<sup>103</sup> The examination of these questions means returning to the earliest and most basic concepts of deconstruction, from the start of

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Reproduced here in extenso the above-cited passage from §80e-81a, *ibid.*: ἐὰν μὲν καθαρὰ ἀπαλλάττηται, μηδὲν τοῦ σώματος συνεφέλκουσα, ἅτε οὐδὲν κοινωνοῦσα αὐτῷ ἐν τῷ βίῳ ἐκοῦσα εἶναι, ἀλλὰ φεύγουσα αὐτὸ καὶ συνηθροισμένη αὐτὴ εἰς ἑαυτήν, ἅτε μελετῶσα ἀεὶ τοῦτο—τὸ δὲ οὐδὲν ἄλλο ἐστὶν ἢ ὀρθῶς φιλοσοφοῦσα καὶ τῷ ὄντι τεθνάναι μελετῶσα ῥαδίως· ἢ οὐ τοῦτ' ἂν εἴη μελέτη θανάτου; Platōn, *Phaidōn* (ē *Peri Psychēs*). See also, an interesting historical perspective in Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 307-12 et passim.

<sup>102</sup> "The Gift of Death," 14.

<sup>103</sup> Derrida and Birnbaum, *Learning to Live Finally*, 24–25.

Derrida's career. This is why the first part of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of the generation of meaning in Deconstruction as a generation and iteration of a certain deathliness. I begin this section with a discussion of writing and meaning in Derrida's thought, and I ground this in a reading of Freud, both in general terms, regarding the origins and implications of Freud's formulation of a 'death drive', and secondly in particular terms, related to Freud's minor paper on the Magic Writing Pad, which was relatively unknown until Derrida took it up and made it a major part of his own theoretical apparatus. The second part of this chapter will discuss firstly the similarities and differences between Derrida and Lacan's understandings of the death drive and its relationship to meaning and to language, and will then move on to a discussion of Derrida's atheism, as this is central to understanding whether or not Derrida's writings on death can be said to constitute a metaphysics, and if so, what sort of metaphysics. I will approach this question through a reading of Martin Hägglund's assertion that Derrida is a radically atheist thinker, for whom God is Death, in opposition to other contemporary authors, such as Marion Bernard, for whom Derrida is a neo-Platonic thinker of an ineffable God.

### **Writing, Repetition, and the Death Drive**

*Nous nous devons à la mort*, we owe ourselves to death.<sup>104</sup> This phrase is constantly repeated in *Demeure, Athènes*, the sort of *leitmotiv*, or even the little sacrificial music,

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<sup>104</sup> Derrida, *Demeure, Athènes*, 9.

which runs throughout the text. It has multiple implications: we ought to devote ourselves to death, in the sense of the Platonic *ἐπιμέλεια τοῦ θανάτου, μελέτη θανάτου*, or in the Heideggerian being-towards-death<sup>105</sup>; we ought to recognize that our life is a result of Death, even a byproduct of Death, for without Death there would be no Life—a sentiment evocative of a certain Nietzschean<sup>106</sup> or even Freudian metaphysics of death, but one that Derrida often excerpts from its dialectical implications and refers to as *lavielamort* or, in English translation, *lifedeath*, not two terms of a dialectic but already the synthesis within the two terms, a synthesis lacking both thesis and antithesis; and lastly, *nous nous devons à la mort* also has the implication that we owe *one another* to death, referring to the ritual processes of sacrifice, enslavement, objectification that certainly were present in Ancient Greece in an explicit sense, but also to the *capturing* of the subject within language, the *interpellation* of the subject by major social and political institutions, the *objectification* of subjects and subject positions within discursive formations, that are all concerns of contemporary philosophical inquiry.<sup>107</sup> Derrida's placing of Athens, of his reflections upon Athens (or perhaps identifying what Athens reflects) under the sign of death is unmistakably linked to Freud's own associating Athens with death and with a deathly inheritance that would come to be theorized as his

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<sup>105</sup> This is explicitly suggested by Derrida in *Derrida*, 52.

<sup>106</sup> Some of Nietzsche's most famous aphorisms relate to this subject: "The living is merely a form of what is dead, and a rare form at that," "As soon as man is born he is old enough to die,"

<sup>107</sup> In Derrida's words ("surpris dans ce nous, je serais d'entrée de jeu situé, déjà fétiche, marchandise, gage ou otage, chose promise ou chose due, dans la transaction") it is impossible not to think of Lacan's account of the captation of the subject within language during the mirror stage, the operation of symbolic castration and of self-misrecognition in which the subject objectifies itself within the "I" (or the Imago) for which it mistakes itself. See, Derrida, *Demeure, Athènes*, 54.

death drive.<sup>108</sup> And the death drive itself, that implacable force, is contained within every repetition, every *generation* (of meaning, of life, of man), and therefore within every text. Below, we will observe how this interaction of technology, psyche, man, machine, time, and space are central to, and the major innovations of, Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction.

*Writing and the Generation of Meaning in Derrida as Deathly Repetition*

What *is* writing for Derrida? In Derrida's work, the production of writing, of meaning, and of death are all interconnected from his earliest writings. In a well-known text originally given as a paper entitled "Signature Événement Contexte" at a conference on the theme of "Communication" that took place in Montréal in August 1971, Derrida consolidates his theory of writing and why writing, the concept of which as a sub-category of "communication" he challenges, is itself specific. For Derrida, writing has the following major specificities. Firstly, writing implies absence. Secondly, writing implies *iterability*. Thirdly, writing requires a rupture with the context. In further development, Derrida will add that writing also requires the ability to be "grafted" (*greffabilité*) – meaning it can produce effects outside of its ordinary or intended consequence; it can be excerpted from its original context and still produce meaning – and spacing (*espacement*), which introduces temporality, necessary for the distinguishability of signs

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<sup>108</sup> Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle."

one from the other, but also the emergence of the sign from its origin, which can never be simultaneous.<sup>109</sup>

Let us analyze these predicates term by term. When Derrida claims that writing requires absence, he means two things. At the most elementary level, Derrida means that writing must be readable even after the death of the writer or the intended recipient of the writing, and is therefore a “supplement” to communication that exists in order to overcome the limitations on it imposed by geography, time, and death: in other words, the limited ability of the voice to be transmitted across long distances, but also beyond time, and, especially, from beyond the grave. He identifies this concept as existing in Rousseau’s own theory of language, and cites the following therefrom: “*Les hommes en état de communiquer leurs pensées par des sons sentirent la nécessité d’imaginer de nouveaux signes propres à les perpétuer et à les faire connaître à des personnes absentes.*”<sup>110</sup> In the most basic terms, writing is only necessary as a “supplement” to speech in order to communicate with those who are absent, or to communicate with those remain in the absence (after the departure or death) of the writer.

Nonetheless, insofar as writing possesses capacities of “communication” that are far superior in temporal and spatial terms than speech, it is indeed in no way “secondary” to speech in the way that the logocentric tradition holds. Indeed, it is impossible to conceive of speech in the absence of some system of inscription, be it mnesic. But to take

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<sup>109</sup> This non-simultaneity is a major element of Derrida’s assertion that a sign is never “full”. This *espacement* should be read in conjunction with the *spacing* (i.e. of the interval between perception and storage) necessary for the Mystic Writing Pad (the psyche) to function. See also: Derrida, *Positions*, 108ff.

<sup>110</sup> Derrida, “Signature Événement Contexte,” 371.

the argument one step further, the absence implied by writing also involves temporality in a very existential sense – it involves the foreordained deathliness of man, and in that sense, is very close to the Nietzschean and Heideggerean formulations of being as suspended within death and always existing towards death, as it implies “*une rupture de presence, la « mort » ou la possibilité de la « mort » du destinataire inscrite dans la structure de la marque.*”<sup>111</sup> Writing, in order to be constituted as such, requires absence but also the presence of a reading being itself destined to disappear, to take over the function of absence. In that sense, writing is much more “primary” than speech itself: it engages and makes clear the very foundation of language itself which, in order to signify, must be iterable.

By iterability, Derrida means that a written trace must be repeatable to be understandable. A written trace only qualifies as writing if it can be reproduced, on one hand, and if it can be read after its writer has disappeared.<sup>112</sup> It is interesting that Derrida notes that his word *iterabilité* comes from the Latin *iter* (path, trajectory, trip) that itself is believed to come from the Sanskrit word *itara*, meaning other.<sup>113</sup> Derrida does not enter into a long analysis of the implications of this etymological parenthesis, but it seems important to me to note that, within the discussion of iterability, the presence of a reference to Latin and Sanskrit etymology is not without importance. For both Latin and Sanskrit are both dead languages whose last native speakers departed this earth long ago

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<sup>111</sup> Derrida, 375.

<sup>112</sup> Derrida, 375.

<sup>113</sup> Derrida, 375.

– and none the less, our ability to understand them and even to *use them as grafts within our own language* is proof of the iterability of writing – the only medium through which the link to the “*etymos logos*” (true meaning) is preserved and via which we maintain the link (however specious) with the past.<sup>114</sup> This is exactly what Derrida means when he says that in order to be writing, a trace must function in the absence of its writer or its intended recipient. And to function, the trace must produce effects as a graft even outside of its original context.

The decontextualization of writing means that a piece of writing can be removed from its original context and still produce meaning, even in ways that are radically different from what was intended by the original writer. This draws both on the concept of the *œuvre* as present in the work of Maurice Blanchot — as distinct from a *livre*, the *œuvre* is what produces effects in the encounter with the eventual reader, that produces effects not foreseen or intended by the author and therefore involves the author’s disappearance and even death<sup>115</sup> — and on the concept of *dissemination* in Derrida’s 1969 article *La dissémination*.<sup>116</sup> Decontextualization implies that every signifier can become a floating signifier, a signifier without referent, which is “*une possibilité assez facilement admise aujourd’hui*,”<sup>117</sup> and one of the ways that decontextualization can take place,

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<sup>114</sup> This must be distinguished from Heidegger’s approach to etymology; in Derrida, this connection with the “past” is never realizable in the present; unlike in Heidegger’s thought, there can be no “authentic” being on the basis of a past that Derrida sees as irretrievable and inexistent (in the sense of *ousia*, it never has “being” in the present, which itself is always a “past”).

<sup>115</sup> This is by no means a complete summary of Blanchot’s complex thought on this subject. See, notably, Blanchot, *Le livre à venir*, 265ff, 293–98. See also Blanchot, *L’espace littéraire*.

<sup>116</sup> Derrida, “La dissémination,” 1972.

<sup>117</sup> Derrida, “Signature Événement Contexte,” 378–79.

disrupting the original context, is citation. By citing a piece of text in another, “*il peut rompre avec tout contexte donné, engendrer à l’infini de nouveaux contextes, de façon absolument non saturable.*”<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, in the Freudian context, the oneirocriticism of the Ancients, which relied upon a fixed correspondence between dream-symbols and their interpretation, was supplanted by the Freudian assertion that dream-symbols must be interpreted in the context of the life of the dreamer (not to say by the analyst’s own frame of interpretation) rendering null any 1:1 correspondence or pre-formed interpretation. Instead, the analyst must ask the patient what associations he or he makes to the symbols appearing in the dream. The infinite engendering of new possibilities and new contexts is at the heart of what Derrida means by iterability and dissemination.

By considering writing from the angle of its iterability or ability to function out of context, of its unlimited gestational power through iteration, we can understand why language itself, speech included, is a form of writing in Derrida’s logic. (Spoken) language is a code, an iterable code, that is *inherited* from the past and that *marks* or *inscribes* the subject. In Derrida’s own words, “*une marque, où qu’elle se produise, n’est-elle pas la possibilité de l’écriture?*”<sup>119</sup> In other words, the subject being inscribed with language and available to itself as representation only through language, language itself, *qua* mark, is already a form of writing. The basic premise of *De la grammatologie* is to demonstrate that speech (*la parole*) was never pure, never full, never originary, it was always already a repetition (iteration) and a representation of a language that is never

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<sup>118</sup> Derrida, 381.

<sup>119</sup> Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 409.

fully present (to consciousness, to being, to the present time) and whose origin is, *de facto*, unidentifiable. Nonetheless, the Western tradition, from Aristotle, has supposed that “*‘les sons émis par la voix (τὰ ἐν τῇ φωνῇ) sont les symboles des états d’âme (παθήματα τῆς ψυχῆς) et les mots écrits les symboles des mots émis par la voix’ [...parce que] la voix, productrice des premiers symboles, a un rapport de proximité essentielle et immédiate avec l’âme.*”<sup>120</sup> What Derrida proposes is to “*penser une nouvelle situation de la parole, à sa subordination dans une structure où elle ne sera plus l’archonte.*”<sup>121</sup>

Here, we must also address the concept of “spacing” referenced above, which could also be referred to as the essence of what *différance* can(not) be said to be. Derrida points out that in Saussure’s own linguistic theory, meaning is only produced by the *difference* between two concepts (*red* is only understandable to us as a color because of its difference from all the other colors) but also between two written or spoken words (e.g. *plough* is not *slough* because of a difference in both spelling and pronunciation). Saussure writes, “*dans la langue il n’y a que des différences,*” and Derrida adds, “*le concept signifié n’est jamais présent en lui-même [...] tout concept est en droit essentiellement inscrit dans une chaîne ou dans un système à l’intérieur duquel il renvoie à l’autre, aux autres concepts, par jeu systématique de différences.*”<sup>122</sup> This difference, however, is not just phonetic or orthographic, but it is also literally marked by and through space: this space is represented in speech by a breath, the pause that marks the

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<sup>120</sup> Cf. *supra*, n.3.

<sup>121</sup> Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 18.

<sup>122</sup> Derrida, “La différence,” 11.

scansion of the chain of discourse, and in writing by the space that distinguishes between two words.<sup>123</sup> The space is the condition of subjectivity, of existence as a *topos noetos* or intelligible form, but it also divides existence because it is what *differs/defers* meaning also by a) pushing meaning always further down the signifying chain, thereby establishing subjectivity and meaning always in a future enunciation, a futurity that is never present, and b) that is only made possible by the past, by the past “origin” of language and of meaning that preceded it.<sup>124</sup> *Différance* is then the conceptualization of *ex-istance*, the affirmation that existence is truly outside of any intelligible self-conception, full awareness of oneself; the affirmation that consciousness does not exist, that the subject is never fully present to itself. Furthermore, language itself is “contaminated” by alterity, both the alterity of *Mitdasein* and the fact that it is an inheritance; as the self is expressed and expressible via language, this is also the alienation of non-presence to the self as a result of the linguistic fact. We are then in a metaphysics that defies metaphysics insofar as any attempt to define what *différance* is falls into the trap of capture by language.<sup>125</sup> We are also in a being that is not be-ing in the sense of the present participle: there is no presence to *différance*, it is an entity that cannot ever exist within any sort of linguistic or existential presence.<sup>126</sup> It can only be approached (but not defined) periphrastically – or even apophatically, by the negative –

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<sup>123</sup> See also, in the context of an analysis of Husserl’s thought on signifiers and signs, the discussion of “*écart*” in Derrida, *La voix et le phénomène*, 23, 35.

<sup>124</sup> Derrida, “La différence,” 13.

<sup>125</sup> Derrida, 17.

<sup>126</sup> Derrida, *Positions*, 54ff.

perhaps even via play, which is the precondition of difference, of newness, of any origin whatsoever. In this context, I would add that death can be taken as both a limit but also the precondition of all newness. We can easily see how, in this respect, one of the most important figures for Derrida is Freud, not only because of his formulation of the Death Drive, but also because of his theory of the *mnesic trace* and of his analogy of the memory apparatus to the child's toy the "*Wunderblock*", as will be explored in the two following sections. Moreover, as we shall see, Freud's death drive is squarely grounded in his own reception of Ancient Greece, something of which Derrida is not unaware, and contributes to Derrida's own assertions of a "haunting" and of an "inheritance" which occur on multiple simultaneous valences of meaning and understanding.

### *Freud: The Death Drive and the Inheritance of Death*

It is not surprising that Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, who brought to light the primal urges that underpinned civilized man and whose discovery of the unconscious mind radically challenged the notion of man's transparency to himself, was an avid student of ancient civilizations and cultures.<sup>127</sup> Freud's interest in the Ancient pervades the discipline he founded in multiple ways. First of all, Freud believed that the etiology of mental illness lay in a patient's past. Secondly, Freud believed that the analyst could

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<sup>127</sup> In a letter to Stefan Zweig dated 7 February 1931, Freud writes, "[...]despite my much vaunted frugality I have sacrificed a great deal for my collection of Greek, Roman and Egyptian antiquities, [and] have actually read more archaeology than psychology[...]" Freud, *The Letters of Sigmund Freud*, 403.

“decipher” the patient’s discourse in order to unveil these past events and bring them to the patient’s consciousness. While questions of an epistemological nature remain as to the “objectivity” of the psychoanalyst’s interpretations, it is generally accepted that “talk therapy,” irrespective of modality, is effective (at least in part) due to its bringing-to-consciousness of pathogenic unconscious processes and beliefs. Thirdly, Freud established a complex set of metapsychological assertions based on his juxtaposition of these premises with the scientific and philosophic tenets of his time. Freud believed that like an archeological site, the human mind contained remnants of past civilizations and stages of human development beneath the minute subset of memories available to conscious recollection formed within one’s lifetime, and that the psychoanalyst, like the archeologist, could use the psychoanalytic technique to reveal, layer by layer, these earlier underpinnings of human development.<sup>128</sup> Freud’s theory of the *mnesic trace*<sup>129</sup>, the “impression” left on the mind by a lived event, extended to the collective inheritance of historical events, much as during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the fields of comparative religion and mythology identified cross-cultural commonalities in terms of social and religious organizations.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, according to Freud, “in mental life, nothing which has once been

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<sup>128</sup> See the long discussion in which Freud compares psychoanalytic work to archaeological discovery, and compares the mind to an archaeological site: Freud, “Civilization and Its Discontents,” 68ff.

<sup>129</sup> Laplanche and Pontalis define the *mnemic trace* as the term Freud uses “to denote the way in which events are inscribed on the memory, [they are] deposited in different systems; they subsist permanently, but are only reactivated once they have been cathected.” Laplanche and Pontalis also note, importantly, that “the Freudian concept of the memory-trace is quite distinct from the empiricist notion of the engram [...]. In fact: the memory trace is invariably recorded in systems, and stands there in relation to other traces.” Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, s.v. Memory-Trace (or Mnemic Trace).

<sup>130</sup> The most famous example in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is Émile Durkheim, who has often been called a proto-structuralist for the ways his theories seem to foreshadow those of Lévi-Strauss.

formed can perish—[...]everything is somehow preserved and that in suitable circumstances (when, for instance, repression goes back far enough) it can once more be brought to light.”<sup>131</sup> Freud often compared hysterical or neurotic symptoms to the appearance of primitive mental states within civilized persons, describing them as the return of a prior stage of human development, as evidenced by the subtitle of *Totem and Taboo*: “Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics”.<sup>132</sup> This theory is often called Freud’s theory of phylogenesis, after German biologist Ernst Haeckel’s theory that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, or that during its development, the maturation of each being as an embryo and during growth (ontogeny) passes through earlier stages of development (phylogeny) on its way to maturity.<sup>133</sup> Human embryos, according to Haeckel, passed through stages during which they went through all of the inferior beings out of which humankind emerged, starting with the unicellular organism, and passing through fish and simpler mammals before becoming a human embryo. Freud applied this theory to culture, believing that the remnants of earlier civilizations and primitive beliefs continued to exist within the unconscious mind of

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Durkheim’s research into “primitive” totemic religions in Australia sought to demonstrate universal facets of human social organization. He believed, like Freud, that “parts of our past [can] become present to us again [...] for time is [...] an abstract and impersonal framework that encompasses not only our individual existence but that of humanity.” Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 12. See also pp. 69f., 79ff., on the connection between linguistics and social organization, and on the universality of the “primitive”, respectively.

<sup>131</sup> Freud, “Civilization and Its Discontents,” 69.

<sup>132</sup> See also, Freud, “Moses and Monotheism,” 97ff.

<sup>133</sup> See excellent study of the intellectual underpinnings of psychoanalysis, and particularly on the subject of inheritance, biology, and phylogenesis or evolution in: Makari, *Revolution in Mind*, chap. 3.

contemporary man, going so far as to claim that anxiety is a symptom derived *ab initio* from prehistoric man's difficulties experienced during the onset of the Ice Age.<sup>134</sup> Two of Freud's most famous examples of this "phylogenetic" metapsychology are his account of the genesis of the Œdipus complex (murder of the horde father in *Totem and Taboo*) and the origin of Jewish guilt and also anti-Semitism in the hypothesized murder of Moses (in *Moses and Monotheism*).

In the former example, the killing of the horde father was Freud's explanation for the genesis of "social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion."<sup>135</sup> He hypothesized that in "Darwin's primal horde [...] a violent and jealous father [kept] all the females for himself and [drove] away his sons as they [grew] up."<sup>136</sup> In response to this competition for women and therefore genetic survival, "the brothers, who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father."<sup>137</sup> This patricide and cannibalistic consummation of the murder led in Freud's opinion to the establishment of the taboo of both patricide and incest, which are not only the wishes that underpin the hypothetically universal Œdipal complex, but also provide the basis for universal moral systems prohibiting incest and endogenous murder according to sociology and ethnology.<sup>138</sup> In the second example, Freud hypothesized that Moses was an Egyptian

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<sup>134</sup> In the 1980s, Ilse Grubrich-Simitis discovered an unpublished draft by Freud on this subject amongst Freud's papers, entitled "Übersicht der Übertragungsneurosen," which was published in English as *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*.

<sup>135</sup> Freud, "Totem and Taboo," 142.

<sup>136</sup> Freud, 141.

<sup>137</sup> Freud, 141.

<sup>138</sup> Totemism is seen as a method for preventing incest by prohibiting the marriage between men and women of the same clan. Each clan worshipping its own totem animal provides a clear-cut set

who led the Jews out of Egypt into the desert, but whom the Jews killed during an uprising due to their frustration over having been led into the desert. Freud believed that the sense of guilt over this murder of the founder of their religion has persisted to this day and is inherited by all Jews. Freud believed that his ‘discovery’ enabled him to “[bridge] the gulf between individual and group psychology” enabling him to “deal with peoples as we do with an individual neurotic.”<sup>139</sup> Using the concept of phylogenesis, Freud extended the domain of psychoanalysis far beyond the couch, authorizing himself to use data collected from his individual patients to draw conclusions about entire peoples, past stages of human history, and the origin of civilization itself.

It is apparent, then, that the phylogenetic underpinnings of Freudian “metapsychology” far surpass Freud’s epiphenomenal conclusions regarding Œdipus and Moses, but more broadly operate a condensation of time and space, of individual and collective, that differ from Jung’s concept of a “collective unconscious” but nonetheless enable a metapsychological discourse that does not hesitate to draw conclusions about the individual from the collective and about the collective from the individual, positing the past as a basis for understanding the present and the present as a basis for understanding the past.<sup>140</sup>

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of sexual taboos. See, *Ibid.*, pp. 4ff. See also René Girard’s treatment of this topic in *La violence et le sacré*, chap. 8.

<sup>139</sup> Freud, “Moses and Monotheism,” 100.

<sup>140</sup> Derrida’s critique of Freudian metapsychology is that it is based on the idea that there supposedly exist “empirical memories of a present truth outside of time” (*vérité présente hors du temps*). “Freud et la scène de l’écriture,” 336. See also, Bass, *Interpretation and Difference*, 110ff.

Perhaps the most famous—not to say controversial and disputed—element of Freud’s metapsychology is his assertion of the existence of a death drive (*Todestrieb* or *Thanatos*) that exists in opposition to the life instincts (*Lebenstrieb*, or *Eros*) within each human psyche, a conclusion that Freud drew on the basis of an inferred phylogenetic connection between unicellular forms of life and humans. The history of how the Death Drive came to be theorized in Freud’s 1920 revision of his theory of the drives is well-known, and I will simply summarize it here.<sup>141</sup> Freud’s earlier drive theory posited that human behavior was dictated by sexual drives (the instinct to reproduce the self and the species) and ego-drives (the instinct for survival and self-furtherance).<sup>142</sup> This initial division revealed its limits when it was unable to explain phenomena of self-harm (either conscious or unconscious, somatic or psychic) such as masochism and shell-shock. As an example, if every dream is a form of wish-fulfillment (a major concept in psychoanalysis in keeping with Freud’s assertion in *The Interpretation of Dreams*<sup>143</sup>), why did soldiers returning from the trenches after World War I experience night terrors? What might compel the mind to pursue such an obviously harmful wish? It was the observation of phenomena entailing the compulsive repetition of painful memories or behaviors that contradicted the idea that the human organism exclusively pursued patently pleasurable aims. Or, rather, as Freud would come to see it, there was, in fact, a type of libidinal fulfillment in the self-infliction of painful stimuli. In other words, the repetition provided some sort of mental

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<sup>141</sup> Although sources abound, a concise synopsis can be found in Laplanche and Pontalis’ *Language of Psycho-Analysis* (*op. cit.*), s.v. Death Instincts.

<sup>142</sup> These drives were first theorized by Freud in “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality.”

<sup>143</sup> Freud, “The Interpretation of Dreams,” 122ff.

satisfaction and therefore had a purpose and a reason for existing that could be logically deduced (this is the economic conception of psychic phenomena). Instead of fulfilling the “pleasure principle” composed of Eros and the life instincts, the mind pursues an opposite and equal aim, known as the Death Drive, the aim to reduce tension to a state of zero.

This is one of Freud’s most controversial principles, both now and at the time he introduced it. Freud arrived at the theory of the Death Drive by founding it on the observation that unicellular forms of life in fact pursue sexual reproduction and self-propagation through division.<sup>144</sup> Therefore, Freud concluded that the aim of all life is in fact death in the form of a return to an initial state characterized by the absence of tension. This is why Freud also terms the death drive the Nirvana Principle, for the return to this initial state devoid of the tensions that in fact compose life (the living organism here being seen as a machine constantly operated upon by variations in tension that cause it to live and think) is the Nirvana (a blissful absence of tension) towards which all life tends. Therefore, Freud came to see masochism and repetition of trauma as attempts by the organism to discharge tension and to pleasurably effect a return to an earlier state (death) in which these tensions would be absent.<sup>145</sup> Even sexual reproduction, the means by which the species is propagated, involves the trend towards death of the genitors who expend life force in the creation of new life and who experience *la petite mort*, the eclipse

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<sup>144</sup> See discussion and references of Lacan’s relationship to phylogenesis in: Johnston, “On Deep History and Lacan.”

<sup>145</sup> Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” 44ff. See also, on the primacy of the death drive in resistance and symptoms, Freud, “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” 244.

of subjectivity in the moment of orgasm, as part of the synousiastic experience of sexuality.

The metapsychological principle of the Death Drive is phylogenetic in nature not only because it reposes upon an analogy between the reproductive behavior of protozoa and that of human psychology<sup>146</sup>, but also because Freud directly related the concept to the thought of the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles. In *Analysis Terminable or Interminable*, Freud mentions that he came across his death drive while reading Empedocles. Although Empedocles' theory, according to Freud, is a "cosmic phantasy, while ours is content to claim biological validity, [...] the two are identical."<sup>147</sup> What Freud is referring to in Empedocles is his concept that the universe is guided by two main principles, love (*φιλότης*) and strife (*νεῖκος*), that are constantly in tension with one another and which tension structures the entire physical world.<sup>148</sup> Freud is manifestly extremely pleased to identify his theory with Empedocles as a spirited response to the many psychoanalysts who refused to accept the existence of a death drive, as he perceives the prestige of the Ancient Greek source to be so great that it alone proves the validity and worth of his theory.<sup>149</sup> Moreover, grounding the death drive within the Western tradition permits Freud to distance himself from the "Eastern" mystical tradition

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<sup>146</sup> Freud believed that his theory "provided some sort of biological basis for the principle of 'strife' by tracing back our instinct of destruction to the death instinct, to the urge of what is living to return to an inanimate state." *Ibid*, p. 246.

<sup>147</sup> Freud, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," 245.

<sup>148</sup> See, Armstrong, *A Compulsion for Antiquity*, 92ff.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid*.

central to the thinking of Schopenhauer and Romain Rolland and from which Freud could have drawn to justify his theory. Indeed, it was a discussion with Rolland on the religious sentiment (what Rolland referred to as the “oceanic feeling”) that prompted Freud to consider the existence of the death drive or the Nirvana principle.<sup>150</sup> Grounding the death drive in Ancient Greece (and a certain conception of biological inheritance) rather than in Eastern mysticism allows Freud to maintain an Eurocentric theory, keeping alive the idea of a special bond across time that maintains Ancient Greek civilization intact within the present day.<sup>151</sup>

Nonetheless, Freud’s grounding of the death drive in Ancient Greek philosophy implies that our biological inheritance is accompanied by a memory-inheritance that is death-related. The aim of life is death<sup>152</sup> and along with the inheritance of antiquity comes death.<sup>153</sup> Therefore, in Derrida, the notion of a psychic text – a writing that precedes speech and meaning – is inherently related to Freud’s concept of psychic inheritance, albeit in a less deterministic way. Where Freud sees the Ice Age at the origin of anxiety, Derrida will counter that any attempt to identify the “archi-trace” is futile and impossible. For Derrida, Freud is a radical thinker because he pointed the way out of the capture of

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<sup>150</sup> Freud, “Civilization and Its Discontents,” 64f.

<sup>151</sup> Armstrong, *A Compulsion for Antiquity*, 97ff.

<sup>152</sup> Lacan cited Heraclitus’ fragment B 48 to pithily summarize this affirmation: τῷ τόξῳ ὄνομα βίος ἐργον δὲ θάνατος [the name of the bow is life {*bios*}, but its work is death]: this is a play on words between the words βίος [life] and βίός [bow] possible because of the absence of diacritical marks in Ancient Greek (Greek diacritics were a Byzantine scribal innovation). *Séminaire 11*, 195.

<sup>153</sup> This is in many ways one of Derrida’s major theses in *Demeure, Athènes*.

metaphysics while being unable himself to fully step outside of the positivistic system he upended.

### *Derrida and the Wunderblock*

One of Derrida's main commentaries on the relationship between historicity and psychic text is based on the 'Note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad,'" one of Freud's so-called 'minor' texts that has taken on greater significance since the 1970s, in large part due to the attention Derrida paid it in his famous essay, *Freud and the Scene of Writing*. Freud came across a device, the *Wunderblock* or 'Mystic Writing-Pad', which is a note-taking apparatus intended as a child's toy, composed of three layers: an upper sheet of celluloid, a middle sheet of protective waxed paper, and a lower layer of solid wax. The notes that the user of the *Wunderblock* takes by applying the stylus to the topmost surface appear upon the sheet of celluloid but can be erased so as to make room for further notes by lifting the sheet of celluloid and cannot be reproduced again upon the sheet. Nonetheless, the 'traces' left by the impression of the stylus remain upon the layer of wax underlying the sheet of celluloid and the protective layer of waxed paper. Freud used this *Wunderblock* as an analogy or metaphor for his own theorization of the interplay between consciousness and memory: that the system of Perception-Consciousness (*Pcpt.-Cs.*) receives impressions (sensory stimuli) but does not store them; the *mnemic traces* are stored elsewhere in "separate but interrelated component parts or systems."<sup>154</sup> The layer

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<sup>154</sup> Freud, "A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad,'" 230. I am indebted to Alan Bass' analysis of Derrida's commentary on Freud's text (*op. cit. Interpretation and Difference*, 109–14).

of waxed paper is the “protective shield” which prevent the sensing apparatus from being overwhelmed by too many concurrent stimuli, and which is occasionally breached in the example of a trauma, and, of course, the underlying block of wax itself is the unconscious, in which the *mnemic traces* are stored.<sup>155</sup> Freud’s metaphoric displacement of the systems of memory storage and perception of stimuli onto this child’s toy, he also includes an account of how the “energy” that fuels the “writing” and “storage” actions of this machine is supplied:

[...] cathectic innervations are sent out and withdrawn in rapid periodic impulses from within into the completely pervious system *Pcpt.-Cs.* So long as that system is cathected in this manner, it receives perceptions (which are accompanied by consciousness) and passes the excitation on to the unconscious mnemic systems; but as soon as the cathexis is withdrawn, consciousness is extinguished and the functioning of the system comes to a standstill. It is as though the unconscious stretches out feelers, through the medium of the system *Pcpt.-Cs.*, towards the external world and hastily withdraws them as soon as they have sampled the excitations coming from it. Thus the interruptions, which in the case of the Mystic Pad have an external origin, were attributed by my hypothesis to the discontinuity in the current of innervation; and the actual breaking of contact which occurs in the Mystic Pad was replaced in my theory by the periodic non-excitability of the perceptual system. I further had a suspicion that this discontinuous method of functioning of the system *Pcpt.-Cs.* lies at the bottom of the origin of the concept of time.<sup>156</sup>

The limit of the metaphor is to be found insofar as the mystic pad cannot reproduce (recall) the writing from the wax pad as human memory is able to recall memories to conscious awareness.<sup>157</sup> Furthermore, there is a periodicity of writing and of erasure within the mental apparatus that Freud says we must imagine occurring in the

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<sup>155</sup> Freud, “A Note Upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad,’” 230.

<sup>156</sup> Freud, 231.

<sup>157</sup> Freud, 230.

*Wunderblock* in order to have a concrete image of how he believes the interaction between memory and perception functions: “one hand [writes] upon the surface of the Mystic Writing-Pad while another periodically raises its covering-sheet from the wax slab.”<sup>158</sup>

This is what prompts Derrida to make the first of a series of remarks about this entire metaphorical-mechanistic arrangement Freud has proposed: “Traces thus produce the space of their inscription only by acceding to the period of their erasure. From the beginning, in the “present” of their first impression, they are constituted by the double force of repetition and erasure, legibility and illegibility.”<sup>159</sup> Of course, on a primary level, this indicates that the eventuality of erasure (of actual repression into the unconscious) is necessary in order to liberate space for the next “set” of “notes”, so that the space of perception may be “cleared” in order to receive further sensory “impressions”. The “space” that is freed up is necessary for further inscriptions to take place. But on a theoretical level, this implies that the psyche itself is writing and erasure, that writing and erasure precede the constitution of the psyche as *theoretical description by Freud* (or Plato, or anyone else — in other words, the *writing* of the psyche is always gesturing outside of the *writing* towards an external reality<sup>160</sup>, something that is *not* it, as all meaning must be produced from *différance* [see *infra*, §§3]) and therefore this is what

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<sup>158</sup> Freud, 232.

<sup>159</sup> Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” 226.

<sup>160</sup> Heidegger will call this the difference between *being* (ontology, what it means to be) and *beings* (ontics, the physical nature of things that are) that has been forgotten since the Greeks in *Being and Time*, 10–14.

enables the metaphor to function: the Writing Pad is the *ōv*, the physical being of the ontological reality of the psyche, which resides elsewhere. The Pad itself is a sort of trace that points us to a network of other traces that give it significance.

We recall that Freud states that “as the cathexis is withdrawn, consciousness is extinguished and the functioning of the system comes to a standstill.”<sup>161</sup> We will also recall that the energy that makes the “machine” of storage of perceived stimuli work is compared to two hands: “one hand [writes] upon the surface of the Mystic Writing-Pad while another periodically raises its covering-sheet from the wax slab.”<sup>162</sup> Because “the machine does not run by itself [...it is] a mechanism without its own energy,” and therefore, according to Derrida, “the machine is dead. It is death. Not because we risk death in playing with machines, but because *the origin of machines is the relation to death*.”<sup>163</sup> This is a sweeping statement that must be unpacked, because it contains multiple implications. The first implication is relative to the Freudian death drive taken dialectically or in the Nietzschean sense of Eternal Return<sup>164</sup>; the second implication is relative to the Western ‘logocentric’ tradition Derrida is deconstructing, and specifically the concept of “presence” or *parole pleine*; and the third implication has to do with *techné* as reproduction and reproduction as death.

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<sup>161</sup> Freud, op. cit.

<sup>162</sup> Freud, “A Note Upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad,’” 232.

<sup>163</sup> Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” 227. Emphasis mine.

<sup>164</sup> The subject of Nietzsche’s Eternal Return is a vast one, including the discussion of whether or not it is, in fact, dialectical in nature (*cf.* Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*) and whether or not it can be compared to Freud’s death drive.

As for the first remark, Derrida is pointing out that life in a sense (taken as physical being) is a machine for causing death; all life is destined to die and all life emerges from death.<sup>165</sup> This pertains to Freud's own theorization that the psyche is dominated by a life drive and a death drive, and that the death drive must eventually win out as this is the end and the fate of all life. Within the psyche, there is therefore death; the psyche inevitably leads the body towards death. In this way, the psyche, with its component death drive, can be seen as a "machine" that *is* death.

The second remark, as to the Western philosophical tradition, is that Freud's concepts are metaphysical in nature, and drawn from the tradition of Western metaphysics that Derrida is working to deconstruct. Going all the way back to Plato, Derrida cites the opposition between "hypomnesic writing and writing *ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ*,"<sup>166</sup> which is the opposition between externalized notes made as a *supplement* for 'natural' memory, described as "empirical memories of a present truth outside of time."<sup>167</sup> Of course, Freud himself within the Western tradition has turned this notion on its head: his discovery of the unconscious (although he did describe it as a place "where nothing ends, nothing happens, nothing is forgotten"<sup>168</sup>) proves that the memories themselves are anything but empirical, that they make no reference to any "present" that could be said to exist "outside of time" or in any way empirically. What Derrida is remarking is that Freud did

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<sup>165</sup> This was a major theme in the work of Georges Bataille, notably in *La part maudite*, 60ff.

<sup>166</sup> Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," 227.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," 230.

not follow his own theories to their utmost, logical, and radical conclusions. “All that Freud thought about the unity of life and death, however, should have led him to ask other questions here. And to ask them explicitly.”<sup>169</sup>

The third remark concerns Freud’s tendency to oppose what he considers to be natural, full, pure (the human psyche and body with its mechanisms for storing perception as memories and retrieving them from the archive of memory) and what he considers supplementary in the form of an “external” metaphor (the child’s toy, along with other “mechanistic” metaphors and allusions that Freud uses elsewhere in his corpus). Derrida affirms that the resemblance between the child’s toy and the psyche “did not happen to memory from without, any more than death surprises life.”<sup>170</sup> For within the *spacing* between the perceived reality and its psychic recollection *there is writing and reproduction*. Within the psyche, there can be no immediate perception that would be available to comprehension (or consciousness) *qua* perception that would circumvent or bypass the *process of inscription, of writing, of storage* of the perception in the memory from which it is recalled to make it available to comprehension. There is a spacing in time and in space that separates perception from external reality: “writing, here, is *techné* as the relation between life and death, between present and representation, between the two apparatuses.”<sup>171</sup> There is something inherently deathly about the possibility of establishing the metaphor of the Writing Pad to describe the psychic apparatus: its

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<sup>169</sup> Derrida, 227.

<sup>170</sup> Derrida, 228.

<sup>171</sup> Derrida, 228.

*representability* demonstrates the finitude of the concept, of the *representation itself*; but because the metaphor can function, because the so-called “intrapsychical metaphor” is workable, it is inscribed in the same cycle of repetition as death itself, as the death drive emanating from the unicellular organism. This is why to Derrida:

The Freudian concept of the trace must be radicalized and extracted from the metaphysics of presence which still retains it. The trace is the erasure of selfhood, of one's own presence, and it is constituted by the threat or anguish of its irremediable disappearance, of the disappearance of its disappearance. An unerasable trace is not a trace, it is a full presence, an immobile and uncorruptible substance, a son of God, a sign of parousia and not a seed, that is, a mortal germ. This erasure is death itself, and it is within its horizon that we must conceive not only the “present,” but also what Freud doubtless believed to be the indelibility of certain traces in the unconscious, where “nothing ends, nothing happens, nothing is forgotten.” This erasure of the trace [...] is the very structure which makes possible, as the movement of temporalization and pure *auto-affection*, something that can be called repression in general, the original synthesis of original repression and secondary repression, repression “itself.”<sup>172</sup>

Repression is here posited as the very condition of memory itself: a perception must be “repressed” into the memory in order to be available for recollection, for consideration. The *Bahnung*, the “breaching” (in French translation, *frayage*) that Freud posited is the precondition for memory because without a “pathbreaking” stimulus, the type of stimulus strong enough to get through the “protective layer” in the Mystic Writing Pad to make an impression on the underlying wax, there is no memory, there is no perception at all. But this also means that reality is only perceptible *through* memory and recollection, there is no such thing as a *direct* experience of reality unmediated by that reality having first been written down, inscribed upon the psyche. The trace is the precursor of conscious perception. This means also that the *recollection* of a memory is

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<sup>172</sup> Derrida, 229–30.

also its *reproduction*, the *reproduction* of a lived experience, which brings to mind the eternal return, the death drive, but also the uncanny “return of the repressed” that results from the return of traumatic memories.<sup>173</sup> The implications that this theory opens up in terms of inheritance from one’s own past, from the past of one’s parents, grandparents, distant ancestors, even Antiquity and prehistoric times, are indeed extremely vast and extremely intriguing. Further exploration of the relationship between repetition, inheritance, memory and death will be engaged in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. However, the next section of the present chapter will engage more specifically with the parallels between Derrida’s reception of Freud’s death drive, and Lacan’s. Lacan and Derrida were contemporaries whose relationship was notoriously fraught. It is important, however, to understand how their theories complement or differ from one another. The subsequent section of this chapter will consider the theological and metaphysical implications of Derrida’s reception of Freud’s death drive in relation to the *meletē thanatou*.

### **Derrida and Apophasis**

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<sup>173</sup> See, for a discussion on the Uncanny and the return of the repressed as *primary narcissism* (the “auto-affection” Derrida mentions above), i.e. the return of a primal double of the self (the self *as* breast before the breast becomes object, other) that Freud himself mentions in “The Uncanny”, but also this repetition and working-through as possibility of change due to the phenomenon of *différance*, of the possibility the n<sup>th</sup> repetition will effect a change: Bass, “Psychoanalytic Process: The Paradoxes of Self-Reference and Intermediacy.”

To consider now the metaphysical implications of the matter of the interplay between writing and psychic life, let us turn to the concept of “meaning” or “truth” *versus* the concepts of “inheritance” or “transmission” (and, by extension, the resulting metaphysics of a transmission of death) in Derrida, whose project is ostensibly an anti-metaphysical one. In other words, insofar as psychic life is underpinned by a written text, does that mean the text is accessible, that its contents are, as Freud believed, archeologically stratified and can be revealed by psychoanalytic excavation? Does that mean that there is some absolute *truth* regarding the past, the origin, and even mortality as inheritance? In Derrida, of course, this question can only be resolved by reference to the relatedness of deathliness and erasure, and can only be examined in light of the concepts of non-presence, of the trace, and of spectrality; it is not something able to be positively defined in the terms of a science such as etymology, aesthetics, sociology, biology, or comparative religion. Another question raised by this discussion relates to the “centrality” or primacy (or even relevance) of certain aspects of antiquity to psychic formation. When Freud asserts that something may have happened during the Ice Age that had a profound impact on humanity, such that it carries over from generation to generation, could it also not be asserted that certain things that occurred in Ancient Greece actually continue to impact European civilization and European minds (or whichever minds have been “*formed*” in the sense of the French *formation* by European education) through time, by dint of their sheer force and importance, while others, less impactful, do not operate in the present? Derrida will certainly not argue that the past has no relevance or no determinacy on the psyche: yet, does opening the door to any sort of inheritance immediately entail some sort of metaphysics? For Derrida, the answer to that

question is not a categorical denial, but rather an ongoing reference to the impossibility of any fullness of meaning or any full presence (to self, of truth, etc.). Of course, this debate is also central to the differences between Lacan and Derrida over the concept of “master signifiers” in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan and Derrida, both eminent readers of Freud (and also Heidegger) in postwar France, seem to agree about the deferral of meaning within the symbolic realm, in that signifiers are inherently meaningless, but Lacan excepts certain signifiers from that regime, granting them a master status (castration, phallus, etc.). This has been criticized in a Derridean way as “phallogocentric” as it asserts a primary status to castration and therefore grants “fullness of presence” or “presence of truth” to myth, *viz.* to the Freudian tale of the origin of the castration complex in the primal horde.<sup>174</sup> It is therefore an inherently phylogenetic position, whether or not Lacan would have asserted the “truth” of the Freudian historical reconstruction. Of course, Derrida’s conception of the unconscious as text does not exclude the concept of inheritance, so what is the difference that opposes the two men? I propose is that in Derrida’s work, death increasingly came to represent not only a limit, but also a point of origin and a potential for generative capacity. A Platonic approach to death via *meletē thanatou*, via care for the self and responsibility towards life inscribed within a spiritual reflection upon death, came to represent a way out of this debate without defining its terms in an absolute, or positive way.

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<sup>174</sup> See, for example, Derrida’s critique of Lacan’s reading of Poe’s *Purloined Letter*: Derrida, “Le facteur de la vérité.” My allusion to the myth of the primal horde refers to Freud’s elaboration of a theory of the origins of castration in the murder of the Ur-father in “Totem and Taboo.”

Indeed, *logos* is not something absolute and external; rather, *logos* must always be relative in its absolutism and its presence. It is said that Socrates contradicts himself throughout Plato's works because he changes the meaning of what he says depending on the level of attainment of his interlocutor. In this case, *logos* can be determined *both* to be something external, a sort of golden rule of rationality and reason, *and* something that is completely individual and contingent upon time and place; a truth that must emerge out of the *aporia* of being faced with death.

*Derrida and Lacan: Phallogocentrism and the Signifier. Controversies and Convergences*

It is precisely this question of the absolutism of *logos* (the relativity of the signifier) that marked a number of important philosophical debates in French thought in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially between structuralism and phenomenology. Specifically, it was the apple of discord between Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida in a well-known debate about the primacy of *logos* as relates to subjectivity. I will briefly summarize this argument in the interest of showing that the two positions are not fundamentally incompatible, but only become so in a particular reading of this debate, which likely took on the proportions it did because of the two men's personalities and ambitions.<sup>175</sup> In sum, Lacan gave a lesson in his 2<sup>nd</sup> Seminar (1954-55), specifically on 26 April 1955, which

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<sup>175</sup> The debate between Lacan and Derrida went further than a debate of ideas and degenerated into an *ad hominem* adversarial relationship between the two men, fueled by Lacan's fury at Derrida's critique of his *Séminaire sur la lettre volée*. An account of the degeneration of the earlier good relations between the two men can be found in Peeters, *op. cit.*

was reprinted—after having undergone extensive revision by its author—as the figurehead text in Lacan’s 1966 *Écrits* under the title “Séminaire sur ‘La lettre volée’”.<sup>176</sup> Derrida published a critique of Lacan’s text in an essay entitled *Le facteur de la vérité* in 1975; this essay was later reprinted in Derrida’s *La carte postale* (1980).<sup>177</sup> Lacan’s lesson on the *Purloined Letter*, a mystery story by Edgar Allen Poe, considers Freud’s concepts of the repetition compulsion and the death drive in relationship to the signifier, and specifically to the signifying chain. Freud argued in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) that all tension tends towards a release of tension, just as life tends towards a return to prenatal non-existence, and he called this tendency the death drive. Life itself, as the search for fulfillment of the drives (an energy variously termed libido or desire), is a state animated by tension, which is only released upon death. The repetition compulsion (*Wiederholungszwang*) commonly observed in various psychopathologies, i.e., repetitive handwashing, but especially in the uncontrollable reliving of traumata experienced by shell-shocked soldiers returning from World War I, was described as an extension of the fundamental tendency towards the reduction of tension. In such cases, the repetition compulsion is fundamentally an attempt at obtaining catharsis of the original traumatic impression (a primal scene, violence in the war, etc.) by reliving it in an attempt to obtain mastery thereof (famously thematized by Freud’s grandchild playing the *Fort-Da* game

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<sup>176</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, 11–61.

<sup>177</sup> For an excellent account of the debate, which also tends to operate a *rapprochement* between the two men’s argumentations, see: Johnson, “The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida.” See also, Major, *Lacan avec Derrida: analyse désistentielle*.

with a toy).<sup>178</sup> As much as the symptom may cause the patient suffering, it is nonetheless an example (albeit an unsuccessful one) of the fundamental psychic drive to return to an undifferentiated state devoid of tension. Lacan's extension of this to the field of linguistics is to say that the signifier itself, being completely detached from the signified, is fundamentally a repetition, but a repetition of nothingness. In other words, it is given that the signifying chain is both structuring of subjectivity and meaning, but it is inherently a repetition of meaninglessness, since there is no one signifier that is in itself meaningful. Therefore, the signifying chain is composed of meaninglessness following meaninglessness, opening up what Lacan calls the *instance de la mort*, in which more signifiers must be added in order to supplement for the *béance* caused by the lack of meaning at their core.<sup>179</sup>

Derrida's reading of Lacan's text is different. For Derrida, Lacan's text is about castration, even though Lacan never once refers to the Œdipal drama in his text. Derrida seeks to demonstrate that Lacan has taken one step ahead of the Poe text that he purports to analyze by reaching the foregone conclusion that the letter, which can never *manquer à sa place*, which will always be found exactly where it is, is indeed a metaphor for the castration that Derrida reads into the Lacanian text. In other words, the purloined letter itself is, in Derrida's reading, the phallus which structures and gives meaning to the entire signifying order. Derrida therefore accuses Lacan of a *phallogocentrism* insofar as he places the phallus at the heart of the signifying chain, erecting it into a "master signifier"

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<sup>178</sup> Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 14–16.

<sup>179</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, 24, 42–43, 45, 50.

which, unlike other signifiers (and *a contrario* to the analysis in the paragraph above) *does* have an inherent meaning that gives meaning to all other signifiers.<sup>180</sup> It is certainly possible to read Lacan this way, and Derrida's critique definitely hit a soft spot in Lacan's theoretical edifice. Nonetheless, Lacan's insistence on a certain *phallogocentrism* at certain places in his teachings is mostly due to the influence of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who posited that it was the prohibition against incest that structured both language and social structures in tribal societies. Lacan's intellectual indebtedness to that pioneer of structuralism often led him to describe the phallus (or the *nom-du-père*) as instituting the law of the symbolic order, in other words, as being the precondition for any meaning.<sup>181</sup> Nonetheless, elsewhere, Lacan specifically states that "the phallus is nothing else than the site of lack that it indicates in the subject,"<sup>182</sup> explicitly separating the *meaning* of the phallus from the *function* it operates within the symbolic order<sup>183</sup>.

I would argue, nonetheless, that at least on the basis of the Seminar on the Purloined Letter, that it is possible to operate a reconciliation between Derrida and Lacan in this respect by specifically foregrounding both thinkers' preoccupation with death and emptiness at the heart of the signifier. Meaning, like death, is always future and operating

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<sup>180</sup> Derrida, "Le facteur de la vérité," 423–509. See detailed analysis in Johnson, *op. cit.*

<sup>181</sup> See, for example, Lacan, *Écrits*, 277–78.

<sup>182</sup> Lacan, 877.

<sup>183</sup> In semiotics, signification is explained by reference to a chain of presence and absence (+/–), similarly to how computers operate according to alternating sequences of 1 and 0, and in such an instance, *meaning* is separate from *function*: the structure provides for a result based on how the signifiers are articulated in relationship to one another, but the *meaning* of the signifiers themselves remains void. Therefore, the phallus *signifies* something both in relationship to other signifiers and within the structure of the symbolic order, but it is not meaningful *qua* its materiality as a signifier.

in *deferral*: it is always the end and always yet to come. Therefore, meaning and death are always the horizon of being and of subjectivity, they are always in futurity with relation to the present moment and always yet-to-come. Moreover, the nature of meaning is dynamic instead of absolute<sup>184</sup>, a concept that is fundamentally shared between Derrida, Lacan, and, as we shall see in Chapter 3, Patočka: despite their differences, the three thinkers, following in the intellectual footsteps of their *maître à penser* Martin Heidegger, would situate the emergence of truth in its *presencing*. Not necessarily a fully *present* truth in an absolute sense, but that the moment of what could be called an epistemological rupture (*rupture épistémologique*, to borrow a term from Bachelard<sup>185</sup>), is a moment in which the entire signifying order can be shifted and modified because it has been momentarily breached. In other words, truth is not articulable *per se*; it is something that takes root and appears in the innermost part of the subject and is not something that can be repeated and transmitted using language in any conventional sense.<sup>186</sup> The very question of how to write about the subject faced with death, in the European philosophical tradition described as care of the soul or *meletē thanatou*, is here at stake, since the very medium by which this transmission occurs (writing, language) is corrupted by its entrapment within a self-referential system of *logos*, of the word. How to overcome the limits of this language in order to disclose the essential structure of being and to

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<sup>184</sup> In *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, Heidegger sets out the proposition that “what is essential in all philosophical discourse is not found in the specific propositions of which it is composed but in that which, although unstated as such, is made evident through these propositions.”

<sup>185</sup> Bachelard, *La formation de l’ esprit scientifique*.

<sup>186</sup> See, Althusser, *For Marx*, 32–35.

formulate it as an open-ended project are, as we shall see in chapter 3 of this dissertation, at stake for both Patočka and Derrida, but also in a slightly different way for Lacan, who, like Derrida, combines Freud and Heidegger in a novel way: however, where Derrida engages more with phenomenology and change, Lacan will hew closer to the Structuralists and their critique of ideology.

*Martin Hägglund: God is Death and apophysis in Derrida's "radical atheism"*

This investigation of the metaphysical and philosophical ramifications of Derrida's thought on death, meaning and metaphysics, would not be complete without mention not only of Martin Hägglund's important study, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*, but also, as a negative impression, of the current of thought he is inveighing against, namely that embodied by Marion Bernard and those who read Derrida as a neo-Platonist thinker of divine apophysis. Hägglund's abovementioned monograph takes as its primary subject a stance against the positing by certain scholars of Derrida as a religious thinker, and specifically a thinker of an apophatic God, meaning a God that exists, but that cannot be apprehended in any positive way by the human mind. In this way, Derrida is compared and put in relation with the Early Christian thinker Pseudo-Dionysius, whose mystical writings about apophysis and negative theology are important in theological circles.<sup>187</sup> Employing specific terms and concepts from Derrida's own work, Hägglund forcefully makes the argument that such comparisons of Derrida with the Early Christian theologian Pseudo-Dionysius are based on a spurious reading and understanding of Derrida's work,

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<sup>187</sup> See, Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 4–7. See also, Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius*.

specifically on spacing, time, and autoimmunity. Namely, the conflation of the concept of *différance* and of God is based on the fallacious equivalence between the idea in negative theology that “God [is] the condition for everything that can be, while emphasizing that God himself ‘is’ not a being.”<sup>188</sup> Hägglund explicates that this is a conception of ‘positive infinity,’ one in which everything can be but in which God must be spoken about in the negative because of the finitude of concepts, signifiers, and human understanding. On the contrary, *différance* is also the condition for everything that can be, but it is a concept of ‘negative infinity.’ “*Différance* is nothing in itself because it designates the spacing of time that makes it impossible for anything to be in itself.”<sup>189</sup> Instead, Derrida must be read as a radical atheist thinker, one whose work is wholly incompatible with the idea of an immortal deity or of an immortal soul.

First of all, Hägglund in the opening pages of his book, makes the argument that the very notion of immortality (of a soul, of a God) is incompatible with Derrida’s fundamental concept of the trace. Hägglund emphasizes the concept of “survival,” which for him is “never to be absolutely present; it is to remain after a past that its no longer and

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<sup>188</sup> Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 3.

<sup>189</sup> Hägglund, 3. Hägglund cites a passage from Derrida’s *Marges de la philosophie* [*Margins of Philosophy*] to support the argument that although *différance* might resemble negative theology in its argumentation, it is not the same thing: Derrida states, “*si bien que les détours, les périodes, la syntaxe auxquels je devrai souvent recourir, ressembleront parfois à s’y méprendre, à ceux de la théologie négative* [emphasis mine]. *Déjà il a fallu marquer que la différence n’est pas, n’existe pas, n’est pas un étant présent (on), quel qu’il soit ; et nous serons amenés à marquer aussi tout ce qu’elle n’est pas, c’est à dire tout ; et par conséquent qu’elle n’a ni existence ni essence. [...] Et pourtant ce qui se marque ainsi de la différence n’est pas théologique, pas même de l’ordre le plus négatif de la théologie négative, celle-ci s’étant toujours affairée à dégager, comme on sait, une supra-essentialité par-delà les catégories finies de l’essence et de l’existence, c’est-à-dire de la présence, et s’empressant toujours de rappeler que si le prédicat de l’existence est refusé à Dieu, c’est pour lui reconnaître un mode d’être supérieur, inconcevable, ineffable.*” Derrida, “La différence,” 6.

to keep the memory of this past for a future that is not yet.”<sup>190</sup> As we have seen, in Derrida, each moment of *survival*, a moment in which the inevitable occurrence of death has not occurred. And yet, the important, and fundamental, nuance that must be taken into account is the idea of the trace, and the fact that the present moment is never actually present. The present is only available in reflection and in temporal deferral (which is why we must equally consider the concept of spacing, of Freud’s *Wunderblock*, discussed elsewhere herein). “Every now passes away as soon as it comes to be and must therefore be inscribed as a trace to be retained, since it is characterized by the ability to remain in spite of temporal succession. [...] The trace is thus the minimal condition for life to resist death in a movement of survival.”<sup>191</sup> And as we know, the trace is always subject to erasure; there is no such thing as an inerasable trace.<sup>192</sup> Survival, then, is fundamentally incompatible with the concept of immortality as life itself (biological life and existence) is incompatible, when understood through the lens of survival as articulated above in relation to temporality and the trace, with the idea of immortality. Immortality would be a full presence, an existence that would abolish existence itself: in Hägglund’s words, immortality “would annihilate the time of mortal life.”<sup>193</sup>

Most importantly, as a result, Hägglund reaches the conclusion that the central radical atheist claim Derrida makes is that “God is death [...] That God is death does not

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<sup>190</sup> Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 1.

<sup>191</sup> Hägglund, 1.

<sup>192</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*.

<sup>193</sup> Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 2.

only mean that God does not exist but also that the immortality of God is not desirable in the first place.<sup>194</sup> While I question Hägglund's use of the term "desirable," his argument remains that Derrida's use of the term autoimmunity deconstructs every religion's predicate of "the unscathed" meaning "the pure and the untouched, the sacred and the holy, the safe and sound [...]" Derrida's argument is, on the contrary, that nothing can be unscathed. His notion of autoimmunity spells out that everything is threatened from within itself, since the possibility of living is inseparable from the peril of dying.<sup>195</sup>

Hägglund's formulation that in Derrida "God is death" seems to be appropriate to the central arguments of this dissertation, and particularly in the third chapter, in which a rapprochement of certain themes discussed by Patočka in "Negative Platonism," *Heretical Essays* and *Plato and Europe* is made with Derrida's approach to the same questions. As Derrida himself acknowledges, his approach is in many ways similar to that of negative theology: he is isometrically approaching the exploration of what *is not*, what cannot *be* in speech, in thought, in time. But unlike the approach to deconstruction taken by certain theological scholars, whose very understanding of deconstruction is called into question by Hägglund, in Derrida, the terms *is not* and *cannot be* are not reserved to a divine existence that is superior and other than human existence; the *is not* and *cannot be* are the very predicates of human ex-istence, the fundamental condition of being revealed by a particular understanding of time, memory, and the trace. For this reason, the radical alterity facing human existence is not God or an alternate, divine, eternal existence; rather

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<sup>194</sup> Hägglund, 8, 208n12. Emphasis mine.

<sup>195</sup> Hägglund, 8–9. See, for a more nuanced genealogy of this concept in Derrida, Rottenberg, "The Legacy of Autoimmunity."

it is *not life*, it is *death*, which is the *tain*, the *doublure*, the always-yet-to-come and never-yet-there counterpart to each moment of survival. And perhaps, yes, it is the proper purpose of philosophy to apprehend and to explicate the relationship of the living to the debt they owe to death by the very fact of having been born.

Here, however, some of the themes and arguments expounded upon in this dissertation are on some level in contradiction with Hägglund, and particularly in the way that Hägglund understands Derrida's thought as a thought of the affirmation of life *against* death. A moment in Hägglund's text where this appears particularly problematic to me is when Hägglund argues that "the unconditional affirmation of [...] mortality does not entail an acceptance of death. On the contrary, to affirm mortal life is to oppose death, to resist and defer it for as long as possible. But since mortal life is essentially linked to death, it is internally bound to what it opposes."<sup>196</sup> On one hand, we understand that in the first instance, that affirming the finitude of life does not entail an acceptance of death. Hägglund defines affirmation as resisting and deferring death for as long as possible. This is part of the idea of survival that Hägglund draws from his reading of Derrida, the idea that each moment of life is in resistance to the inevitable occurrence of death, the irresistible transition of life into its opposite. This could also be said to be a type of Freudian understanding of the life drives resisting and opposing the death drives, the desire to return to an original, pre-life state marked by the absence of tension and non-differentiation. Tension and difference *are* life, in a sense, for both Derrida and Freud. Yet, can one not identify in Hägglund a tendency to use "acceptance" and

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<sup>196</sup> Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 129.

“affirmation” in an active sense, as though both were acts of will and of desire, and as though the acceptance and the affirmation were in some way related. Instead, I would argue, the affirmation of life is principally biological and automatic; it is not, with the possible exception of certain extraordinary circumstances marked by extreme physical and psychic suffering<sup>197</sup>, an act of will whether or not one goes on living. Death is an inevitability and it is the counterpart to life; whether or not one “accepts” or “affirms” life against death is a choice, but it does not inherently lead to a longer or more fulfilled life.

It seems to me that this ambivalence is present even in the citation reproduced above by Häggglund (note 111): Häggglund acknowledges that life is inherently bound up with what it resists: death. This is reminiscent of a certain ambivalence, even contradiction, in Derrida’s last interview with *Le Monde* (“Apprendre à vivre, enfin”). At the very end of the interview, Derrida states, “everything I say [...] about survival as a complication of the opposition life/death proceeds in me from an unconditional affirmation of life. [...] My] discourse is not a discourse of death, but on the contrary, the affirmation of a living being who prefers living and thus surviving to death.”<sup>198</sup> But Derrida concludes this development with the following words: “When I recall the happy

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<sup>197</sup> See, for example, Giorgio Agamben’s identification as the ultimate form of bare life as the *Muselmänner*, the term used by Nazi concentration camp inmates to refer to their fellow prisoners who had lost the will to live. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, chap. 2. And, of course, I am excepting the case of suicide, in which one makes the active choice of taking one’s own life. Instead, I am focusing on the cases of actually deciding to die, to make the decision to succumb to death.

In general terms, and this again could be understood in a Freudian sense, the life instinct/drive is just that—an instinct and a drive—something autonomic (in the pure sense of obeying its own law, something self-governed) that operates outside of consciousness and will and that cannot be shut off or actively resisted by the conscious portion of the psyche.

<sup>198</sup> Derrida and Birnbaum, *Learning to Live Finally*, 50–51.

moments, I bless them too, of course, at the same time as they propel me toward the thought of death, toward death, because all that has passed, come to an end...”<sup>199</sup> It seems to me that there is a contradiction also in Derrida’s terms, specifically between Derrida’s *affirmation* of life and *preference* for living and surviving to death, on one hand, and his affirmation that the happy moments *propel* him towards death.<sup>200</sup> There is a dichotomy here between life/death but also between activity and passivity, as though the act of living were a choice and an active taking up of life. I would say that indeed, there is a *mode* of living, of surviving that could be described in a way as a decision and a stance (an aesthetic, almost) of heartily embracing life; of eating, loving, living with gusto and enjoyment of each moment. Yet, as Derrida accurately states, these happy moments of life do not stop the clock; they instead represent the passage of time, which *propels* the living being towards the moment of death. This clock cannot be stopped or slowed down, it is, like the very act of living itself, autonomous. It obeys its own laws and its own time, which is independent of any will or desire on the part of anything that exists, anything that can be said to fall within the domain of the living.

I believe it is important to further expand on this paradox, however. At a certain point in Hägglund’s text, it becomes apparent that one of the sticking points of this

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<sup>199</sup> Derrida and Birnbaum, 51.

<sup>200</sup> But perhaps Derrida was aware of this contradiction, and even found it generative. He states elsewhere in the interview: “I say contradictory things that are, we might say, in real tension; they are what construct me, make me live, and will make me die.” Derrida and Birnbaum, 46. I find the implicit reference to the Freudian instinct-drives very striking here: the tension is what makes one live and also what makes one die. There is no room here for affirmations, wishes, or utterances: the contradictory things are said; but no matter what they are, the contradiction itself is what sustains life, causes death, and causes life to emerge out of death. I am referring in particular to Freud’s seminal formulation of drive theory in “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes.”

affirmation of life and the rejection of an acceptance of death occurs when Hägglund affirms:

For the same reason<sup>201</sup>, one cannot be cured from the fear of death and learn to “accept” finitude. [...] *an acceptance of finitude would amount to a denial of finitude*. This is not a paradox but follows from the double bind inherent in the desire to keep a finite life. If one accepted finitude, one would accept death and thus deny the attachment to a finite life that is extinguished in death. Inversely, the desire to keep a finite life can never amount to an acceptance of death. On the contrary, the desire to keep a finite life amounts to a struggle against death. The desire to keep a finite life can never be reconciled with itself, since what it desires leads to death despite itself.<sup>202</sup>

It is here, particularly, that Hägglund’s arguments seem to me most problematic, as it is here that Hägglund is stating precisely that life is finite and that it ends with death. This is a very un-Nietzschean (un-Christian, un-philosophic) understanding of death, for ever since Plato, the Western philosophic tradition has emphasized the importance of an acceptance of death for a fulfilled and elevated life (*meletē thanatou*, care of the soul, eternal return, death drive, etc.).<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Hägglund is referring to a passage he cites earlier from Derrida, relative to the “desire to keep (*désir de garder*): “a desire to keep a finite life, but the life one wants to keep bears within itself the death one wants to keep off.” Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 159.

<sup>202</sup> Hägglund, 159.

<sup>203</sup> Derrida, speaking about the essentially Christian tradition of the contemplation of death, authenticity, care, etc., present in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, states that neither the language nor the analytic approach to death would be possible without the Christian, or even Judeo-Christian-Islamic experience, to which it bears witness. The same could be said about Freud and Levinas’ thought (Derrida, *Apories*, 138–39.) While Derrida is deconstructing the thought of death in these “modern” thinkers as being both essentially the same and essentially different than the thought of death that preceded them, and pointing out a sort of “bio-anthropo-thanato-theological” contamination present in their thought, and ends *Apories* with the statement that we are infinitely finite (*op. cit.*, p. 141), it seems to me that Derrida’s own thought does not entirely escape, nor would he want it to, this tradition of considering death: as he puts it, we are all “*marranes*,” Jews who stayed in Spain after the inquisition and continued to practice Judaism in secret (*ibid.*).

It is perhaps appropriate to note at this point that Häggglund's book does not *once* cite Plato or Nietzsche, which is quite telling when one considers the extent to which Derrida's engaged with both thinkers' approach to a thought of death.<sup>204</sup> Häggglund's argument only stands insofar as death is an end to a finite life. Häggglund does see death and life as imbricated in the atomistic sense that life engenders death, but it seems to me he fails to consider the opposite and necessary predicate that death engenders life. Rather than seeing death and life as part of a cycle, a complementary and natural gyration in which life would not be possible without death, not simply in the individual fashion that he takes Derrida's affirmation about death *chaque fois unique, à chaque fois la fin du monde*. Of course, the death of the individual is each time unique, and each time the end of a world. A catastrophe, an apocalypse, an annihilation. However, it is also the possibility and the precondition of life: *nous nous devons à la mort*, as Derrida writes in *Demeure, Athènes* is both an exhortation to the Platonic *meletē thanatou* and a reminder that we owe our existence to death itself.<sup>205</sup> Moreover, life cannot be inviolable, untouchable and immune in the finite sense that Häggglund wants to ascribe to it, for it is the very possibility of sacrifice of life that makes life itself meaningful.<sup>206</sup> Of course, Häggglund is admitting the possibility of sacrifice and agrees that life contains death as its

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<sup>204</sup> On Plato, see: Derrida, *Demeure, Athènes*. On Nietzsche, see, esp. Derrida, *La vie la mort*.

<sup>205</sup> In his latest book, Michael Naas explains that Derrida's entire work is permeated by an thinking of the ways in which life and death are imbricated and interwoven, and one can identify the constancy of this idea from *Of Grammatology*—in which Derrida discusses this idea via an analysis of Rousseau—to *Rogues*, in which he articulates it as the idea of autoimmunity—with the seminar on *Life Death* as the theoretical middle point. Naas also touches upon the centrality of the theme of sacrifice in Derrida's work. *Plato and the Invention of Life*, 187ff.

<sup>206</sup> Derrida, "Maurice Blanchot est mort," 278.

always-unrealized possibility; but what he overlooks or chooses to de-emphasize, I believe, is the aporetic question of meaning and meaningfulness that can only be apprehended by the idea that death is generative and that life is not just ended by death; indeed, it emerges out of death. But also the indefinability of life and of death, which is the apophatic, negative philosophical approach itself, or perhaps the aporia of approaching the question of death and death in its relation to life.

It is perhaps this aporetic answer to the question of meaning, of the meaning(fulness) of life that Hägglund wishes to elide, and which is, on the contrary, the subject of this dissertation. It is not a question here of a metaphysics of the divine—unless the divine is taken as death itself, and even then, only as a negative metaphysics. Derrida often cited, although of course not always uncritically<sup>207</sup>, the notion from Heidegger's *Being and Time* that death is for *Dasein* the possibility of the impossible.<sup>208</sup> Besides Heidegger, we must also return to what we cited at the very beginning of this chapter, namely Derrida's Nietzschean affirmation of life in "Structure, Sign, and Play." If Nietzsche embraces life, it is a life that triumphs over death even in death itself. It seems to me that Bataille was the most exuberant exponent of Nietzsche's thought in this regard, considering such ritualized slaughter as Aztec sacrifices and Imperial Chinese tortures as forms by which the dying and mangled victim was elevated beyond the simple immediacy of life to a much higher and intense form of life in death—a death that in its

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<sup>207</sup> In large part, *Apories* (op. cit.), can be read as a deconstruction of the idea of what it means to experience the impossible.

<sup>208</sup> Derrida, "Maurice Blanchot est mort"; Derrida, *Apories*, 50.

erotic and orgiastic dimension was generative of new and higher life.<sup>209</sup> Philosophers such as Jan Patočka and Derrida, as we shall see in the third and fourth chapters of this dissertation, in particular, I argue, maintain a Nietzschean stance towards life that is indeed sublimated in a particular consideration of death, but nonetheless temper Bataille's particular approach to this question by introducing the concepts of care and responsibility as a counterfoil to Bataille's exuberant and sanguinary erotics. But most importantly, unlike Häggglund, the reading adopted here is one in which the approach to the question of death generates aporetic significance. Rather, meaning cannot *be*; it *emerges* in and *is* that aporia. Derrida's style of writing, especially in his later works, generate such an *aporia* through his treatment of Nietzsche, Freud, and Plato. The following chapter will examine Derrida's reading of these three thinkers in relation to death diachronically, through his Seminar on *lifedeath* of 1975-6; *Apories*, a conference he gave in 1992 and published as a book in 1996; and lastly, the aforementioned *Demeure, Athènes*.

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<sup>209</sup> Bataille, *L'Érotisme; L'expérience intérieure; Les larmes d'Éros; La part maudite*.

## CHAPTER TWO: DERRIDA ON DEATH. THE TRUTH OF AN APORIA.

The hermit does not believe that any philosopher—assuming that every philosopher was first of all a hermit—ever expressed his real and ultimate opinions in books: does one not write books precisely to conceal what one harbors? Indeed, he will doubt whether a philosopher could *possibly* have “ultimate and real” opinions, whether behind every one of his caves there is not, must not be, another deeper cave—a more comprehensive, stranger, richer world beyond the surface, an abysmally deep ground behind every ground, under every attempt to furnish “grounds”. Every philosophy is a foreground philosophy—that is a hermit’s judgement: “There is something arbitrary in his stopping *here* to look back and look around, in his not digging deeper *here* but laying his spade aside; there is also something suspicious about it” Every philosophy also *conceals a philosophy*; every opinion is also a hideout, every word also a mask.<sup>210</sup>

As stated in the prior chapter, it is indeed tempting to see Derrida’s stance towards the question of life/death as consistent if one bookends his career with the Nietzschean affirmation of life in “Structure, Sign, and Play” and the affirmation in his final interview that deconstruction is squarely on the side of life and that he, Derrida, has learned nothing about how to die. Nonetheless, I formulate the following two hypotheses in this regard, which will be expanded upon in this chapter. Firstly, Derrida’s thought on the subject of death shifted throughout the course of his career. Although we have examined, in the prior chapter, the question of death in relation to iteration, meaning, and apophaticism (negative theology or metaphysics), I propose in this chapter to specifically look at the

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<sup>210</sup> Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future,” sec. 289.

evolution of Derrida's thought on death through three works: firstly, his recently-published seminar of 1975-6 entitled *La vie la mort*; a conference he gave at the "Colloque" at Cerisy-la-Salle on July 15, 1992, published as a book under the title *Apories* in 1996; and, lastly, *Demeure, Athènes*, first published as a commentary to a series of photographs of Athens taken by French photographer Jean-François Bonhomme in 1996 by Greek publishing house Olkos under the under the bilingual title *Αθήνα στη σκιά της Ακρόπολης. Athènes dans l'ombre de l'Acropole*. My second hypothesis in this regard is that it is of capital importance to define "death" in examining Derrida's thought on this concept. It might be taken for granted that "death" means the state of non-living, but this definition becomes complicated by the added consideration of "dying," which, when taken as a process, involves the passage of a frontier between life and death; and also when one takes into consideration the relationship of the living subject to death, in which case one is addressing not a biological process, but the impact that awareness of the inevitability and omnipresent possibility of death has on subjectivity itself. In this respect, it will be important to consider Derrida's reading of Heidegger on the subject of *Sein-zum-Tode* or "being towards death" and his critique of Heidegger's approach to this topic. Indeed, Derrida's critique of Heidegger reposes on Derrida's identification in Heidegger's thought of a disavowed Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition towards death that I wish to question and complicate in this chapter. The chapter will be divided into two broader sections: the first shall examine the definition of death, and the question of death as an aporia; the second, the implications of defining death as an aporia for life—what are the consequences of Derrida's approach to death for living and for the living, for the

thinker? Moreover, what are the consequences for the very concepts of being, of metaphysics, and of truth?

### **Derrida's approaches to defining death**

Jacques Derrida taught seminar and lecture courses at a series of educational institutions in Paris each year from 1960 to 2003.<sup>211</sup> While a *maître-assistant* at the École normale supérieure, Derrida taught preparatory courses for the *agrégation* examination for students at the school.<sup>212</sup> In 1975-1976, students attending this seminar were given the opportunity to attend fourteen seminars on the subject of *La vie la mort*, life death, in which Derrida presented them with three approaches to the subject of death and life, through a careful reading of the work of Nietzsche, Heidegger, biologist François Jacob's 1970 generalist work on biology and genetics entitled *La logique du vivant*, and lastly, Freud. Derrida's seminar presents, analyses and deconstructs the thinking of these figures, but Derrida's seminar is also a demonstration of a method of how to approach the subject and these questions. The method consists of asking a set of questions that complicate a facile or automatic understanding of *la vie la mort*, and that undermine the certainty of what is at stake when we speak of this topic, or whether it is even possible to speak of this topic.

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<sup>211</sup> Derrida, *La vie la mort*, 7.

<sup>212</sup> Derrida, 11.

*Co-implication of death and life in “la vie la mort”. The question of biologism and the veiling of the truth in Nietzsche.*

Beginning with the title of the seminar, *la vie la mort*, Derrida explains his approach by making reference to Hegel and Nietzsche. Derrida explains that for Hegel, life and death were equivalent to one another. In a very Christian syllogism, life *is* death (“*la vie est la mort*”), for life is the process of dying, and in the death of the natural life, the true life of the spirit is born.<sup>213</sup> The implication of this is that physical life is merely a pale copy and an antechamber for the true life of the spirit which will emerge only after the physical vessel has perished. Therefore, one might say that all living beings are dead for Hegel – *la vie est la mort*. On the other hand, for Nietzsche, it is impossible to *be* dead (*être-mort*).<sup>214</sup> Whatever is dead ceases to *be*. There is no such thing as a dead *being*. Moreover, as both language and human reason appertain to the domain of the living, it is not possible to articulate death within these living media; there is therefore no such thing as a possible linguistic or mental *representation* of what death might be.<sup>215</sup> We must therefore posit, albeit with skepticism, that for Nietzsche, life and death are entirely separate – *la vie et la mort*. Derrida uses these observations as a starting point for the

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<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 23. This assertion is going to be complicated over the course of the seminar, for Nietzsche also defines the living as merely a type of what is already dead, and a very rare type at that. See *infra*.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

entire intellectual development to follow in the seminar. In the long citation below, Derrida explains both his choice of naming the seminar *la vie la mort* and also the approach he will adopt throughout the seminar in examination of this topic:

...à partir de cette identification hégélienne de la vie à la mort, à partir d'une opposition procédant en vue de son annulation dans l'identification finale : l'être est la vie, où la vie est deux fois marquée, une fois comme mort (procès de la mort), une fois comme immortelle, impérissable, je voulais marquer que la même logique pouvait identifier entre elles les portées sémantiques de la vie *et* la mort (où l'*et*, e, t, signifie la position, juxta- ou op-position) et la vie est la mort (*est*), où la mort définit l'essence comme procès dialectique de la vie se gardant en vie, comme vie, se produisant et re-produisant, etc. Si bien que disant, avec le blanc d'une pause ou le trait invisible d'un au-delà, « la vie la mort », je n'oppose *ni* n'identifie la vie à la mort (ni *et* ni *est*), disons que je neutralise l'opposition et l'identification, pour faire signe non pas vers une autre logique, une logique opposée de la vie et la mort, mais vers une autre topique, si vous voulez, depuis laquelle se donnerait à lire au moins tout le *programme* du *et* et du *est*, de la positionnalité et de la présence de l'être, les deux restant des effets de « la vie la mort ». (25)

Derrida's position, reflected in the unconventional choice of title, is neither "life *is* death" *nor* "life *and* death", and not even to adopt another logic than the equivalency or the opposition of the two terms, but rather to interrogate what he calls the "program", which one might understand as another way of referring to the "scene of writing," of what is at stake in such oppositions, and what is the status of *being* – or what is its position and its presence – where life and death are considered. This approach is especially relevant to the work of biologist and geneticist François Jacob, whose generalist work, *La logique du vivant*, is an object of study in this seminar.<sup>216</sup> The major aspect of this work to which Derrida applies his incisive style of reading is actually common to Jacob and to Freud, namely a type of reasoning that draws conclusions about life, death, reproduction and

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<sup>216</sup> Jacob, *La logique du vivant*.

sexuality from the observation of a unicellular organism (the first, most basic form of life), which reproduces by cellular division. Freud makes a series of observations on this subject in chapter IV of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. There, Freud notes that there is nothing “natural” about a “natural death”: all primitive societies do not believe in the concept of a natural death; rather, they attribute all death to the work of some evil force.<sup>217</sup> Freud goes on to note that modern scientists, too, hold strong disagreement on the subject of natural death and that “in fact the whole concept of death melts away under their hands.”<sup>218</sup> After reviewing a series of disagreements on the topic of death in contemporary scientific works, and namely a series of divergent theories on whether or not protozoa are immortal (i.e., whether or not they can die a natural death or whether they merely cease to exist as individuals in the moment of reproduction when the individual protozoan divides to become two protozoans), he asks “whether any object whatever is served by trying to solve the problem of natural death from a study of the protozoa.”<sup>219</sup> Nonetheless, through a series of rhetorical twists by which Freud first states it is indifferent whether or not death can be shown to exist in protozoa as soon as one adopts a psychodynamic point of view, and then goes back, stating that even if biology were to conclude that death did not exist in protozoa, the *tendency* towards death might still exist within them, even though the phenomenon of death did not manifest

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<sup>217</sup> Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” 44–45.

<sup>218</sup> Freud, 45.

<sup>219</sup> Freud, 49.

clinically.<sup>220</sup> It is nonetheless on the basis of the so-called asexual reproduction of unicellular organisms, which cease to exist as individuals as soon as they reproduce by division, that Freud intuits his theory of a death drive in more advanced life forms, which operates in opposition to the life-preserving forces, and constantly seeks to effect a return to a state of undifferentiated non-tension.

François Jacob also bases a certain set of assumptions about death on unicellular life forms. He, much like the scientist August Weismann, one of the founders of genetics, whom, as Derrida notes, Freud also cites in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, believed that death was a late supplement to life, not something inherent in it.<sup>221</sup> Jacob also believed that sexuality, not only death, was a late addition to life, and refers to them as “supplements” to a preexisting program, which the reader is to imagine as life without death and without sexuality.<sup>222</sup> Life without death and life without sex: a sort of eternal continuous uninterrupted state of being, untroubled by tension and pressure; one is given to imagine a state of beatitude in the Christian afterlife, or some other sort of afterlife. Instead, in Jacob, this is the original, pure form of life: death and sexuality were later additions to the program. As Derrida rephrases Jacob’s position: “*ni la sexualité ni par conséquent la mort ne sont des constituants essentiels [du vivant] ; et que donc, par*

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<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> See: Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” 46; Derrida, *La vie la mort*, 125; Jacob, *La logique du vivant*, 330.

<sup>222</sup> “*Les deux inventions les plus importantes sont le sexe et la mort.*” See the rest of this citation in Jacob, *La logique du vivant*, 330. Cited in Derrida, *La vie la mort*, 126. Elsewhere, instead of “inventions,” Jacob speaks of “supplements,” which gives one food for thought when one considers the importance of the supplement for Derrida’s own thought, particularly in *De la grammatologie*.

*conséquent, ils arrivent en supplément, comme du dehors.*”<sup>223</sup> According to Jacob, protozoan asexual reproduction can continue indefinitely (“*celle-ci reste en croissance perpétuelle ; les bactéries s’y reproduisant éternellement*”) so long as the environmental conditions are favorable to the bacterial colony’s life; should the environment become inhospitable to bacterial life, then Jacob says *something like a death* (“*si l’on veut voir une mort dans cette non-vie*”) would occur, which could be recognized by the bacteria’s incapacity to reproduce, but such a death would not be either *internal* or *inherent*; rather, it would be both *external* and *contingent*.<sup>224</sup>

However, Derrida recognizes a striking and major contradiction in these theories. On one hand, Jacob argues that in the case of the bacterium, a death that comes from the outside, a contingent death, is not a real death, it is simply non-life. Therefore, Derrida asks, is the inverse possible: is real life in fact death? Moreover, Derrida quotes without citing a passage in Jacob’s text in support of this assertion, where he does say that death must be “*intérieure et essentielle à la vie pour être vraiment mort.*”<sup>225</sup> If the bacteria is unaffected by death, but is nonetheless alive because it reproduces, then it is “*invulnerable, vie pure et inaccessible à la moindre négativité.*”<sup>226</sup> On the other hand, however, as Derrida continues to point out, Jacob says that death and sexuality were supplements to life, late additions to the program of the living. This is irreconcilable with

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<sup>223</sup> Derrida, *La vie la mort*, 145.

<sup>224</sup> Jacob, *La logique du vivant*, 317–18. Cited in Derrida, *La vie la mort*, 147.

<sup>225</sup> Derrida, *La vie la mort*, 148.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

the position Jacob enunciates with regard to the bacterium: the bacterium is not truly alive because it cannot truly die. Or instead it is pure life, a life that is resisted by no negativity of any sort whatsoever.<sup>227</sup> But if death is then the true hallmark of the living, it cannot be something external, something that arrived as a late supplement to life, as Jacob says: death must then indeed be internal and inherent to life itself.

This does not mean, however, that life *is* death (la vie *est* la mort) or that life is in a binary opposition to death (la vie *et* la mort). Having dismantled the premise that death is completely external to life, Derrida continues his analysis of Jacob's *La logique du vivant* to show that in fact, in order to isolate or preserve a (pure) model that allows for confident handling of a binary or dialectic model,<sup>228</sup> Jacob omits mention of the phenomenon of bacterial transformation:

*Selon une découverte de 1944 (Avery), portant sur des pneumocoques, quand deux souches microbiennes dont l'une a été, comme on dit, avec des guillemets « tuée », l'autre qu'on appelle « réceptrice » et vivante, s'empare des extraits d'ADN de la mort, du mort, extraits qui se mettent à flotter dans le milieu ambiant. Au cours de cette cérémonie où la réceptrice (femelle, donc !) s'empare de ce qu'on pourrait appeler le sperme du mort, un petit fragment seulement pénètre pour s'intégrer au chromosome de la receveuse. Il y a aussi des phénomènes de transduction par l'intermédiaire d'un bactériophage, etc. Quelle que soit la fréquence ou la rareté de ces phénomènes, leur caractère partiel (sans fusion cellulaire, etc.), ils signifient en tout cas, par leur seule possibilité, que cela peut toujours arriver à la bactérie « pure » comme modèle de reproduction sans sexualité et sans mort [...].*<sup>229</sup>

Necrophilia, cannibalism, erotic ingestion, a panoply of strange microscopic lovemaking ceremonies...under Derrida's pen, the sheer variety of reproductive acts that occur in the

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<sup>227</sup> See, on immortality, *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>228</sup> Derrida, *La vie la mort*, 152. Translation mine.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

supposedly-asexual and deathless life of bacteria appears worthy of Sade, Bataille, the Surrealists... Derrida's strategy here is to prove that "*si la 'science' ou la 'philosophie' doivent parler de la sexualité ou de la mort, les oppositions (positif/négatif, plus/moins, dedans/dehors), la logique du ou/ou, du et ou du est n'y suffisent plus. Et je veux dire que le concept de modèle est toujours là pour masquer que ça ne suffit plus.*"<sup>230</sup> Two forms of logic implicit in the scientific model, and which are necessary for it to preserve its function and status as model, break down here. It is the breaking down of the presupposition that allows the model to stand (that the bacterium is pure, i.e. asexual and deathless, like an angel) that reveals the very logic of the model itself. The model hides the insufficiency of its own self-referentiality and it is only the model that allows the rigorous separation of inside/outside, life/death, etc. These binary pairs are terms that exist within the economy of the model, but the model betrays their facticity.<sup>231</sup> The larger implication is that the sciences, and in this instance biology, discuss life (*bios*) but do not know what life is, nor what death is. They lack the contact with philosophy (an external system) that would allow them to elucidate and describe the fundamental assumptions and elements of their own system.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> See *Ibid.*, 154. See also, Jacob, *op. cit.*, 326, 337 (cited by Derrida, *Ibid.*). In these passages, Derrida is making evident a contradiction in Jacob: on one hand, Jacob states that a genetic message can only be translated by the products of its own translation (p. 326), but he also states that per the discoveries of Kurt Gödel, a logical system cannot adequately describe itself (p. 337). See also, on the topic of Kurt Gödel, a work that aims to make Gödel's theories accessible to a non-specialist audience: Goldstein, *Incompleteness*.

<sup>232</sup> See also, discussion of "*tain*," *ibid.*, 156-7; discussion of biologism, *ibid.*, 182.

Derrida continues his deconstruction of Jacob's ideas about life and death using Jacob's own contradictory and haphazard pronouncements on the subject: on one hand, Jacob states that all living beings: i) constantly absorb food from the outside and reject waste, are constantly being traversed by energy and material from the outside; ii) without this constant flow of energy, they would disintegrate and die, for all isolated beings die; iii) all living creatures remain constantly plugged into the general flow that brings the universe towards disorder (entropy); iv) the living creature is merely a local and transitory deviation from the general principle of disorder that allows the organization to survive and allows it to be reproduced.<sup>233</sup> Derrida concludes that:

*“[...] cette ouverture structurelle de tout système vivant rend insoutenables les énoncés sur la bactérie qui ne meurt pas parce que la mort vient du dehors ou sur la mort au sens propre qui doit être inscrite dans l'organisme, etc. De même que cela rend insoutenables toutes les oppositions simples du dedans et du dehors qui sous-tendent ce que [Jacob] dit aussi bien de la sexualité et de la mortalité comme accidents venus du dehors s'inscrire dans le dedans.”*<sup>234</sup>

At this point in the development of Derrida's arguments, it seems quite incredible to think that one might have accepted Jacob's initial assertions that the bacteria is not subject to death or to sexuality; that *if* death can be said to affect bacteria, *then* it can only be a contingent death, a death from the outside. That death is a late supplement to life, and that the bacterium is a form of life that antedates the supplemental addition of death to the program of life. Instead, insofar as a bacterium is alive, of course it is “plugged into” the outside world, of course it is traversed by all sorts of outside forces and

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<sup>233</sup> Paraphrase of passage from Jacob (*op. cit.*, 273), cited by Derrida, *ibid.*, 168.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

energies, and of course, removed from this, placed in isolation, it will die.

Supplementarity is a part of the system, of all systems, but perhaps not in the way that Jacob assumes.

Derrida's explorations of Jacob's work are to show that, on the first hand, philosophy is *necessary* to begin to form an understanding of life-death, and second, that the commonly-held assumptions about the topic, particularly in the field of biology, are insufficient to arrive at such an understanding, given that it is a self-referential system whose internal contradictions preclude any true understanding of life-death and the relationship between the two. Having shown that what Jacob has to say about death and sexuality not existing *ab initio* in conjunction with life is riven with internal contradictions and cannot, in itself, tell us much, if anything at all, about the nature or meaning of life or death or sexuality or their interrelationship, Derrida turns to Nietzsche and to Heidegger for a further exploration of life-death and the questions it raises.<sup>235</sup>

Derrida first approaches Nietzsche's text around the question of life-death by explaining to his listeners that for Nietzsche, the truth is not only something hidden, but this hiding, this dissimulation of the truth is the means by which life preserves itself. Life must preserve itself against the truth by hiding the truth, but the truth is also something that is a product of this hiding as it is constructed by the hiding itself.<sup>236</sup> One might say, in a provisory fashion, that truth is, in a sense, the hiding of the truth. Both language and

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<sup>235</sup> In this way, Jacob importantly differs from Freud, who saw in the reproduction of unicellular organisms both death and sexuality.

<sup>236</sup> Derrida, *La vie la mort*, 187.

nature are what conceal the truth from men, and because men are creatures of language, they are the consummate masters of dissimulation and concealment of the truth.<sup>237</sup> Unlike men, however, nature conceals the truth not by veiling it, but rather by not saying or not writing or not signifying the truth, but instead by writing something else than the truth: the truth must then be deciphered or decrypted.<sup>238</sup>

What is this truth, that men hide and that keeps them alive, and that nature also hides by indicating something else? This truth is mortality, of course, but more than just mortality, it is that, for Nietzsche, life is some small, subordinate part of death itself. The living is merely a form of what is dead, and a rare form at that.<sup>239</sup> Man must beware of fatal curiosity, of trying to see the system from the outside, for by doing so, he risks actually transgressing the system itself.<sup>240</sup> Like Œdipus, man risks blinding, castration, expulsion.<sup>241</sup> However, what does this mean? What would it mean to transgress the system of life death? Would it mean somehow accessing immortality, like Jacob's bacillus? Of course not. Rather, it means surpassing the distinction and dichotomy of true/false and of life/death; it means transgressing the system by seeing that the two are not necessarily proper terms for describing life or death and that the two are not necessarily separate states from the perspective of the unconscious or from an ontological

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<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 187-189.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>239</sup> *V. supra.*

<sup>240</sup> Derrida, *La vie la mort*, 191.

<sup>241</sup> See ; Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 49; Derrida, *Apories*, 25. See also on Derrida's "Œdipus": Bowlby, "Derrida's Dying Oedipus"; Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*.

perspective.<sup>242</sup> It is merely the mendacious appearance of separation between them that allows life to go on.<sup>243</sup> We can then see that the earlier statement regarding Nietzsche, that life and death are entirely separate, is true, but only insofar as the truth is the truth of a dissimulation; that the truth is hidden by the mechanism of language and of life, but that knowing the truth is a transgression of the entire system.

*Heidegger and death as (im)possibility*

According to Derrida, Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche oscillates between recognizing Nietzsche's singular and unprecedented contribution and trying to force him back to order, to toe the line.<sup>244</sup> What Heidegger has to say about death is mainly focused on Da-sein's *Sein-zum-Tode*, being-towards-death. Rather than speak about the human, Heidegger speaks about "Da-sein" in an attempt to avoid the humanistic implications he criticizes in Nietzsche. It is no longer man's relationship to his own death, it is Da-sein's relationship towards its death. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger approaches death first

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<sup>242</sup> See, *La vie la mort*, 196.

<sup>243</sup> On this topic, it is important to consider Derrida's critique of Heidegger's critique of Nietzsche's metaphysical thought as a thought of totality. Derrida does not neglect to point out that Heidegger wrote his *Nietzsche* during the Nazi period, and while Heidegger claims to have written it in reaction to National Socialist misuse made of Nietzsche, as Derrida correctly states, Heidegger's attempt to save Nietzsche (by distinguishing between chosen/fallen, authentic/inauthentic, essential/inessential thinkers) can be used in support of the Nazi misuse of Nietzsche. The reader is referred to *Ibid.*, chs. 7-10, which contain an extensive discussion of Derrida reading Heidegger reading Nietzsche, a summary of which would not be relevant here.

<sup>244</sup> Either by dismissing what Nietzsche has to say about temporality as irrelevant and simplistic or by attempting to liberate him from the accusation of biologism by condemning him to the status of a humanist metaphysician. See, *Ibid.*, 234, 253-254.

through the “one”.<sup>245</sup> “One” dies (understand, “everyone dies”), we hear, all the time. This is an attempt at covering over, at papering over the truth. In the end, “no one dies,” is the message we receive from the affirmation that “one dies”. This introduces the “temptation of covering over for itself its ownmost being-towards-death,” writes Heidegger.<sup>246</sup> Moreover, the attitude often adopted towards the dying is one of trying to “convince the ‘dying person’ that he will escape death and soon return again to the [...] world [...]. [...]his tranquillization is not only for the ‘dying person,’ but just as much for ‘those who are comforting him.’”<sup>247</sup> The result is that Da-sein is forbidden to contemplate the possibility and eventuality of its own death, and is forbidden to have *Angst* about death; this leads Da-sein to the state of *falling prey*, meaning estrangement from authenticity regarding its ultimate possibility.<sup>248</sup> For one must understand death as a possibility—Heidegger explains that death is both certain and uncertain: we know that it is certain to arrive but are unsure of when.<sup>249</sup> This means that “death is the ownmost nonrelational, certain, and as such, indefinite and not to be bypassed possibility of Da-sein. At the end of Da-sein, *death is* in the being of this being-toward-its end.”<sup>250</sup> But because Death can be anticipated and awaited, contemplated and meditated over, it cannot ever be anything but *possibility* insofar as after death, such anticipation,

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<sup>245</sup> See on the concept of being-towards-death: Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 233ff.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

contemplation, and meditation are senseless. Death is always a possibility, never an actuality for Da-sein, and Heidegger states that “the nearest nearness of being-toward-death as possibility is as far removed as possible from anything real.”<sup>251</sup> And yet, despite being impossible, Death is, Heidegger tells us, “the possibility of the impossibility of existence in general.”<sup>252</sup> Not only this, it is the “ownmost” of Da-sein because it is isolation and impossible to die in anyone’s place; it is “nonrelational” because it is purely individual.<sup>253</sup>

In *Apories*, Derrida reprises the Nietzschean question of the truth of life being veiled, being hidden, and how looking through the keyhole means transgressing the system.<sup>254</sup> He asks, how can something be beyond truth? How can be something beyond being? How is such a thing knowable? And if there are limits to the truth, to being, how can they be crossed? This should remind us immediately of Heidegger’s assertion that death is the possibility of the impossibility—how is such a thing possible, knowable, and if so, on what terms? *Apories* is Derrida’s reckoning with Heidegger’s writing and

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<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 243. Derrida will point out that *Mitsein* and *Sein-Zum-Tode* are co-originary in *Apories*, 75.

<sup>254</sup> For a broader discussion of how *Apories* represents a transitional point on Derrida’s thinking of death within the broader context of his work, see: Watkin, “Derrida’s Limits.”

thinking about death, but it is also his reckoning with how the theme of aporia, of limitlessness, pervades his work much more broadly.<sup>255</sup>

*Apories* examines most of the points Heidegger makes in *Being and Time* on death and Da-sein's being-towards-death, and dismantles Heidegger's affirmations that death is the proper of the human, that only humans can be in relation to death; animals merely perish. Only man possesses language and death, according to Heidegger.<sup>256</sup> But it is through this relationship to language that Derrida begins to deconstruct this argument. It is an illusion that man can "say" something that he has not experienced, something that he cannot live. Death can never be "said" in language. Actually, death refuses to be put into language (see *supra*) and surpasses language in the manner of negative theology, God, etc. In this place, the frontier between man and animal is abolished because although Heidegger wants to say that man is in a unique relationship of possession towards death, something of which the animal is deprived, and man is also in a unique possession of the word, of language, of which the animal is also deprived, as Derrida indicates, man is not in possession of language towards death because man is not in possession of death. Death and language are incompatible, and so man finds himself deathless and wordless, in a sense, before death. This is what allows Derrida to make the

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<sup>255</sup> See *Apories*, 33, 36. See also, Derrida, "Ousia et Grammè." On the subject of the aporia and an examination of its implications for Derrida's work more broadly, see: Zangeneh, "An Impossible Waiting — Reading Derrida's Reading of Heidegger in *Aporias*."

<sup>256</sup> *Apories*, 70ff.

argument that life ignores death, but suggests that there is an originary form of mourning that Heidegger, like Freud and Levinas, ignore.<sup>257</sup>

So what is the authentic being-towards-death for Heidegger? It is understanding that the possibility of death is “not to be bypassed” and “becoming free for one’s own death.”<sup>258</sup> This means being free for the *possibility* of death, and not annihilating it by bringing about the possibility. Instead, it “must be understood as possibility, cultivated as possibility, and endured as possibility.”<sup>259</sup> Being-towards-death is essentially Angst, but not cowardly fear about death. Instead, it is a practice of acceptance and anticipation that “brings [Da-sein] face to face with the possibility to be itself...in passionate anxious *freedom towards death* which is free of the illusions of the they, factual, and certain of itself.”<sup>260</sup> A freedom from fear, a freedom towards death itself, a chosen, understood, anticipated but not desired death.

Of course, and this is one of Derrida’s major critiques of Heidegger’s approach to death, this approach, this *ars moriendi*, is in large part the approach of the Church towards death. A freedom from fear brought about by an acceptance of death. Derrida criticizes Heidegger’s religious approach in *Apories*, saying that Heidegger repeats the “Christian onto-theology of death in *Being and Time* and reinscribes or reimpreses all of its essential motives...” and arguing that “neither the language nor the approach of this

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<sup>257</sup> Derrida, *Apories*, 74.

<sup>258</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 243.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.* 241.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

analytic of death would be possible without the Christian, or even Judeo-Christian-Islamic experience of death to which it bears witness.”<sup>261</sup> In the *Geschlecht 2* seminar on Heidegger’s *Hand*, Derrida also levels a similar accusation:

Heidegger claims to be [...] neither a Platonist nor a Christian thinker. That he belongs neither to metaphysical theology nor ecclesial theology. [...] But the originality (pre-Platonic, pre-metaphysical, pre-Christian) which Heidegger draws us back to [...] has *no other content and even no other language* than that of Platonism and Christianity. It is simply that on the basis of which something like metaphysics and Christianity are made possible and thinkable.<sup>262</sup>

However, as the next chapter will show, there is nothing specifically Christian about this approach towards death. The work of Pierre Hadot is specifically focused on deconstructing, in a sense, what we see to be Christian in this approach, which is actually Greek and was a prevalent focus of philosophy in Antiquity, because of the way that the Church so fully recuperated and took possession of these practices in late Antiquity.<sup>263</sup> Derrida dismisses Heidegger’s assertion that there might be something pre-Platonic, pre-metaphysical, pre-Christian about his approach towards being-towards-death likely because Derrida is implying that even were this factually true, it is impossible today to read this in a way that is pre-Christian. There is no origin to return to, the text is its context, and the context is Christian. This is true in some way, but it is also true that the context can change, that thinkers like Heidegger and Hadot and Patočka help us approach these age-old questions, which at first glance to use do seem Christian in nature, in a new

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<sup>261</sup> Derrida, *Apories*, 138–39. See also, 110, 140–141. All translations mine.

<sup>262</sup> Derrida, “*Geschlecht II*,” 221–22.

<sup>263</sup> Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*.

way and with a more open mind. Yet, as Derrida will remind us, the most important thing is that philosophy neither forecloses nor resolves the *aporia*, or the aporetic approach required towards such questions.

*Freud and the death drive as a scene of writing*

In the *La vie la mort* seminar, Derrida focuses the last sessions, which one could call the third and final part of the seminar, on Freud and his theory of the death drive, which he uses to nurture and complicate his reflections on Jacob and Nietzsche and Heidegger in the prior parts of the seminar.<sup>264</sup> Derrida starts out by trying to separate in Freud what is Schopenhauerian and what is Nietzschean, and he cites a portion of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in which Freud states that according to Schopenhauer, death is the proper result of life and in that respect is the goal of life, while the sexual instinct is the embodiment of the will to live.<sup>265</sup> While this is indeed what Schopenhauer states, Derrida insists that this is also compatible with Nietzsche's enunciation in *Gay Science* that life is a rare form of what is dead, and in *Will to Power* that life is a particular case and a means pursuing another end.<sup>266</sup> This is important because as we know, Freud originally rejected any challenge to the primacy of the pleasure principle: the organism can only pursue life, pleasure, reproduction; it cannot actively pursue pain, destruction, death at the expense of

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<sup>264</sup> See also chapter entitled « Le legs de Freud » in Derrida, *La carte postale*, 299-342 et passim.

<sup>265</sup> *La vie la mort*, 280.

<sup>266</sup> *Idem.*, 281.

the pleasure principle. This was a debate over the concept of “primary masochism,” which Freud originally rejected as impossible but later, with the publication of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, admitted as a possible hypothesis under the name of the death drive.<sup>267</sup> It might be possible, under the influence of this hypothetical death drive, to pursue aims contrary to life.

Freud admits, as Derrida points out, that the search for pleasure can lead to death in certain instances, where the pleasure is too pure. In such instances, the pleasure principle is supposed to cede to the reality principle, which momentarily takes over. In general, the reality principle is subservient to the pleasure principle, but in cases where life itself is under threat, the reality principle takes over to abort the destructive seeking of pleasure. Nonetheless, this does not amount to a *renouncing* of the seeking of pleasure; it merely represents a deferral of satisfaction and obliges the pleasure principle to take long detours in pursuit of satisfaction.<sup>268</sup> This is where Derrida pounces, so to speak, on Freud’s unexamined use of the word *detour*. The detour, for Derrida, is that pure pleasure and pure reality are both ideal limits, which would be destructive and fatal in their absolute state: therefore, “*le rapport de detour ou de différence*” between the two is what makes the psychic process operative and effective, albeit “*structurellement vouée au compromis*.”<sup>269</sup> In other words, there is never reality or pleasure in the pure form, merely

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<sup>267</sup> Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” 55n1.

<sup>268</sup> See Derrida’s account of this in *La vie la mort*, 291.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid*, 291-292.

a compromise between the two. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this is certainly a given. Derrida's clever and extremely thought-provoking conclusion is that:

De telle sorte que déjà, par quelque bout que l'on prenne cette structure à trois termes (principe de plaisir, principe de réalité, Différance) qui n'en font qu'un, qui n'en font qu'un puisque le principe de réalité et l'*Umweg* [le détour] ne sont que des effets ou des modifications du principe de plaisir, par quelque bout que l'on prenne cette structure à un-trois termes, *c'est la mort, je dis bien au bout, une mort qui n'est pas opposable, qui n'est pas différente, dans le sens de l'opposition, du principe de plaisir, du principe de réalité ou de la différence détournante, mais y est inscrite dans le fonctionnement même de cette structure.*<sup>270</sup>

In other words, not only do we observe that there can be no pure reality or pure pleasure, as they are always obliged to negotiate with one another, to take detours around one another, but also that *death* is to be found at the end of each of these principles, as they both lead to death in their unmediated forms: it is deferral via the detour that allows life to go on. Pure reality would be death, because there would be no pleasure; pure pleasure would be death because reality would never intervene to keep it in check.<sup>271</sup>

Death is not opposed to pleasure, as Freud wants to put it, but rather for Derrida, the death drive and the pleasure principle are co-originary, they are the *mise-en-abyme* of one another at the "origin of the origin," and Freud's writing itself in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which Derrida describes as shuffling, taking one step forward and one step backwards, is a mimesis of this relationship between pleasure and death.<sup>272</sup> The entire *mise-en-scène* of the famous episode of Freud's grandson throwing the spool away

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<sup>270</sup> *Ibid*, 292. Emphasis mine.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid*, 293.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid*, 305.

from his crib, shouting what Freud translates from baby language as *Fort! Da!* (“Away! Here!”) in an effort to gain mastery over his anxiety at being left alone by his mother, is for Derrida a scene of writing, structurally a scene of writing, both in the text and in the event, and an “autobioerotothanatographic” one at that.<sup>273</sup>

But Freud goes further, and Derrida goes with him, reading over his shoulder, in a sense. Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, states that the relationship of the compulsion to repeat is related to pleasure insofar as “an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces; that is, it is a kind of organic inelasticity, or, to put it another way, the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life.”<sup>274</sup> We remember Jacob’s assertion that death was a supplement—here, as we have already stated, but as a reminder, Freud is asserting the contrary: life is a supplement to death, it is an external disturbing force and all the while, life is seeking a return to its originary inertia, which is both pleasure and the pursuit of pleasure in the return to a state of non-life. The bacillus, in reproduction, in the pursuit of life, also disappears, also ceases to live, but unlike Jacob’s assertion that death never occurs to the bacillus, that the bacillus is pure life and cannot suffer death except as a contingency from the outside, that it never has its own death, that death and sexuality are a supplement to life and a late one at that, Derrida is showing that in Freud, like in Nietzsche, death is at the end and at the beginning of life, it surrounds it but is also inside of it, it is not opposed to it, it is inside

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<sup>273</sup> *Ibid*, 319.

<sup>274</sup> *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 36.

of what makes it go on and what makes it “tick” in a sense.<sup>275</sup> Life is the detour that limits and defers death, that makes pleasure possible.<sup>276</sup>

But Derrida’s exploration results in an aporia. He has deconstructed Jacob, Heidegger, and Freud on the subject of Death. He has examined how they complement and contradict one another. He has examined Nietzsche as the philosopher of *la vie la mort*, the non-oppositionality of life and death. He concludes that in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, life tends towards death, and death is internal, not an accident; it is rather life that is the accident of death.<sup>277</sup> Nonetheless, there are life-preserving drives, drives that seek to limit the race towards death, and Freud justifies them by recalling that such drives are *partial*<sup>278</sup>, on one hand, and, on the other, by stating that the preserving drives are intended to prevent the organism from dying from an outside death; the organism wants to die its own death for internal reasons.<sup>279</sup> But here, we return to Heidegger: being-towards-death means being towards one’s own, proper death, that impossible event. Derrida states that the conclusion that both Freud and Heidegger seem

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<sup>275</sup> Derrida will point out later in the seminar (p. 354) that the pursuit of limitless pleasure is the extinction of pleasure, that the beyond of the pleasure principle, the pursuit of “Nirvana” is the end of pleasure itself.

<sup>276</sup> *La vie la mort*, 332-333.

<sup>277</sup> Derrida, *La vie la mort*, 333.

<sup>278</sup> In Freud, the partial or component drives are the smallest identifiable parts of sexuality that psychoanalysis can discern: the death drives and the sexual drives are categories that contain component drives, which might differ from individual to individual. Sadistic acts could be composed of an anal instinct and also an instinct to master. See, Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, s.v. Component (or Partial) Instinct. See also, Derrida, *La carte postale*, 414–16.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 334. See also, Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 39.

to reach is that “*il faut avant tout s’auto-affecter sa propre mort, faire que la mort soit auto-affection de la vie ou la vie auto-affection de la mort.*”<sup>280</sup> The auto-affection of death is problematic, the ownness of death is problematic, because what is the “*auto*”, the self in this case, the case of death, which is properly speaking the elision, the disappearance and the erasure of the self? And furthermore, is not this auto-affection, insofar as it is an affection, a care, a *Sorge*, besides being problematic in terms of an analysis of subjectivity, also vulnerable to the same critique that Derrida makes of Heidegger’s being-towards death, namely that it is a Judeo-Christian approach to this subject, an *ars moriendi* that is tainted by its unexamined religious and metaphysical assumptions?<sup>281</sup>

It seems that Derrida’s seminar already concludes with an aporia, the same aporia or aporias that inspired the title of *Apories*, but that Derrida also explores in *Tympan*, in *Glas*, in *Fors*, in *Mémoires pour Paul de Man*, and in *Psyché, Inventions de l’autre*, in *Parages*, in *Schibboleth*...<sup>282</sup> In other words, a conclusion that death and life are in a non-oppositional relationship, but nothing positive that can be said beyond the fact that there is an irresolvable paradox in the approach of something that cannot be properly approached by any subject for death is the end of the subject. As Heidegger says, it is the possibility of an impossibility, certainly, but Derrida contests the Judeo-Christian way

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<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.* See also, Derrida, *La carte postale*, 364–67.

<sup>281</sup> Elsewhere, Derrida mentions that Freud and Heidegger are two phantoms, two grandfathers of the same time who never met but who are in correspondence with one another despite never having read one another: Derrida, 196–97.

<sup>282</sup> *Apories*; “*Tympan*”; *Glas*; “*Fors*”; *Mémoires*; *Psyche I*; *Psyche II*; *Parages*; *Schibboleth*. Derrida provides a full list of the works he considered to be germane to the exploration of this (these) aporia(s) in *Apories*, 35–37.

that Heidegger approaches it. If death is certainly within life, within pleasure, nothing more can be said about the topic as it is a discussion of something wholly unknowable and something wholly antithetical to life, to subjectivity, to thought.<sup>283</sup> In a sense, it would seem that we are back where we started: it is necessary to auto-affect one's own death, but the "auto" is impossible, there is no "self" when it comes to death.

Nonetheless, there exists an important and major counter-tradition in Western thought, the tradition that Derrida criticizes in Heidegger as the unthought Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition regarding death, care for death, and which I argue that he erroneously identifies as Jewish-Christian-Islamic, for, following Hadot, it is in fact a Greek tradition that was recuperated by the monotheistic religions from Greek philosophy so wholly as to be unrecognizable to us today as an essential part of Ancient thought.<sup>284</sup> Heidegger, too, would reject the accusation that his thought on being-towards-death is Platonic, and yet in many ways, it could be said to be entirely Platonic. The second part of this chapter focuses more particularly on the Platonic legacy in Derrida, and on the Heideggerian lineage of this reception of Plato in not only Derrida, but also in Jan Patočka, and how their interpretation and begins to explicate not only how their reception of the *meletē thanatou* differs from that of other of their contemporaries, but

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<sup>283</sup> See also, *Apories*, 128, 134-6, 138 and *passim*. François Raffoul argues that for Derrida, nonetheless, the aporia in this case is not a closure, but a possibility and an openness. See: "Derrida et l'éthique de l'im-possible."

<sup>284</sup> Miriam Leonard has described Derrida's "positioning between the poles of Hellenism and Hebraism" as "precarious" (Leonard, "Derrida between 'Greek' and 'Jew.'"). It is certain that this is an example of Derrida's precarious balancing act, for even as in texts such as "Violence and Metaphysics" and *Glas*, Derrida seeks to deconstruct and undo the traditional opposition between Greek and Jewish, here he seems to be relying on this opposition to reject a tradition he erroneously categorizes as Judeo-Christian-Islamic, where it is, in fact, *also always* Greek.

also how Derrida and Patočka inherit both Plato and Heidegger (and Plato through Heidegger) differently.

### **Derrida and the death of Socrates**

#### *Plato, Socrates – Athens Still Remains*

Derrida's book *Demeure, Athènes* was published as the commentary to a series of photographs of Athens taken by French photographer Jean-François Bonhomme and was first published in Athens by Greek publishing house "Oikos" in 1996 under the bilingual title *Αθήνα στη σκιά της Ακρόπολης. Athènes dans l'ombre de l'Acropole*.<sup>285</sup> A meditation on photography, on temporality, on *technē*, on inheritance, and on death, the text of *Demeure, Athènes*, by Derrida's own admission, belongs to the long French tradition of travel writing on Greece, as he was traveling around Greece "*avec ces photographies*"

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<sup>285</sup> Original publication: Bonhomme and Derrida, *Athēna stē skia tēs Akropolēs. Athènes à l'ombre de l'Acropole*. Galilée publication: Derrida, *Demeure, Athènes*. English translation: Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*. Much of the scholarly attention paid to this work has focused on the fact that it is both Derrida's most sustained commentary on the photograph, and also a serious reckoning with Barthes, *La Chambre Claire*. (English title: *Camera Lucida*.) This dissertation will not specifically focus on the technical or photographic elements of this work and their implications, as they have been prolifically studied by other authors, and therefore the reader is referred to the following sources which explicitly engage with *Demeure, Athènes* on the theme of photography: Naas, "When It All Suddenly Clicked: Deconstruction after Psychoanalysis"; Naas, "'Now Smile': Recent Developments in Jacques Derrida's Work on Photography"; Saghafi, "Phantasmaphotography"; Hancock and Garner, "Reflections on the Ruins of Athens and Rome"; Papageorgiou, "Athens in Derrida"; Kujundžić, "Passing the Image." These themes are explored more broadly in works such as: Marder, "Nothing to Say"; Marder, "Mourning, Magic and Telepathy"; Wills, *Prosthesis*; Wills, *Inanimation*; García Marín, "The Origin Is Already Haunted." Essential to an exploration of these questions is an engagement with Bernard Stiegler's work, *Technics and Time*.

when he decided on a “3 juillet, n’ayant encore rien écrit, que la forme serait à la fois aphoristique et sérielle.”<sup>286</sup> Of course, this opens a metaphoric *mise-en-abyme*: the text itself is, like the photographs, both aphoristic and serial, while the photographs themselves, both aphoristic and serial, are like a text. Each photograph in *Demeure, Athènes* “signifie la mort [...] sans la dire. Chacune [...] rappelle à la mort accomplie, à la mort promise ou menaçante, à la monumentalité sépulcrale, à la mémoire dans la figure de ruine.”<sup>287</sup> Each of these photographs is an epitaph, like the epitaph in the first photograph, depicting a funerary monument in the ancient Kerameikos cemetery of Athens (a ruined cemetery, a place of ruins of past lives, within a ruined city that yet lives, full of monuments to lives that have been ruined and of which and upon which these ruins bear the traces) upon which is inscribed a proper name “ΑΠΟΛΛΟΔΩΡΟΣ ΣΩΤΟΥ ΡΑΜΝΟΥΣΙΟΥ” (Apollodōrus, son of Sōtos of Rhamnos). The photograph is an epitaph because, like the funerary monument, it is a monument to “la singularité irresistible de son référent, de son ici-maintenant, de sa date.”<sup>288</sup> It is a ruin that bears memory to a past that was always destined to ruin, to be ruined, to disappear eventually. A trace of a moment that is no longer present, and indeed, was never present. Each of these photographs, of these photographic funerary monuments, *appelle telle autre et tous*

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<sup>286</sup> Derrida, *Demeure, Athènes*, 9–10.

<sup>287</sup> Derrida, 11.

<sup>288</sup> Derrida, 11.

*les autres*.<sup>289</sup> Each death (but also every birth) is a harbinger of all the deaths to come, of each death to come, of the deferral of the eventuality of death.

And yet the shadow of Socrates' death, as recounted in Plato's *Phaedo*,<sup>290</sup> looms large over Derrida's entire commentary to these photographs, as do three other works: Heidegger's *Sojourns* [*Aufenthalte*], Freud's "Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis" [1936], and Roland Barthes' *La chambre claire* [*Camera lucida*]. More broadly, the fact that *Demeure, Athènes* is ostensibly a form of travel writing, aphorisms and reflections by a (Western) European during a visit to (Modern) Greece, it participates in a long tradition of such travel writing, extant since at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century and flourishing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the increased interest in Greece brought about by the Greek struggle for independence from the Ottoman rule and the increased possibilities of travel to Greece brought about by technological change and the regime change in the newly-independent Greek state.<sup>291</sup> The most famous of these works is Chateaubriand's *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem*, remarkable for the author's disdain for the population of Modern Greece, seen generally as barbarians occupying the land of Ancient glories, speaking a debased and foreign tongue, and his ability to disregard his contemporary surroundings to see a fantasy of past glories.<sup>292</sup> Another remarkable text in this vein by a French traveler is Renan's "Prière sur l'Acropole", whose full title is in fact "*Prière que je fis sur*

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<sup>289</sup> Derrida, 12.

<sup>290</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*; Platōn, *Phaidōn* (*ē Peri Psychēs*).

<sup>291</sup> Cf. Introduction, *supra*.

<sup>292</sup> Chateaubriand, *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem*.

*l'Acropole quand je fus arrivé à en comprendre la parfait beauté*".<sup>293</sup> Like these texts, Heidegger's *Sojourns*, written, like *Demeure, Athènes*, in an aphoristic and serial style during the German philosopher's first visit to Greece in 1962, as part of a cruise he took on the steamship *Yugoslavia*, is remarkable for its disdain for Modern Greece and the author's ability to perceive antiquity in place of his modern surroundings.<sup>294</sup>

Heidegger opines that "what matters is not us and our experience of Greece, but Greece itself" (9). But what Greece? Heidegger sees a "truth" in the ruins of Antiquity, despite his constant frustration at "the unfinished new buildings [to become] hotels for the American tourists," (12), "their tourist's zeal, their toing and froing, in which one was, without being aware, included, as it threatened to degrade what was just now the element of our experience into an object ready-at-hand for the viewer," (42) and that "with the unthoughtful assault of tourism an alien power enforces its own commands and regulations over ancient Greece" (55-56).<sup>295</sup> Heidegger, the German philosopher, "correctly" perceives Greece, i.e., he correctly perceives its antiquity, its *alēthia*, the truth conveyed by the ruins of Delos, of the Acropolis, of Delphi. He "sees" and "feels" and "understands" its rites and religious practices, and the philosophical message they conveyed. Was Heidegger in Greece or was he merely at home in the Black Forest with

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<sup>293</sup> Renan, *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse*, 46–51.

<sup>294</sup> Heidegger, *Sojourns*. Heidegger dedicated *Sojourns* to "der Mutter" [the Mother], his wife. Might one not draw certain inferences between Heidegger's practice of calling his wife "Mother" and the fact that certain American politicians on the religious right (the most famous example of which is current Vice-President of the United States of America, Mike Pence) do the same? On this text, see also: Duro, "The Return to the Origin: Heidegger's Journey to Greece."

<sup>295</sup> Derrida discusses Heidegger's ill-tempered incriminations in *Auftenhalte* in *Demeure, Athènes*, 20-21.

his books? Heidegger complains that “the irresistible modern technology together with the scientific industrialization of the world is about to obliterate any possibility of a sojourn” (56) but is it not possible that the sojourn—a stay, an excursion, a foray into a foreign land, into otherness—was made impossible by Heidegger’s education and philosophical-theoretical-theological convictions? Heidegger refused to disembark from the steamship *Yugoslavia* at Rhodes, Kos, and Patmos: “the recollection of thinking anew that demanded its rights” prevented Heidegger from disembarking on Rhodes (25); and “neither of the smaller islands in the Dodecanese (Kos and Patmos) [on Easter day] succeeded in convincing us to disembark” (28). It is ironic that Heidegger was not convinced to disembark on the island of Patmos, the island where St. John had his *apocalypse*, his revelation of the end times, in a cave at the foot of the Byzantine fortress-monastery later built above, on Easter Day, the day of resurrection, of the distortion and blurring of the frontiers between life and death, of the mysterious conquering of death by death. No revelation, no apocalypse for Herr Heidegger: it seems that in Greece, Heidegger saw only sameness, only identity, pre-shaped and pre-formed in such a way and carried in little packages brought along from Germany, that his faculty of visual perception was distorted by his mental contents.<sup>296</sup>

A distortion of a different nature was reported by Sigmund Freud in an open letter to Romain Rolland on the occasion of the latter’s seventieth birthday, recounting the disturbance of memory he experienced when standing atop the Acropolis for the first

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<sup>296</sup> The refusal of difference is an essential mechanism in the *fetish*, and characterizes all fetishistic processes. See, *inter alia* by same author, Bass, *Fetishism, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy*.

time.<sup>297</sup> Freud had a double disturbance of his sensory perceptions: he firstly could not believe that he was actually standing on the Acropolis, and secondly, realized that he had not believed that the Acropolis actually existed, “just as we learnt at school!”<sup>298</sup> Freud describes this as a feeling of derealization [*Entfremdungsgefühl*].<sup>299</sup> In an article on *Demeure, Athènes*, its English translator Michael Naas relates this feeling of “*non-arrivé*”, something that hasn’t really arrived, really happened, to Derrida’s discussion of death in *Demeure, Athènes*: it is something that is a *non-arrivé*, something not-yet arrived/occurred.<sup>300</sup> It is this *non-arrivé*, this not-yet of death, that forms a sort of *leitmotiv* in *Demeure, Athènes*, based on the melody of Socrates’ death, and syncopated metaphorically by an extended reflection on photography and the mechanism of delay.

Derrida begins to speak explicitly about Socrates and his death in *Demeure, Athènes* towards the middle of the work, and it is related to his visit to Cape Sounion, the place where Socrates and his entourage waited to see the sails of the ship that would arrive from Delos and which signified that the philosopher would be put to death. Because Socrates was condemned during an annual feast period during which the Athenians would send a sacrificial mission by ship to Delos in honor of Apollo, and during which time, until the ship returned to Athens, the city must remain pure and free of any bloodshed, the execution of his sentence was suspended until such time as the ship

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<sup>297</sup> Freud, “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis.”

<sup>298</sup> 241.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 244ff.

<sup>300</sup> Naas, “When It All Suddenly Clicked: Deconstruction after Psychoanalysis.”

returned to Athens. Cape Sounion being the southernmost point of Attica, it is the place where the white sails of the ship would first be seen by those watching out in preparation of Socrates' execution. We read in *Demeure, Athènes* that this scene is like a photograph, the scene of Socrates waiting for death is a photograph that “*éternisait, d'un instantané, le temps de ce moment inouï.*”<sup>301</sup> This photograph is not only part of “*la mémoire lumineuse d'Athènes, à son archive phénoménale*” but Socrates behavior and words during this period of waiting for death, his discourse on the “*souci [...] de la mort*” is also a part of “*le discours qui veille encore sur nous, le discours de deuil et de la denegation du deuil, toute la philosophie [...]*.”<sup>302</sup> Derrida speaks of this legacy as a photograph, an image engraved in the phenomenal archive of Athens and of philosophy as a whole, but also a symphony, a piece of music that Socrates composed. One of the photographs in *Demeure, Athènes* by Jean-François Bonhomme, of a set of musical instruments in a shop window, whose glass reflects a tree and part of the building on the opposite side of the street, along with some old metal and pottery vessels on the shelves above and below, give Derrida the opportunity to reflect on Socrates' composition of a piece of “sacrificial music” while he was awaiting death, and even the comparison between Socrates and the musical instrument: Socrates became a musical instrument and the musical instruments are all Socrates:

#### CLICHÉ XVI

Photographier Socrate en instrument de musique. Et les instruments de musique en autant de Socrates. Or que fait Socrate, lui ? Il attend, mais sans attendre, il attend la mort, il rêve d'annuler son retard en composant une musique

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<sup>301</sup> Derrida, *Demeure, Athènes*, 32.

<sup>302</sup> Derrida, 32–33.

sacrificielle. La mort tarde à venir, en effet, mais il sait, il croit savoir calculer l'échéance. Non qu'il la *voie venir*, la mort, depuis le cap Sounion, non, il la *laisse* venir, il l'*entend* qui vient, rappelons-nous, et c'est aussi une musique. Il rêve, il rêve beaucoup, Socrate, il déchiffre ses rêves. Il les décrit et à ce qu'ils prescrivent il se veut docile. Il veut faire ce qu'il doit et il sait ce qu'il doit. Or l'un de ces songes lui annonce la mort, il lui dit *quand* la mort viendra, quand le retard prendra fin, et l'imminence. L'autre lui enjoint de payer une dette en composant de la musique. Pour l'offrir au dieu dont la fête votive a différé sa mort.<sup>303</sup>

We are all in fact Socrates, all composing a sort of sacrificial music while we wait for the arrival of death, the end of the immanence of death. All human activity, and here, philosophy in particular, is a way of delaying death. "To be able to anticipate is to be able to see death coming, but to see death coming is already to be in mourning for it, already to amortize, to be able to start deadening death to the point where it can't even happen anymore."<sup>304</sup>

Socrates' two dreams involve, as Derrida mentions in the cited paragraph above, the announcement of the moment of his death, and the injunction to pay a debt by composing a piece of sacrificial music to Apollo, the god whose votive festival caused the deferral of the moment of his execution.<sup>305</sup> Although Socrates theorizes that philosophy, his activity of philosophy, is already a form of musical composition, and the greatest form of music at that (*ὥς φιλοσοφίας μὲν μεγίστης μουσικῆς*), he feels that perhaps his dream is telling him to compose what is more popularly thought of as music. Logically, if the correct practice of philosophy is the *meletē thanatou*, and if philosophy

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<sup>303</sup> Derrida, 46–47.

<sup>304</sup> Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*, 106.

<sup>305</sup> Platōn, *Phaidōn* (*ē Peri Psychēs*), secs. 61a–61b.

itself is the “greatest form of music,” then it stands to reason that anyone who is involved in the active contemplation of death, the care for one’s own death, is a musical instrument, an instrument playing the great symphony of deathly music that, as Derrida tells us, is inscribed in the phenomenal archive of Athens. The musical instrument, like the photographic machine so intriguingly analyzed by Derrida in *Demeure, Athènes*, are machines repeating the delay-mechanism that characterizes the position of life towards the immanence of death. But, in mirror-image, so are we.<sup>306</sup> And at bottom, a philosophy of death is a philosophy that preempts death, that immixes a certain deadness into life to the point where life is no longer lived. It is against this deathly, deadening philosophy that Derrida wants to protest—the type of philosophy he sees as reducing life to calculations, numbers, and never allowing a moment for chance, for the event.

Nonetheless, Derrida struggles with this philosophic legacy, and the immanence of the legacy in this work is foregrounded more than the immanence of death itself. Derrida writes in *Demeure, Athènes* that the phrase *nous nous devons à la mort* does not have to be understood in the sense of the “*grande tradition post-socratique et sacrificielle de l’être-pour-la-mort, cette éthique du dévouement ou de devotion qui vient aussitôt prendre cette phrase en vue [...]*.”<sup>307</sup> For within this tradition, this great tradition:

*c’est la mort de Socrate en somme, qui ne cesse de veiller sur nous, la culture de mort ou le culte du deuil, la façon dont ce pauvre Socrate [...] a cru, en ne se sauvant pas, se sauver et sauver en lui, au même instant, la philosophie, toute*

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<sup>306</sup> See, on relationship between camera/techne, the human and (the temporality of) death: *Echographies of Television*, 38.

<sup>307</sup> Derrida, *Demeure, Athènes*, 52.

*cette musique, 'la plus haute musique' alors que je persiste à le croire, la philosophie pouvait avoir une autre chance.*<sup>308</sup>

Here, in this quotation, we return to the main motifs explored in the first part of this chapter and the second part of the first chapter of this dissertation: Derrida often repeats that his philosophy is a philosophy which affirms life. This *autre chance* Derrida sees for philosophy is the rejection of the “*originarité prétendue du devoir, du 'Schuldigsein', cette religion du deuil, cette culture de la perte et du manque, etc.*”<sup>309</sup> This would be a rejection of Heidegger’s “religion” of being-towards-death; a philosophy that, as Derrida says at the beginning and at the end of his life, takes the Nietzschean approach of affirming life (*cf. supra*).

And yet, *Demeure, Athènes* does not resolve the mystery of life within death, it leaves it within suspense. First of all, Derrida’s protest against this approach to philosophy, as he describes it, is “deaf” [*“je protestais sourdement contre lui”*].<sup>310</sup> If philosophy is music, philosophy is the *meletē thanatou*, and therefore Socrates—as a philosopher—is a musical instrument, and musical instruments are so many Socrates, as Derrida writes, what does it mean to register a “deaf” protest against this music? Does it mean that Derrida does not hear the music, he is impervious to it as he *cannot* hear it, or does it mean that he seeks to practice philosophy deafly, without producing or repeating what he sees as the religion of death and the culture of sacrifice proper to philosophy,

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<sup>308</sup> Derrida, 53.

<sup>309</sup> Derrida, 55.

<sup>310</sup> Derrida, 53.

indeed by which philosophy has been haunted, since Socrates' death?<sup>311</sup> Perhaps the answer to this question is *both and*. In Catherine Malabou's interpretation of the message of *Demeure, Athènes*, it would be that another possibility is always possible: Socrates could have escaped. Something might have happened to the boat. Although death might have been inevitable, it is not *yet* here, the moment of death is always a futurity and the future is not reducible to a tangible predictability.<sup>312</sup> Therefore, death is not avoidable, it is an inevitability, but it is never but a *possibility*—life is possible instead, and that is the message to which death clings.

Nonetheless, death is an inevitability, it is unavoidable, it is a debt that at some point must be repaid. I think that Derrida addresses this problem through the discussion of translation, which is also present in *Demeure, Athènes*, and it is treated as an aporia, an unresolved question. The photographs of Athens taken by Jean-François Bonhomme, which inspired Derrida's writing, are said to be untranslatable insofar as they tell us that "*nous nous devons à la mort*."<sup>313</sup> The translatability and the transcription of this meaning, however, are impossible, and in this, we are reminded of Derrida's discussion of François Jacob's *La logique du vivant* with its assertion of the supplementary and prosthetic nature of death. The aporia is that Socrates' death was announced before it occurred: "*le verdict avait eu lieu mais le soleil n'était pas encore mort*."<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> According to Drew Hyland, Derrida's entire corpus is haunted by the specter of the Platonic Socrates despite himself. See, Hyland, "Spectres of Interpretation."

<sup>312</sup> Malabou, "Another Possibility."

<sup>313</sup> Derrida, *Demeure, Athènes*, 59.

<sup>314</sup> Derrida, 60.

However, it seems to me that reading Derrida's philosophical stance on sacrifice and death and the affirmation of life faced with the necessity of sacrifice are alongside, or along with, his brief engagement with the work of Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, perhaps the most Platonic-Socratic of all twentieth century philosophers with his emphasis on sacrifice and on death, yields interesting and subterranean insights into Derrida's own thinking on this subject, but also his relationship to the Platonic legacy of *meletē thanatou*. Not only that, but in reality, Patočka's own death, at the hands of the Czechoslovak secret police, for refusing to cease his teaching and to live his philosophy, was in itself a type of Socratic death, and Derrida became active in the intellectual resistance against the Czechoslovak regime as a result of this death. Like Derrida, Patočka affirms the centrality of the *aporia* to the question of being, both students of Heidegger agree that *aporia* and ineffability are the ineluctable ends of any thought about being—yet, where the question of “truth” or “metaphysics” are concerned, Derrida is staunchly anti-metaphysical and atheist, striving to uncover the latent metaphysical and Catholic positions underpinning Heidegger's thought; whereas Patočka's Catholic faith sustained both his thinking and his life. And yet, both reach similar conclusions about *meletē thanatou*. I will begin to explore this contradiction in the following section.

### *Derrida, Jan Patočka, and the Socratic Death*

Both Jan Patočka and Jacques Derrida extensively engage with Heidegger and his concept of *Being-Towards-Death*, which evidently has its roots in the Platonic *meletē thanatou*. This raises important issues concerning metaphysics, given Patočka's avowed Catholicism and Derrida's disavowal of the latent Catholicism in Heidegger's *Being-*

*Towards-Death*; but also concerning the reception of Nietzsche, whose philosophy on life and on death unquestionably influenced Heidegger and Derrida and Patočka. Because Jan Patočka is relatively little-known in the Anglophone world, I will begin this portion of the chapter with biographical information about the Czech philosopher, which will prove useful for situating him not only historically, but also within the history of ideas, and also for understanding how he came to meet a Socratic death at the hands of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic's secret police. The rest of this chapter will explore not only how Derrida came to be involved in the organized international resistance against the regime's ideological strictures, but also will begin to address the questions related to metaphysics and philosophy raised in the first portion of this paragraph.

Born in the Bohemian town of Turnov in 1907 to an educated family—his father was a schoolteacher trained as a classical philologist—Jan Patočka received a thorough education in the classics and enrolled in Charles University in Prague, which at the time was dominated by positivistic philosophy.<sup>315</sup> Unsatisfied with the dominant philosophical current in his home institution, Patočka received a grant from the French government to study at the Sorbonne in the academic year 1928/1929 and there was exposed to Husserl's phenomenology, which had a lifelong impact on him.<sup>316</sup> When he graduated with his doctorate (entitled "The concept of evidence and its meaning for noetics") in 1932, he had already published a number of articles on phenomenology and theology,

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<sup>315</sup> Vit, *Jan Patočka (English Edition)*, 3–4. See also, for historical information about Patočka's life and work: Kohák, "Jan Patočka: A Philosophical Biography."

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

and left for Germany to study at the Humboldt Foundation, just as Hitler had accomplished his putsch of the ill-fated Weimar Republic.<sup>317</sup> After his first year at the Humboldt, Patočka took a summer course at Freiburg University, where Husserl, a fellow Moravian, welcomed him, and went for long walks with him every day, along with his academic assistant Eugen Fink.<sup>318</sup> Meanwhile, Patočka attended lectures by the “disloyal” Martin Heidegger, “disloyal not only in his evermore noticeable inclination away from Husserl’s phenomenological starting point, but also in his political attitude.”<sup>319</sup> As it is well known, especially in the early days of the Nazi regime, Heidegger was an eager proponent of Hitler’s party and was awarded the rectorate of Freiburg University as a reward for his intellectual caution of the regime. Despite Heidegger’s “wearing the NSDAP badge on his lapel, [...Patočka...] gained a lasting impression of the particular philosophical depths of Heidegger’s ideas.”<sup>320</sup> When Patočka returned to Prague, he became a university lecturer at the Faculty of Philosophy until 17 November 1939, when the Nazi occupiers shut down the Czech universities.<sup>321</sup> After that, he taught at a grammar school and, at the end of the war, was put to forced labor building a railway line.<sup>322</sup> In 1945, Patočka resumed teaching at the Faculty of Philosophy of Charles University, but

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<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*

this was to be relatively short-lived<sup>323</sup> : indeed, following the seizure of power in a coup-d'état by the Soviet-backed Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1948, Patočka began to face serious repression as a result of his failure to conform with the ideological strictures new regime. He refused to join the Communist Party, despite the pressures placed upon him to do so, and was relieved of his teaching duties in the academic year 1950-51 as a reprisal, after the university in the prior year had recommended students to stay away from Professor Patočka's lectures.<sup>324</sup>

Yet, this ostracism was short lived: after the thaw that occurred following the death of Stalin, Patočka was gradually readmitted into official academic circles; by the 1960s, he was able to travel abroad for work and gave lectures at a number of European universities .<sup>325</sup> He was then able to lecture once again at Charles University, albeit only at an optional seminar scheduled during the lunch hour. This pause in official repression, however, would also be short lived: Patočka faced ever-tightening restrictions on his work and on his publications, which were gradually banned. The philosopher was finally forced out of the university in 1972, and so began clandestinely teaching at his home .<sup>326</sup>

As the underground movement *Charter 77* began to take shape, with the publication of an eponymous petition in December 1976,<sup>327</sup> Patočka became extremely

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<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-17.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>327</sup> Peeters, *Derrida*, 410.

active in the movement, to the point that he became its spokesperson.<sup>328</sup> In March 1977, Patočka even met with Dutch Foreign Minister Max van der Stoep while the latter was in Czechoslovakia on an official visit.<sup>329</sup> In retribution, Patočka was subjected to an extreme interrogation by the Czechoslovak secret police; the interrogation was so brutal that it led to fatal injuries from which the philosopher died in hospital a few days later.<sup>330</sup> But while dying in the hospital, Patočka reputedly said to his visitors “there are things for which it is worth suffering. And the things for which we eventually suffer are those worth living for.”<sup>331</sup> Patočka died on 13 March 1977 and even his funeral was disrupted by the secret police, who arranged a hasty burial so as to prevent people from attending, checked IDs at the cemetery, and flew a police helicopter over the burial site so as to drown out any conversation.<sup>332</sup>

Following Patočka’s death, a group of professors founded the “Jan Hus Educational Foundation” in Oxford in 1980, and elected Derrida as the vice-president of the organization.<sup>333</sup> The goal of this foundation was to provide material and intellectual assistance to Czechoslovak professors by organizing underground courses and seminars,

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<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>330</sup> According to Vit (*op. cit.*), Patočka died of heart failure; according to Kohák (“Philosophical biography,” *op. cit.*), it was from a brain hemorrhage.

<sup>331</sup> Vit, 22-23.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>333</sup> Peeters, 410-411. Derrida had a special interest in Czechoslovakia, as his wife’s family was Czechoslovak, and the couple would receive news on the political situation in the country from her family there.

bringing forbidden books into Czechoslovakia, and publishing *samizdat* literature.<sup>334</sup> The members of the association regularly traveled to Czechoslovakia, despite the risks and the police pressure they faced while there. On 26 December 1981, Derrida participated in one of the Foundation's missions and flew to Prague on a mission to attend the underground seminar founded by Patočka, which, by that time, was led by Professor Ladislav Hejdlánek.<sup>335</sup> However, after attending the seminar, Derrida was arrested the next day at the airport while trying to return to Paris: his luggage was checked by the secret police, which had previously planted several sachets of heroin in its lining.<sup>336</sup> Derrida was arrested and imprisoned for drug trafficking and was only released several days later after the intervention of the highest levels of the French political establishment.<sup>337</sup> The positive outcome of Derrida's arrest, although it severely demoralized and upset the French philosopher, was that both the cause of the oppressed Czechoslovak academics and the activities of the Association Jan Hus were brought to greater public attention.<sup>338</sup> Derrida himself, despite the difficulties he experienced during this voyage to Communist Czechoslovakia, stated that the journey "*fut au fond le voyage le plus digne de ce nom, dans ma vie.*"<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, 414-417.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, 420-421.

<sup>339</sup> Derrida and Malabou, *La contre-allée. Voyager avec Jacques Derrida.*, 39. Cited in Peeters, *Derrida*, 421.

Sacrifice upon sacrifice characterized the involvement of Derrida with Patočka. Although the two men did not meet in Prague, separated by the frontier of Patočka's Socratic death, both made a sacrifice to further the cause of intellectual probity and freedom in the repressive political environment of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. Derrida was detained and interrogated during a short trip to Prague to help the oppressed intellectuals participating in the legacy of Patočka's underground seminar, while Patočka himself faced repression during his academic career and, when he became the figurehead for the Charter 77 movement, he ended up paying for his refusal to change, to flee, or to disavow his ideals, his intellectual commitments, or his dignity with his life at the hands of the Czechoslovak secret police. There are obvious parallels to be drawn between Socrates' death, as recounted posthumously in Plato's *Phaedo*, and Patočka's death, as recounted by various of his students after his death. Both men died at the hands of the State for their teachings; in some sense, both men could be said to have made this sacrifice willingly, they had time to prepare for their deaths and they knew what consequences their insubordination would have. Yet, they were both prepared to pay with their lives.

Derrida, of course, and perhaps not wrongly, might challenge these notions of preparation, of foreknowledge, of prematurity; he might also critique the epigraphic nature of the disciple's writing *for* and *about* the Master after his death.<sup>340</sup> And yet, perhaps tellingly, Derrida's most sustained engagement with Patočka's thought occurred regarding the question of death and sacrifice in a work entitled, in English translation,

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<sup>340</sup> See, especially, *La carte postale*, *op. cit.*

*The Gift of Death* [fr: *Donner la mort*]. To prepare for a discussion of Derrida's reading of Patočka in the following chapter, let us first examine the sole work by Patočka that Derrida explicitly comments on, and his most-well-known text, the *Heretical Essays in the History of Philosophy*. In this work, Patočka explicitly engages Nietzsche, Plato, and Heidegger on the concept of Sacrifice which for Patočka, like Derrida, involves valences of both *aporia* and of *mystery* (but which, in Patočka's mystical Catholicism are also present in the transubstantiation of the Sacrament).

Although Jan Patočka wrote two books focused on the problematic of the meaning or essence of Europe and the universality of European thought as relates to the concept of sacrifice and responsibility (responsibly dying), the *Heretical Essays* remain the best-known.<sup>341</sup> The *Heretical Essays* take a chronologic approach to the unfolding of history, beginning with prehistory and ending with the Second World War. To summarize, for Patočka, history emerged from pre-history once the concept of history was no longer defined as the recording of the past as the origin of the present.<sup>342</sup> Patočka

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<sup>341</sup> See discussion in Chapter III, *infra*. The books are namely *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History and Plato and Europe*. See also, in French, *Liberté et sacrifice*.

<sup>342</sup> This is also a very Nietzschean apprehension of history. According to Karl Jaspers, Nietzsche believes that history begins as a result of individuals' desire for liberation and that history is the movement resulting from a tension between individuality and obligation. See: Jaspers, *Nietzsche: introduction à sa philosophie*, 236ff. This is an appreciation of Nietzsche's discourse on historicity and individuality that does not exclude a Heideggerian position relating to authenticity, nor does it exclude a discourse of responsibility.

Gilles Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche on historicity and individuality tends to take the opposite tack: while Deleuze acknowledges the aforementioned tension between individuality and obligation as a motor of history, he privileges a certain discourse of power that has been identified in Nietzsche's work and which sees unbridled freedom as the purest expression of the individual—one capable of fashioning history himself rather than being fashioned by it, or in psychoanalytic terms which would doubtless have been abhorrent to the later author of *L'Anti-Œdipe*, the illusion of a man completely free of both *id* and *super-ego*. Of course, Deleuze understands psychoanalytic theory and especially metapsychology as an *ex post facto*

describes the concept of genealogies and record-keeping in prehistorical times as “a historical narrative without an actual history, the reason being that its purpose and meaning was the preservation of the lifestyle of prehistorical humanity, a humanity whose life’s meaning was given and prescribed, defined basically by the acceptance, transmission, preservation, and securing of life.”<sup>343</sup>

In this prehistorical conception of the world, the living and the dead are one; indeed, the dead are more *real* and more *alive* than the living, for they are the origin that the living and all living forms imitate. The maintenance of life depends upon the faithful veneration and reproduction of ancient rituals.<sup>344</sup> According to Fustel de Coulanges, “*le vivant ne pouvait se passer du mort, ni le mort du vivant. Par là un lien puissant*

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rationalization of capitalism’s sublimation of the individual’s desires and power into production and consumption, rather than as a way of sublimating the individual’s destructive and sexual drives into a civilized frame (although Freud was at least in his theoretical writings ambivalent towards the notion of “civilization,” what Deleuze seems to take issue with is the notion that work *per se* could be fulfilling or authentically gratifying, whereas one of the founder of psychoanalysis’ avowed goals is that his method should rehabilitate patients to be able to derive authentic satisfaction from both work and love. In other words, Deleuze’s critique of psychoanalysis is that while meretriciously claiming to liberate Eros from the chains imposed upon it, it is in fact a repressive tool used by society in order to maintain man’s desire in chains...and that such desire could never involve “work” in any sense involved with a capitalist mode of production writ large). See: Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, 207–19. See also: Deleuze and Guattari, *L’anti-Œdipe*.

<sup>343</sup> Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, 28.

<sup>344</sup> Patočka mentions Fustel de Coulanges on p. 23 of *Heretical Essays*, and how Fustel showed that “this chain of perceptions essentially remained the foundation of the (patrician) family in Antiquity, in Greece as well as Rome.” I would add that it is interesting to consult Fustel also specifically as regards the Greco-Roman belief in the importance of *exactitude* in the performance of any ritual, for the *present* ritual had to imitate in all points the *prototypical ideal* of that ritual: “*En vain le cœur le plus fervent offrait-il aux dieux les plus grasses victimes ; si l’un des innombrables rites du sacrifice était négligé, le sacrifice était nul. Le moindre manquement faisait d’un acte sacré un acte impie. L’altération la plus légère troublait et bouleversait la religion de la patrie, et transformait les dieux protecteurs en autant d’ennemis cruels.*” Fustel de Coulanges, *La cité antique*, 238.

*s'établissait entre toutes les générations d'une même famille et en faisait un corps éternellement inseparable.*"<sup>345</sup> The consequence of this unicity, this determinism, and this intransigence meant that "*la religion était un lien matériel, une chaîne qui tenait l'homme esclave.*"<sup>346</sup> According to Patočka, the model of the *polis*, the Greek city-state, extricated mankind from this repetition and sterile reproduction of each new generation on the model of the former; in other words, from an unbroken chain of life in which the present is nothing but the ersatz counterpart of the full and noble past.<sup>347</sup> Indeed, what Patočka praises in the *polis* is its discovery, with the Nicomachean Ethics, of the possibilities of a free life: *enjoyment, political existence, and the life of the mind*. The possibilities of freedom offered by the polis entail "the shaking of life as simply accepted with all its certainties and at the same time the origin of new possibilities of life in that shaken situation, that is, of philosophy."<sup>348</sup> This is why European philosophy and European history are the history and the philosophy of the world, according to Patočka; not because of any inherent supremacy<sup>349</sup>, but rather because it was in Greece, in the Greek polis, that

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<sup>345</sup> Fustel de Coulanges, 65.

<sup>346</sup> Fustel de Coulanges, 236.

<sup>347</sup> This is not to say that Patočka disdains prehistoric man: indeed, he asks rhetorically, what more can man hope to understand than the community between gods and mortals; and man's inescapable integration in the involuntary maintenance of life? Nonetheless, there is a nobility in questioning and reaching one's own conclusions, rather than accepting as given without a process of *becoming* and *unfolding* of the truth (Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, 25.).

<sup>348</sup> Patočka, 41.

<sup>349</sup> Although given the influence of Heidegger's thought on Patočka, it must be mentioned that the fundamentals of such a line of reasoning may, in Heidegger, be tainted by racist and supremacist views, as Heidegger precisely founded the superiority of Germans over others to what he perceived as the uniqueness of their historico-philosophical inheritance.

life was for the first time, no longer taken as something *immanent* and *given*, but rather, something whose meaning had to be discovered and rediscovered anew for each generation. This does not mean that the past no longer holds relevance to the present, nor that it ceases to operate and determine the present; rather, it means that the meaning and the truth of the past's bearing upon the present is no longer given as a certainty and as a pre-ordained concept. Instead, the truth must become apparent and must reveal itself to each individual, through a process of philosophy, the only means by which history can exist as such, and which means that the process of coming into history or the revelation of the sense of history and of being is much more meaningful than the givenness of the truth itself.<sup>350</sup> It is within the freedom to explore and to question, and not within the conclusion, that philosophy itself has sense and universality.

Yet, the fundamental effect upon humanity of the emergence of history and philosophy is "*the shaking of accepted meaning*."<sup>351</sup> The consequence of this shaking is something potentially akin to nihilism, existential despair, or decay. In the Third Essay of the *Heretical Essays*, Patočka addresses the questions and problems that emerge from the birth of philosophy, with the confrontation of mankind with new, absolute, and unlimited truths or possibilities of truths: these questions are related to the source of meaning (is meaning supplied by each individual or is it rather something collective, or pre-given?),

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<sup>350</sup> History and philosophy are co-constructing discourses according to this line of reasoning insofar as history exists *qua* history because philosophy constructs it as such: history is "more than aught else this inner history of the world as being, as distinct from what-is, yet as appropriate to it as the being of what is," and history could not construct such a history without the *a priori* existence of philosophy as the harbinger of history itself (Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, 49f.).

<sup>351</sup> Patočka, 62. Emphasis in original.

the relativity of meaning (is truth relative or absolute), and he questions the compatibility of truth and life (is it possible to go on living in a world in which what heretofore had supplied meaning has been devalued and in which one is now faced with the absolute truth?).<sup>352</sup> In answer to these question, Patočka references Plato's Allegory of the Cave. In this famous allegory, once the liberated cave dweller has beheld the truth underlying what theretofore had been his entire truth, thereby revealing all he had believed to be true to be merely a shadowy reflection of the truth, he feels compelled to return to the cave to share his experience of the truth (what Althusser might have called an "epistemological rupture") with his fellow prisoners—who are so attached to their realities and way of being that they put the truth-bearer to death. Patočka points out that, regardless of the animosity of the fellow prisoners or their refusal to see the truth, once the truth has emerged, there is no going back. The emergence is a fact, and neither the cave, nor the shadows, nor the existence of the liberated prisoner nor that of his captive fellows, shall ever be the same again after this *shaking*. This portion of Patočka's analysis bears quoting *in extenso*:

Passing through the experience of the loss of meaning means that the meaning to which we might perhaps return will no longer be for us simply a fact given directly in its integrity; rather, it will be a meaning we have thought through, seeking reasons and accepting responsibility for it. As a result, meaning will never be simply given or won once and for all. It means that there emerges a new relation, a new mode of relating to what is meaningful; that meaning can only arise in activity which stems from a searching lack of meaning, as the vanishing point of being problematic, as an indirect epiphany. If we are not mistaken, then this discovering of meaning in the seeking which flows from its absence, as a new project of life, is the meaning of Socrates' existence. The constant shaking of the

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<sup>352</sup> See analysis in Patočka, 55–59.

naïve sense of meaningfulness is itself a new mode of meaning, a discovery of its continuity with the mysteriousness of being and what-is as a whole.<sup>353</sup>

Here, Patočka explicitly transitions to the *μελέτη θανάτου*, the care for death. The meaning of Socrates' existence is "the discovering of meaning in the seeking which flows from its absence." In other words, Socrates' existed to discover that the meaning of life is death and that the meaning is to be found within the continuity of life within "the mysteriousness of being and what-is as a whole." Here, is the "sacrificial tradition" mentioned in the incipit of this chapter. Indeed, the *μελέτη θανάτου* is the birth of philosophy, of history, of politics. Insofar as the discovery of the horizon of death as freedom, insofar as it is both a limit and an infinity, it broke with prehistoric man's "bondage to the perennial maintenance of life [... and] the humility which teaches them to reconcile themselves with the lot of servitude to life and the toil of never-ending labor."<sup>354</sup> The remainder of Chapter Three reinscribes this Platonic project of finding meaning (the meaning of life and of being) within death as a desirable project for mankind, calling for "humankind to bring about a meaningful existence consistent with [history's gradual unfolding of the meaninglessness of the universe] – on condition of a gigantic conversion, of an unheard of *metanoein*."<sup>355</sup> What, for Patočka, extirpates life and being from total relativity and nihilism is that "at the very core of reality itself [there

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<sup>353</sup> Patočka, 60–61.

<sup>354</sup> Patočka, 62.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

is] something like the mysterious and the mystery.”<sup>356</sup> This mystery “can never be explained as a thing [it is] present only in the *seeking* of being.”<sup>357</sup> It is here that we begin to see the centrality of a specific approach to death to Patočka’s thought.

Indeed, the fifth essay of the *Heretical Essays*, entitled “Is Technological Civilization Decadent, and Why?”, lays out the central arguments of Patočka’s thought: the beginning of the book leads up to it, and the rest of the book could be read as a summation or application of what is advanced in these pages.<sup>358</sup> Patočka explains that the primary, pagan way of relating to the beyond of individual existence is through orgies and sacrifices. In the rituals of pagan religion, the individual is drawn out of the everyday and the particular into the world “of the erotic, of the sexual, of the demonic, of the dread of the holy [which] is then capable of penetrating and transforming our life. Face to face with this phenomenon, we tend to *forget* the entire dimension of the struggle for ourselves.”<sup>359</sup> This is the risk of looking death in the face, of a concern for death, or an interest in death devoid of responsibility and of the concept of “self care.” Instead, this type of loss of contact and of shaking is ecstatic, it is “an ek-stasis from this bondage, but it is not yet freedom.”<sup>360</sup> The bondage referred to is being bound to life and to the preservation of life, to work, to care for the past and the future. What then constitutes true freedom if not this ecstatic freedom? Indeed, it is philosophy that represents the

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<sup>356</sup> Idem.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>358</sup> Specifically, pp. 99-107.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 101.

“confrontation of the orgiastic with responsibility.”<sup>361</sup> More specifically, it is the Platonic concept of *meletē thanatou*, which is the:

overcom[ing] of death fundamentally by not fleeing from it but by facing up to it [...] care for death; care for the soul is inseparable from care for death which becomes the true care for life; life (eternal) is born of this direct look at death, of an overcoming of death (perhaps it is nothing but this “overcoming”). That, however, together with the relation to the Good, identifying with the Good while breaking free of the demonic and the orgiastic, means the rule of responsibility and so of freedom. The soul is absolutely free, that is, it chooses its destiny.<sup>362</sup>

This freedom is different from simply murdering, passively allowing oneself to die, or flinging oneself headlong into death. There is no relationship between what Patočka is describing and something that would be like a passive or even willing abandonment of the self to fate or reveling in bloodshed. These are so-called “demonic” modes of engaging with the frontier of the ecstatic and the free because they are fundamentally irresponsible. There is no “care” involved, neither for death nor for the self, which in the end amount to the same thing. In other words, the “orgiastic” relationship to death is the one inherent in the sacrificial tradition, in which victim and sacrificer become one in the moment of death, in the moment of depersonalization inherent in the orgiastic climax of sex and sacrifice.<sup>363</sup> In Jan Patočka’s words, the *μελέτη θανάτου* is instead a way of “identifying with the Good while breaking free of the demonic and the orgiastic [that makes] the soul absolutely free [because in that way] it chooses its destiny.”<sup>364</sup> Socrates,

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<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>362</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>363</sup> See especially: Bataille, *L’Érotisme*, 96 et passim; Bataille, *La part maudite*, 65ff, 81ff.

<sup>364</sup> Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, 105.

by his preparation for death, his *μελέτη θανάτου* as the correct practice of philosophy, showed how facing up to death does not remove the orgiastic element from death (it is always present), but rather made it secondary to his act of facing up to it, which is the gesture by which he frees himself from *only* being dissolved in it. Patočka, who relates this freedom from dissolution in the orgy of death with the survival of the eternal soul in both the Platonic and the Christian traditions, writes: “on the basis of the duality of the authentic/responsible and the exceptional/orgiastic [...] the orgiastic is not removed but is disciplined and made subservient.”<sup>365</sup> This responsibility takes the essence of the realization that death is the province of a “responsible I” (a responsible *ego* in the Freudian sense)<sup>366</sup> because it is “in the confrontation with death and in coming to terms with nothingness [...] where no one can take our place.”<sup>367</sup>

The last chapter of Patočka’s *Heretical Essays* seems to use a Heideggerian concept of *Gestell* or “enframing” to criticize the way in which Europe has been transformed by war into a sort of “energetic complex” into which the reality of death has been subsumed.<sup>368</sup> The technologizing of warfare and of death (the factory-methods used

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<sup>365</sup> Patočka, 106. See Derrida’s analysis of Patočka’s text as thinking the unthought of Platonism in Christianity: Derrida, “The Gift of Death,” chap. 1. Derrida explains in this chapter how the difference between paganism, Platonism and Christianity is the concept of responsibility and its repression. Yet, he argues there is something more Nietzschean than Heideggerian in the way Patočka analyzes the relationship between technology and inauthenticity as the return of the orgiastic (see “The Gift of Death,” 22).

<sup>366</sup> Although the term has resonances of North American ego psychology, I do not mean to imply any “presence to self” or humanism, but rather to evoke Freud’s idea of the capacity of sublimating the drives (sexual drives, aggression, etc.) into something higher: ethics, art, philosophy.

<sup>367</sup> Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, 107.

<sup>368</sup> Patočka, 123. See also, more generally: Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology.”

in the extermination camps of the Holocaust, for example) have dehumanized and “enframed” death in such a way that excludes it from the realm of the “responsible I” Patočka mentioned above. Patočka adopts the sacrificial discourse of a Bataille or even a Freud on pages 129-132 of the *Heretical Essays* in which he explores the psychology of the veteran of warfare and what he has learned about life on the front lines. The main discovery of one who has lived through an experience of total war on the front is that “life leans out into the night, into struggle and death, that it cannot do without this component of life,” for through the experience of warfare in which all might disappear in an explosive instant, life “has acquired an end beyond which there can be nothing further, higher, more desirable.”<sup>369</sup> Such a perspective would seem to lead to an almost Heraclitean dialectic out of which no *Aufhebung* can possibly result: “life itself gives birth to war and cannot break free of it with its own resources.”<sup>370</sup> This is precisely where Patočka intervenes with the rhetoric of death: if life cannot break free from the eternal cycle of war and dehumanization from which precisely the *beyond* and the *truth* in fact appear (the truth of metaphysics), but in an irresponsible and orgiastic sense, it is within death, but the responsible understanding thereof, that some sort of *Aufhebung* (Patočka uses the Greek term “*metanoia*” – a literal conversion of thought) might be possible, via a *solidarity of the shaken*, a solidarity between those whose lives have been shaken by the confrontation with death (and therefore the confrontation with history).<sup>371</sup> The solidarity

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<sup>369</sup> Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, 131.

<sup>370</sup> Patočka, 132.

<sup>371</sup> Patočka, 134.

of the shaken is intended to overcome the mechanization of war in which *others* are sent to their deaths, barring any responsible confrontation with the true meaning, and perhaps even the true choice of self-sacrifice that only an enlightened, “truly spiritual” person can hope to achieve.

At the core of Patočka’s appreciation of the state of Europe, and what he perceives as the decadence of technological society that has befallen it, he regards Greece as both a model to be returned to and also a memory that Europe must liberate itself from in order to achieve true freedom and renewal.<sup>372</sup> This is because the Greek polis and its tradition present itself as radically clear and transparent, devoid of mystery, whereas the so-called “gift of death” given to man by God (who are in a position of radical dissymmetry vis-à-vis one another) involves the keeping of a secret, of the *mysterium tremendum* of the earth-shaking consequences of the *meletē thanatou*.<sup>373</sup>

Nietzsche is extremely relevant to any discussion of the concept of sacrifice in Patočka—but also in Derrida’s reading of Patočka—and particularly Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*, which discusses the Greece to which Patočka references and in which he situates the birth of history itself. Nietzsche is also a central figure for identifying commonalities between Derrida and Patočka, particularly where the question of sacrifice

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<sup>372</sup> “Taken to its extreme, [*Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*] seems to suggest that the Europe to come must no longer be Greek, Greco-Platonic, or even Roman. The most radical insistence provided by the *mysterium tremendum* would be upon a Europe so new (or so old) that it would be freed from the Greek or Roman memory that is so commonly invoked in speaking of it; freed to the extent of breaking all ties with this memory, becoming heterogeneous to it.” Derrida, “The Gift of Death,” 30–31.

<sup>373</sup> According to Derrida, however, the position of this false transparency implied by democracy-without-secrets is but one step away from full-on totalitarianism, one in which the individual has no secrets and no difference with the community and with the State, one in which any such characteristics would have to be crushed. Derrida, 35. See also following chapter.

is concerned. For where Derrida and Patočka seem to disagree about questions related to theology, their agreement on the centrality of the *aporia* or the *mysterium tremendum* is predicated also on a common understanding of Sacrifice and its relation to questions of responsibility and ethics. The next section will explore the concept of sacrifice with reference specifically to Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, and this analysis will more thoroughly examine the commonalities and differences in Patočka and Derrida's approaches, as well as delve into the racist and Eurocentric implications of this line of thinking and their origins in Heidegger's thought.

*The Birth of Tragedy* [1872] was a work by young Nietzsche which set forth a vision of Greece and Greek antiquity that shook the 19<sup>th</sup>-century conception of Greece as the yardstick of truth and beauty, and of the premises of European cultural and even racial superiority. Instead of focusing on the purity and perfection of Greek art, Nietzsche sought to pierce through the surface of Greek tragedy in order to expose the wild and troubling undercurrents it contained. Nietzsche's analysis was (and remains) provocative and was received as such at the time: the critical fallout resulting from the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy* temporarily destroyed Nietzsche's reputation as a philologist and an academic, while simultaneously leaving a huge impact on the field and on his readers.<sup>374</sup> Nietzsche's reading of "tragedy"—the corpus of surviving tragic theatrical works passed down intact from Ancient Greece to the present day—is more psychoanalytic or

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<sup>374</sup> Kaufmann, "Translator's Introduction," 4–9.

deconstructionist than strictly philological.<sup>375</sup> It focuses on a category, that of “tragedy”, rather than on specific works or even specific details inherent to those works. It depersonalizes the works and treats them as a class; as it does their authors by treating both creator and work as both a product of a particular cultural and social superstructure at a given moment in time, and as the product of something universally and fundamentally applicable to humanity. Nietzsche’s reading of tragedy is a strike through the visible in order to reach what underpins it. Moreover, what Nietzsche believes he has found in tragedy is indeed applicable both to modern society and to the psychology of contemporary man, which is the most provocative part. Like Freud after him, Nietzsche is attempting to show man what he *is*, rather than what he has always believed he was.<sup>376</sup>

The premise of *The Birth of Tragedy* is that Greek tragedy is an idealized art form that combines the “Dionysian” and the “Apollonian” spirits, mediated for the public through a chorus of satyrs.<sup>377</sup> What Nietzsche meant by the term Dionysian was the world of chaos, formlessness, music, the instinctive, and the “collapse of the *principium*

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<sup>375</sup> “...for I at last thought that I possessed a charm to enable me—far beyond the phraseology of our usual aesthetics—to represent vividly to my mind the fundamental problem of tragedy; whereby I was granted such a surprising and unusual insight into the Hellenic character that it necessarily seemed to me as if our classical-Hellenic science that bears itself so proudly had thus far contrived to subsist mainly on shadow plays and externals.” Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” 2000, 100–101.

<sup>376</sup> See, on the value of dreams as opposed to waking reality: Nietzsche, 44–45.

<sup>377</sup> The word tragedy is a portmanteau of the words *τράγος* (goat) and *ὥδή* (song) in reference to the fact that the chorus was originally composed of Dionysian satyrs. Nietzsche believed that the “satyr was the archetype of man, the embodiment of his highest and most intense emotions, the ecstatic reveler enraptured by the proximity of his god, the sympathetic companion in whom the suffering of the god is repeated, one who proclaims wisdom from the very heart of nature, a symbol of the sexual omnipotence of nature which the Greeks used to contemplate with reverent wonder. The satyr was something sublime and divine” Nietzsche, 61.

*individuationis*”.<sup>378</sup> The Apollonian, on the other hand, is the desire for order, rules, separation, and individuation. Classical tragedy, Nietzsche believed, operated a perfect synthesis of the two orders, giving the spectator, in a controlled fashion, a pure vision of the “tenderest and deepest suffering [...] the terrible destructiveness of so-called world history as well as the cruelty of nature,” while consoling him via the chorus, which expressed the fact that “life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable.”<sup>379</sup> In other words, “the tragic myth is to be understood only as a symbolization of Dionysian wisdom through Apollonian artifices.”<sup>380</sup> Within the tragedy, the spectator is put into contact with “the highest artistic primal joy, in the bosom of the primordially One.”<sup>381</sup>

But what precisely might these “Dionysian” and “Apollonian” spirits be? They are, in fact, instincts or drives, in the Freudian sense (albeit *avant l’heure*). The first lines of *The Birth of Tragedy* place us squarely within the province of a certain vitalism or concept of tension-generating opposition between antagonistic life-forces (*viz.* Eros and Thanatos), here given the names Apollonian and Dionysian.<sup>382</sup> These two forces are responsible for the creation of everything (and particularly, here, art) in their absolute forms but also in all of their specific variations (just as life and death co-create the possibility of one another while giving rise to a wide variety of life-forms). As we see in

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<sup>378</sup> Nietzsche, 36.

<sup>379</sup> Nietzsche, 59.

<sup>380</sup> Nietzsche, 131.

<sup>381</sup> Nietzsche, 132.

<sup>382</sup> Nietzsche, 33.

the first lines, echoed towards the end of the text, Nietzsche is critical of any rational attempt to understand tragedy, as it precisely overlooks the irrational or metaphysical aspect of the work, and what its message has to show us about the nature of life itself.<sup>383</sup>

He vituperates as emotionally and aesthetically numb the aestheticians who “never tire of characterizing the struggle of the hero with fate, the triumph of the moral world order, or the purgation of the emotions through tragedy [*catharsis*], as the essence of the tragic.”<sup>384</sup>

Like Patočka’s advocating of a *metanoia* on a global scale, Nietzsche exhorts his readership to “believe with me in Dionysian life and the rebirth of tragedy. The age of the Socratic man is over; put the thyrsus into your hand, and do not be surprised when tigers and panthers lie down, fawning, at your feet. Only dare to be tragic men; for you are to be redeemed.”<sup>385</sup>

It is questionable whether Nietzsche’s *metanoia* is compatible with Patočka’s in the absolute sense. On a certain level, although Patočka is approaching the access to metaphysics through a Platonic *meletē thanatou* as one that also incorporates responsibility (in which, as we have seen, the orgiastic is made subservient to a greater cause), Nietzsche can be read (as Deleuze reads him) as advocating a total abandonment

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<sup>383</sup> The text begins “We shall have gained much for the science of aesthetics, once we perceive not merely by logical inference, but with the immediate certainty of vision, that the continuous development of art is bound up with the *Apollonian* and *Dionysian* duality—just as procreation depends on the duality of the sexes, involving perpetual strife with only periodically intervening reconciliations.” (Nietzsche, 33.)

In his study on Nietzsche, Francis Wotling places Nietzsche’s developments in *The Birth of Tragedy* in relation with his later critique of Socratic logic in “Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future,” sec. 191. See: Wotling, *La philosophie de l’esprit libre*, 199ff.

<sup>384</sup> Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” 2000, 132.

<sup>385</sup> Nietzsche, 124.

to the orgiastic as a means of achieving an existence of unfettered desire and total power. Patočka, the Platonist, advocating responsible, philosophical *meletē thanatou*, as emphasized by the description of Socrates' death in Plato's *Phaedo*, while Nietzsche's conception is the one that gave rise to a thinker such as Bataille, for whom sacrifice is orgiastic, bloody, and redemptive.<sup>386</sup> But what about Derrida's philosophy? Derrida states that his philosophy of deconstruction is a Nietzschean philosophy in that it affirms life. We have seen that in *Demeure, Athènes*, Derrida in some way distances himself from by interrogating the ineluctability and omnipresence of the Platonic-Socratic inheritance of philosophy as a practice of death: would it be that this is part of the aporia, the impossibility of finding a passage *out* of this situation that is most central to Derrida? Despite Derrida's vocal alignment with Nietzsche and his philosophy of life, unlike in Bataille's reading of Nietzsche, Derrida does not take a wantonly sacrificial approach to philosophy, he certainly does not advocate an irresponsible, orgiastic approach to death or to putting-to-death. Instead, Derrida's relationship towards the Platonic tradition's insistence upon *meletē thanatou* as the essence of philosophy, his status as an *inheritor* of the tradition of *meletē thanatou* which haunts philosophy itself, is one of ambivalence but of *responsibility*. In this, he is closer to Patočka's responsibility for overcoming the "demonic" via responsible sacrifice and also in that, for neither Patočka nor Derrida, sacrifice never reveals or ends the mystery, the aporia: the origin is always lost. For Derrida, the imperative of responsibility is a responsibility towards an *inheritance*: an inheritance of philosophy, a legacy, but also an inheritance and legacy of *lifedeath* itself.

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<sup>386</sup> See, for example, Camus, *Acéphale*.

In *Echographies de la télévision*, Derrida writes, “Inheritance implies decision, responsibility, response, and consequently critical selection, choice. There is always choice, whether one likes it or not, whether it is or isn’t conscious. [...] That we are inheritance through and through does not mean that the past dictates something to us.”<sup>387</sup> It would seem that there is a contradiction here between the constraint of an inheritance that one is not free to reject or *not* receive, and the *freedom* of choice, which one can only conclude is therefore not absolute. Indeed, later in the same work, Derrida writes:

And this is why I am an inheritor: the other comes *before* me, I who am before him, I who am because of him, owing to him, owing him obedience, incapable of exchanging with him (not even a glance). [...] This is the law of the genealogy of the law, the irreducible difference of generation. From the moment that I cannot exchange or meet a glance, I am dealing with the other, who comes before me; an absolute autonomy is already no longer possible. And I cannot settle my debt, I can neither give back nor exchange because of this absence of the other, which I can’t look in the eye.”<sup>388</sup>

The inheritance of philosophy, like all inheritance, therefore, implies a lack of freedom of choice, an impossible debt that can never be settled, because the other is placed, by the irreducible law of generation, in an inaccessible past temporality. One must choose, but the choice is not free: the choice is one of asymmetric *responsibility*, one in which one remains an eternal debtor. Like the death in *Demeure, Athènes* to which one owes oneself, and like the photographs in *Demeure, Athènes* which capture a past that embodies both death and time in a relation to life and the present but which both permeate and are impervious to the latter, the inheritance of both philosophy and of death imply an approach of responsibility. A philosophy of life, then, which must necessarily

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<sup>387</sup> Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*, 69.

<sup>388</sup> Derrida and Stiegler, 122.

be imbued with an attitude of responsibility towards death, towards the inheritance of a philosophy of *meletē thanatou*, without necessarily reproducing it, slavishly, as Derrida asserts that Plato did with Socrates' teachings, both transcribing for posteriority and, in so doing, distorting his master's legacy.<sup>389</sup>

The Platonic text tells the truth and it lies: its truth is not to be found where it states it is to be found. Although the *meletē thanatou* and the "great sacrificial tradition" it entails are a part of Derrida's thought, as it is impossible to think *without* the Greeks, *without* Plato, he is at pains to distance himself from the tradition while at the same time he embraces it. The next chapter will in greater detail explore Derrida as a figure in the history of European metaphysics, of a tradition of "care for the soul" and *ars moriendi* which emerged out of the *meletē thanatou* of Plato and of the spiritual practices of the Greek philosophers. Understanding this element of Greek philosophy through Pierre Hadot, who was very influential on Foucault, helps us to view the Catholic/Christian imbrication with European thought in a different light, namely to understand spiritual exercises as a properly philosophical and not originally religious practice. Hadot also helps us understand why Foucault's approach to this aspect of philosophy was not compatible with Derrida's. It also helps us, *in fine*, read Derrida alongside a Catholic, neo-Platonist, Heideggerian such as his Czech contemporary Jan Patočka, to understand how both receive Plato's *meletē thanatou* via Nietzsche and Heidegger in order to understand Derrida in this way as first and foremost as thinker of the *aporia*, which

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<sup>389</sup> Derrida, *La carte postale*, 36, 69–70, 152, 159, et passim. For Francis Wolff: "*La Grèce de Derrida [...] se trouve dans des textes, et non hors d'eux ; dans des textes qui visent la vérité, mais dans ces textes pris comme signes, au mieux, d'une autre vérité et non porteurs de la vérité à laquelle ils prétendent eux-mêmes.*" "Trios," 234.

enables us to reconcile the position that Deconstruction is a philosophy of life: it can be said to be such only insofar it is an approach that has deeply and profoundly engaged with a contemplation of death.

### CHAPTER THREE: DERRIDA, PATOČKA, AND THE ESSENCE OF PHILOSOPHY AS MELETĒ THANATOU.

*In the life of man, his time is but a moment, his being an incessant flux, his senses a dim rushlight, his body a prey of worms, his soul an unquiet eddy, his fortune dark, his fame doubtful. In short, all that is of the body is as coursing waters, all that is of the soul as dreams and vapors; life a warfare, a brief sojourning in an alien land; and after repute, oblivion. Where, then, can man find the power to guide and guard his steps? In one thing alone: Philosophy.<sup>390</sup>*

*Demeure, Athènes*, is emblematic of Jacques Derrida's later philosophical writings insofar as it represents an engagement with the concept of "*meletē thanatou*" which had not been an explicit focus of his earlier work.<sup>391</sup> I argue that this change in focus in Derrida's work is at least in part inspired by Foucault's response to Derrida's well-known criticism of his *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (1963) in an essay entitled "Cogito et

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<sup>390</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, bk. II §17.

<sup>391</sup> I propose that *meletē thanatou* and *epimeleia tēs psychēs* (translated as care for the soul, care of the soul, care of the self, *souci de soi*, *souci de l'âme*, etc.) are interchangeable terms. Plato uses both the term *epimeleia tēs psychēs* and *epimeleia thanatou* alongside with *meletē thanatou*, where, according to the Liddell Scott dictionary, *ἐπιμέλεια* is defined as "care bestowed upon a thing, attention paid to it, and abstractly, attention, diligence" (therefore synonymous with *meletē*, with which it shares the same root verb *melō*, "to care for" or "to be an object of care") and *ψυχή* variously as: a) life; b) the immaterial and immortal soul; c) the conscious self or personality as center of emotions, desires, and affections, also the emotional self or the moral and intellectual self; d) the primary substance and source of life and consciousness in the philosophical writings of the early physicists; e) the spirit of the universe; f) in Plato, the immaterial principle of movement and life. It seems exceptionally seductive to consider here that *epimeleia tēs psychēs*, where *psychē* might mean life, is, for Plato; synonymous with the *epimeleia tou thanatou*, care for death.

histoire de la folie” (1967). It is apparent that Derrida’s late thought engages with death on an entirely different plane than his earlier work. Whereas in Derrida’s earlier work, the explicit focus was on a conceptualization of death in relation to linguistics and psychoanalytic drive theory, his later work changes style and tone and insists stylistically and thematically (and perhaps latently) upon the centrality of the *aporia* to a theorization of death, as he also expands his topical focus to questions implicating more explicitly Heidegger’s *being-towards-death*, the inheritance of Plato’s *meletē thanatou*, and the implications of these questions in terms of conceptualizing the inheritance and legacy of Europe and of European philosophy. Derrida was also intervening in a context in which his contemporaries in France, particularly Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot, were exploring in great detail the legacy of the Platonic-Christian tradition of “care for the soul” and Derrida’s work, also in his engagement with contemporary Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, touches on the imbrication between Greek philosophy, Christian spirituality (and particularly early Christian spirituality), and European philosophy, which all meet at the crossroads of their inheritance of *meletē thanatou*. Seen in this light, *Demeure, Athènes*, in particular, but also much of Derrida’s later work and teaching, is not only a work of historical, aesthetic, or philosophical speculation: it is a practical engagement with Classical Antiquity and its thinking of death as a *meletē thanatou*, a practice and an ascesis of death as a method of spiritual attainment, and in that sense, I argue, this work, along with certain other of Derrida’s work, constitute a practice of an *aporia* around the philosophical apprehension of death and of the practice of philosophy as a study of the inarticulable *beyond* of being.

This chapter is organized into several sections that branch out off of the central theme of *meletē thanatou* as Greek-Christian-European legacy in 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. The first part of this chapter begins with a discussion of Foucault on the question of *le souci de soi*, his interpretation of Ancient Greek spiritual practices, and his implicit and explicit intellectual engagement with Derrida. I argue that Foucault and Derrida are engaged in a *sotto voce* discussion around the concept of *meletē thanatou* / *le souci de soi* and that it is perhaps Foucault who pushed Derrida to more explicitly engage with this topic. Next, I will turn to Pierre Hadot, the most prominent intellectual to engage with this theme in France during that time, and an important intellectual interlocutor for Foucault: his perspective on ancient philosophy reveals it as a method for spiritual attainment and freedom from care by the apprehension of death as the ultimate horizon of being. However, the most important contribution of Hadot's work to the present is in the implication of the inverse: that certain spiritual practices of Christianity (and particularly the asceticism and gnosis surrounding death and rebirth) are therefore in fact not properly Christian, but rather appropriations from the Greek philosophical tradition. Because of the *aporetic* nature of this type of gnostic approach, Hadot's work is closely related to that of Jan Patočka, the Czech philosopher who also foregrounded the theme of care of the soul as the central facet of Ancient, especially Platonic, philosophy, but who also put it into relation with his own deeply-held Catholic faith.

In the second part of this chapter, I will examine the convergences and differences between Jan Patočka and Jacques Derrida's respective conceptions of *meletē thanatou* as foundational to Europe, both the European project, and European philosophy, which takes *meletē thanatou* as a predicate to any understanding of being. I will proceed to a

broader engagement with Patočka's thought in the context of death as a spiritual exercise or a method of care of the soul and explain how this represents an anti-humanist and asubjective phenomenological approach to the thinking of the event, and put this in relation with Derrida's own approach to thinking of the event. In this, both Derrida and Patočka are forced to reckon with the latent metaphysics and Catholicism in Heidegger's thinking of being. The third section of this chapter will focus on the problem of Eurocentrism in the thought of Heidegger, Patočka, and Derrida, inherent in a grounding of philosophical problems relating to the truth or nature of being in a Greek inheritance of *meletē thanatou*.

My goal will be to demonstrate that firstly, Derrida was influenced by both Foucault and Hadot, on one hand, and by Patočka on the other in his interpretation of the care of the soul. Secondly, I assert that Derrida's critique of Patočka was not only limited in scope, as it focused on only one portion of one of Patočka's works, but especially that it failed to consider Patočka's thought according to his own lifelong preoccupation with the metaphysics of presence. When considered from that angle, Patočka's thought appears not fundamentally incompatible with Derrida's own approach to these questions as an open-ended horizon, devoid of any teleology and in which neither the Christian nor the foreign are to be foregrounded in an understanding of Europe and European philosophy: in other words, an *aporia*. Moreover, reading Patočka *with* Derrida on questions of the care of the soul, the legacy of Greek philosophy, and the project of Europe as a project related to the truth of being is complementary, as both thinkers provide unique perspectives on the importance of all of these questions to contemporary life, but most importantly because through such a comparative reading, one is able to take the full

measure of the importance of Derrida's rhetoric style in recreating a thought-experience of the *aporia*, of plunging his readers into an experience of the *aporia*, regarding all of these questions about *meletē thanatou*, *lifedeath*, and ultimately, being.

**Derrida and Foucault: divergent approaches to the anachronistic question of the care of the soul**

*Foucault's problematic interpretation of care of the soul as "un travail de soi sur soi"*

In 1968, Derrida published the final version of a text entitled "Cogito et histoire de la folie" in a book of collected articles entitled *L'écriture et la différence*. In "Cogito et histoire de la folie," Derrida critiques the basic premises of Michel Foucault's 1963 *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, and identifies several allegedly incorrect specific claims and assertions made therein by his former teacher at the *Ecole normale supérieure*.<sup>392</sup> One of the salient points in Derrida's critique of Foucault's *Histoire de la folie* is his rebuttal of Foucault's assertion that madness as a category was formed during the 17<sup>th</sup> century as the opposite of reason (*logos*), before which time, according to Foucault, it had known no opposite. In the initial preface to *Histoire de la folie*, Foucault writes the words "*le Logos grec n'avait pas de contraire*," which is something Derrida

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<sup>392</sup> The specifics of the argument are not especially relevant to the present. See P. A. Miller's article cited *infra* for an analysis thereof.

seizes upon, demonstrating that *logos* was not unopposed in Ancient Greece: were *logos* somehow pure, immanent and unopposed<sup>393</sup>, the entire Socratic dialectic would have no sense, as its reason would have no opposite.<sup>394</sup> In “La pharmacie de Platon”, Derrida shows that the *logos* of Greek philosophy was a type of truth or reason contrasted with the truth or reason of *muthos* from which it emerged.<sup>395</sup> Furthermore, Derrida criticizes Foucault’s citing of a passage from Descartes to assert that the category of Western reason emerged *ex nihilo* during the seventeenth century as a result of the internment of the mentally ill, who came to be defined as such during that period.<sup>396</sup> This would be a logical inconsistency and a factual impossibility given the fact that the opposition between *logos* and the alterity against which *logos* must be contrasted in order to exist must have already existed during the age of Greek philosophy.<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> A central concern of Derrida’s work on the metaphysics of presence.

<sup>394</sup> Derrida, *L’écriture et la différence*, 63–64.

<sup>395</sup> Derrida, *La dissémination*, 1972, 38. While Derrida wants to use myth to show that there is no recoverable or identifiable origin of either myth or *logos* (the myth of origin), and therefore that there is no clear-cut distinction between philosophy and myth, even though the two are contrasted, Patočka will use the contrast to specifically identify what the difference between philosophy and myth are in terms of their respective truths, showing that even without being able to identify a precise origin to myth, myth in general has a truth, philosophy emerged in opposition to that truth (something Derrida would contest) and this occurred in Ancient Greece. Nonetheless, I think where Patočka and Derrida could be in dialogue is that whereas Derrida wants to avoid *opposing* the truth or reason of *logos* with the untruth or unreason of *muthos* in order to not operate a radical distinction between the two, Patočka is inclined to admit that there is a truth in *muthos* that is different from the truth of philosophy (not necessarily taken as *logos*, *per se*), and that the two are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary and different in their relationship to knowledge. See, e.g., Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 34–36, 73–75. See also on this topic Naas, “Earmarks.”

<sup>396</sup> Derrida, *L’écriture et la différence*, 62–66.

<sup>397</sup> Foucault himself opposes *logos* and “*ubris*” (i.e. *hubris*) in Antiquity, something Derrida uses to challenge his argumentation. By necessity, *logos* must have had a tradition and a history, as well as a contrary in order for it to emerge as a distinct concept *against* something else. *Logos* did

This was not merely a routine exercise in academic critique, nor did it go unnoticed by Foucault or the broader Parisian intellectual circles in which both men were active. In his biography of Jacques Derrida, Benoît Peeters recounts how Derrida's initial presentation of his critique of *Histoire de la folie* took the form of an oral presentation given at the first Parisian conference he attended.<sup>398</sup> Foucault was present in the audience, and reacted positively to Derrida's talk, even going so far as to praise Derrida even after the text's publication in an edited version in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*.<sup>399</sup> Nonetheless, the relationship between the two men soured as Derrida's renown grew, and Foucault began to attack Derrida in a number of fora, attempting specifically to refute and defuse his criticism of *Histoire de la folie*, leading to a growing antipathy between the two men.<sup>400</sup> While Foucault never succinctly rebutted Derrida's critique of his *Histoire de la folie* in a single definitive interview or text, it has been argued that Foucault did answer and did rebut Derrida's critiques throughout his later work and in interviews he gave, and notably via the adoption of an anti-Platonism that privileged Stoic thought; indeed, according to P. A. Miller, "Foucault implicitly argues that there is a counter-philosophical tradition to the Platonic one from which Derrida derives, a

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not emerge *ex nihilo*, as a monad, during Antiquity but rather developed and grew over time in opposition to other contemporary discourses and discursive practices. (Derrida, 65)

<sup>398</sup> Derrida, 166–68.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid, 296–299.

tradition whose primary focus is ultimately on practice rather than the *logos*, and whose chief concern is the ethics of self-fashioning rather than the metaphysics of presence.”<sup>401</sup>

From Derrida’s earliest work, the issue of “metaphysics of presence” is a central preoccupation. To roughly summarize what is at stake in this expression, the metaphysics of presence refer to the issue of whether or not the signifier and the signified can be ontologically united. In other words, whether or not the signifier can bring about the signified in such a way that the signified becomes fully present. When we refer to a concept such as “being,” Derrida asks whether or not it is possible to actually and fully discuss such a thing, or whether we are merely remaining encapsulated within the chain of signifiers, falsely positing a “logocentrism” that has historically (since Plato, in Derrida’s analysis) privileged the “logos” (the spoken word representing absolute reason and presence both temporally and to the self) over the written word, which was reviled as a subaltern and derivative form of expression.<sup>402</sup> The concept, the word, the *logos* can never exist in a pure, transcendental state without the distortion of language. Because speech has been privileged as a more immediate and purer form of expression than writing, Derrida wants to show that writing has been unjustly neglected in the Western philosophical tradition, and wrongly described as derivative or inferior to the spoken word, by re-establishing the preëminence of writing over speech, by reference to Freud, in particular, but also in order to emphasize the impossibility of presence, of *parousia*, of transcendence with regard, in particular, to a thinking of being.

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<sup>401</sup> Miller, “The Classical Roots of Poststructuralism,” 219.

<sup>402</sup> See especially, Derrida, *De la grammatologie*.

In Foucault's rebuttal of Derrida's critique of *Histoire de la folie*, he accuses Derrida of ignoring the fact that ancient philosophical schools outside of Platonism (and even some Platonists) "advocated the keeping of *hypomnēmata*, or notebooks, not as a substitute for memory [...] but as a form of practice, a technology of the self [i.e. an ascetic practice constituting a form of care of the soul]." <sup>403</sup> Moreover, according to Foucault, countering Derrida's major argument in *De la grammatologie* (viz., the repression of the written word in the Western philosophical tradition since Plato), in these competing traditions, "the grapheme is not the foreign element that threatens the interiority of the soul, but rather the technology that makes interiority possible." <sup>404</sup> In sum:

Foucault carefully and unobtrusively takes up each of Derrida's major themes with regard to the role of writing in the constitution of western philosophical reason—the *pharmakon*, *mnēmē* versus *hypomnēsis*, presence versus absence, interiority versus exteriority—and demonstrates the existence of a counter-tradition that Derrida ignores. That counter-tradition, like Foucault himself in his response to Derrida's attack on *Histoire de la folie*, privileges practice over the abstractions of pure reason, and self-fashioning over textuality in a vacuum. <sup>405</sup>

Foucault is accusing Derrida of a certain type of sophistry, of idle speculation and philosophy for the sake of philosophy, disconnected from its original concern with the good life, freedom from care, and ultimately, the perfectibility of the soul. However, as I have shown, and as this chapter will continue to demonstrate, Derrida's insistence on non-presence, on non transcendence, bars the legitimate conceptualization of any sort of

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<sup>403</sup> Miller, "The Classical Roots of Poststructuralism," 219–20.

<sup>404</sup> Miller, 220. This is also Derrida's argument in "Freud et la scène de l'écriture."

<sup>405</sup> Miller, "The Classical Roots of Poststructuralism," 220.

*being* (self, soul, etc.) that could be conceived of *as such* and could be presented *as such*, without the distortion of representation given the deferral operated within both language and the unconscious, via which such thoughts, such conceptions must pass (or out of which they are produced) before being pondered. Moreover, Derrida's emphasis on non-presence is neither accessory to, nor extraneous to, Derrida's thought on being and on death: it is indeed *inherent to* Derrida's thinking on both being and on death, as it is to his reception of and his reworking of Ancient philosophy and its legacy (or, as legacy). The result is Derrida's emphasis on the *aporia* of a thinking of being and of a thinking of death.

Examining Derrida and Foucault's thinking on this topic seems to merit a detour via Pierre Hadot, whose interpretation of Ancient philosophy was extremely influential on Foucault, and which will also help us better study Derrida, Heidegger and also Patočka on these questions in latter portions of this chapter.

*Foucault and Hadot: what is care of the soul?*

Michel Foucault came to be interested in the topic of the "care of the soul" as a result of the work of a contemporaneous philosopher of antiquity, Pierre Hadot, who, during the 1970s, was working on the unfashionable topic of classical Greek philosophy in its relationship to the care of the soul.<sup>406</sup> This topic was unfashionable precisely because, as

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<sup>406</sup> Although the following will focus on the influence of Hadot on Foucault's thought, Foucault was also aware of Patočka and his work on the care of the soul. Tellingly, after expressing admiration for the Czech philosopher's book *Plato and Europe*, Foucault marks his divergence from his approach to the care of the soul: "*Le point sur lequel je me séparerai de lui, tout en reconnaissant combien il est intéressant comme analyse de l'épimeleia et du souci, c'est qu'il envisage essentiellement l'épimeleia comme souci non pas de soi, mais de l'âme. C'est-à-dire*

Hadot argued, the theme of the “care of the soul” had been so thoroughly recuperated by Christian religious discourse and spiritual practices that it was unjustly ignored in the study of ancient philosophy, to which it was absolutely central. Hadot aimed to demonstrate that Greek philosophy was not merely an affair of intellectual speculation on the nature of being; rather, it was a technique<sup>407</sup> via which man could achieve *ἀταραξία* (ataraxia: inner peace, peace of the soul, freedom from worry), *αὐτάρκεια* (autarkeia: inner freedom, freedom of action), and *μεγαλοψυχία* (megalopsychia: cosmic awareness or consciousness, breadth of the psyche).<sup>408</sup> Given the anti-humanist and atheist climate of the French intellectual scene in the 1970s, Hadot’s line of enquiry might seem anachronistic, even questionable. And yet, Hadot’s thought is not fundamentally incompatible with anti-humanism. Indeed, he even shows to an extent how Ancient thought of the care of the soul can be recuperated and reinterpreted within the framework

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*qu’il n’envisage, me semble-t-il, cette thématique que sous la forme, dans la direction et sous le profil de la connaissance et de l’ontologie de l’âme. Tout ce qui est au contraire la notion et le thème du souci de soi comme mise en épreuve, mise en question, examen, vérification de la vie (du bios) disparaît dans son analyse.”* (Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité: le gouvernement de soi et des autres II. Cours au Collège de France, 1984*, 119. Cited in: Suvák, “Patočka and Foucault,” 1.)

<sup>407</sup> Or perhaps a series of techniques, of spiritual exercises. A list of such “stoico-platonic” exercises is supplied by Hadot (*Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 26) citing from Philo of Alexandria. It includes: *ζητήσεις* (*zētēsis*, seeking), *σκέψις* (*skepsis*, deep examination), reading, *ἀκρόασις* (*akroasis*: attentive listening), *προσοχή* (*prosochē*: careful attention), *ἐνκράτεια* (*enkrateia*: self-mastery), and indifference to what is unimportant.

<sup>408</sup> Hadot, 309. Cf. Patočka’s analysis of care of the soul in Plato as being divided into three aspects: the ontocosmological aspect (never articulated by Plato but always present); the care of the soul in the community as the imperative of adhering to truth (Socrates’ death as maintaining truth faced with the injustice of a decadent community); and the care of the soul regarding inner life (mortality and incorporeality). (*Plato and Europe*, 97.) Compare also with Christopher Fynsk’s assertion that in Heidegger, the concept of *being-towards-death* (*Sein-zum-Tode*) involves a triad of its own by which Dasein must firstly hold itself in the truth of death; secondly, hold death as true; and, thirdly, hold the truth of death (Fynsk, *Heidegger*, 37).

of 20<sup>th</sup>-century thought. *Autarkeia* should not be understood as a type of absolute freedom of action and of consciousness that would elide the Freudian discovery of the “other scene” of the unconscious. Nor ought a term such as *megalopsychia* be understood as a positivist conception of anthropocentric omniscience and omnipotence. Instead, as Hadot points out:

*Dans le platonisme, mais tout aussi bien dans l'épicurisme et le stoïcisme, la libération de l'angoisse s'obtient donc par un mouvement dans lequel on passe de la subjectivité individuelle et passionnelle à l'objectivité de la perspective universelle. Il s'agit non pas d'une construction du moi, comme œuvre d'art, mais au contraire d'un dépassement du moi, ou tout au moins d'un exercice par lequel le moi se situe dans la totalité et s'éprouve comme partie de cette totalité.*<sup>409</sup>

In the foregoing citation, Hadot is expressing a divergence with Foucault. The aim of ancient philosophy is not the cultivation of the self, or the development of an aesthetics of existence, as Foucault claimed.<sup>410</sup> Rather, for Hadot, the ancients were aiming at inner peace through the confrontation with the mysteries of life, the acceptance of death, and the awareness of one's participation in the universality of existence.

Furthermore, although Hadot did not articulate this point in his essay on his commonalities and divergences with Foucault<sup>411</sup>, it is relevant at least to the debate between Foucault and Derrida that Foucault placed a great emphasis on Stoicism in his conception of the care of the soul, whereas Derrida (like Patočka) was more heavily engaged with Platonism. For example, Hadot's most famous essay, entitled “Exercices

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<sup>409</sup> Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 310.

<sup>410</sup> Hadot, 307–8.

<sup>411</sup> Hadot, 305–12.

spirituels et philosophie antique,” details a clear difference between Stoicism and Platonism in their approach to spiritual exercises.<sup>412</sup> While the Stoic, Epicurean, and Platonic schools of philosophy place an equal emphasis on the central role of philosophy as a method for enabling man to “pass from an inauthentic state of life—benighted by a lack of awareness, gnawed at by anxiety—to an authentic state of life in which man attains self-knowledge, an exact vision of the world, and interior peace and liberty,”<sup>413</sup> there is a difference between the three schools’ approaches to philosophy as a spiritual exercise, and that involves a question of morality. The Stoics teach:

To philosophize means to train oneself to ‘live’, meaning to live consciously and freely: consciously, by overcoming the limits of individuality via the realization that one is a part of a cosmos animated by reason; freely, by renouncing desire for what does not depend on us and that escapes us, by only clinging to what depends on us – correct action guided by reason.<sup>414</sup>

The Epicureans teach:

Man’s unhappiness comes from fearing things that are not to be feared and desiring things that it is not necessary to desire and that escape him. His life is therefore consumed by the anguish of unjustified fears and unsatisfied desires. Man is thereby deprived of the only true pleasure, the pleasure of being. That is why Epicurean physics deliver man from that fear by demonstrating that the gods have no effect on the workings of the world and that death, being total dissolution, is not part of life. Epicurean ethics deliver man from insatiable desires, by distinguishing between desires that are natural and necessary, desires that are natural yet unnecessary, and desires that are neither natural nor necessary. By satisfying the first, renouncing the third and possibly also the second, man will be freed from care and will cause the pleasure of living to emerge.<sup>415</sup>

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<sup>412</sup> Hadot, 19–74.

<sup>413</sup> Hadot, 23. All translations mine.

<sup>414</sup> Hadot, 33.

<sup>415</sup> Hadot, 34.

Therefore, both the Stoics and the Epicureans place faith in man's ability to struggle against his passions by depending on the providence of an outside source: reason, for the Stoics, as something objective, external, and accessible; bounteous and provident Nature, for the Epicureans.

Inversely, the Platonic school teaches that man must strive for the divine through dialogue. The Platonic dialogue is, at root, a dialogue with oneself, the purpose of which is to convert oneself to a certain point of view.<sup>416</sup> True dialogue is the dialogue that provokes conversion (*metanoia*<sup>417</sup>) and such dialogue is only possible on the predicate that one who engages in such a dialogue really "*wants* to change, if he really *wants* to find truth, if he *desires* Good with all of his heart, if he *accepts* to *submit* to the rational *demands* of Logos."<sup>418</sup> The similarities with religious conversion are here apparent. Lastly, Hadot critiques Foucault's assertion that philosophy ceased to be understood as a "*travail de soi sur soi*" as a result of Descartes, for whom it was enough to meditate alone on oneself to have access to the truth. For Hadot, this rupture occurred during the Middle Ages, when philosophy became the auxiliary of theology and when philosophy's spiritual

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<sup>416</sup> Hadot, 45.

<sup>417</sup> Hadot explains in the essay entitled "Conversion" that the single Latin word *conversio* (which gave rise to the English and French words 'conversion') regroups two distinct concepts in Greek, viz., *epistrophē* (ἐπιστροφή) and *metanoia* (μετάνοια). The former refers to "a change in direction"; the latter, to "a change in mindset". Conversion in the philosophic domain, as recuperated by early Christianity, means "a change in mindset ranging from mere change of opinion to total transformation of the personality." (Hadot, 223) [all translations mine]

<sup>418</sup> Hadot, 47. Emphasis mine.

exercises were assimilated as a part of Christianity.<sup>419</sup> Indeed, for Hadot, the aspects of ancient philosophy concerned with care of the soul and spiritual fulfillment as the purpose of philosophy have become so thoroughly recuperated by Christianity that it is nearly impossible to the contemporary mind to dissociate them from a theological or pastoral discourse.<sup>420</sup> Moreover, as previously stated, Foucault's emphasis on self-realization in the form of an aesthetics of the self was antithetical to Hadot's own approach. The purpose of care of the self in the Ancient (and Christian) tradition is not, to employ a contemporary formulation, 'to be the best *you* you can be' (nor a *travail de soi sur soi*, properly speaking). At least not for the purposes of self-improvement. To be the best *you* you can be necessitates an intellectual operation by which the signified designated by the aforementioned italicized *you* (the "I") is overcome, rather than aestheticized or improved for its own sake (perhaps it could be called *un travail sur soi*

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<sup>419</sup> Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 310.

<sup>420</sup> Hadot, 21. Hadot argues that this occurred during the Middle Ages, but I think it could easily be argued that the process of recuperation by Christianity of the discourse of care of the soul and *epimeleia tou thanatou* began much earlier than the Middle Ages. Indeed, spiritual classics by the Patristic fathers display clear influence and reference to Platonism and Greek philosophy more generally, even if begrudgingly or with the intent to diminish the importance or relevance of Greek thought over that of the Bible. For example, in his classic work on monastic asceticism, St. John Climacus ends his chapter on the "Remembrance of Death" by admitting that "even the Greeks have said some such thing, because they describe philosophy as meditation on death." (John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 135.) See also, for an interesting account of the way in which Christian Asceticism in the Early Church incorporated the practice of the mindfulness of death from Ancient philosophy into monastic and ascetic devotional practices: Malandrakis, "The Mindfulness of Death According to the Ascetic Patristic Tradition." It is possible that Christianity merely "Christianized" a practice of mindfulness and of care that had been common already in pre-Christian Greco-Roman culture. Hadot describes the Epicurean use of apophthegmata, or useful maxims, that could be used by followers in order to dispel anxiety or to help make the right decision in times of doubt (p. 35); is this not reminiscent of the index inserted in the back of the type of Bibles one finds in hotel rooms, which direct the disquieted faithful towards specific passages of the Bible meant to assuage states of sorrow, anxiety, grief, doubt, etc.?

*pour dépasser ou se libérer de son soi*). Whatever divergences Hadot and Foucault may have had as to chronology or the proper purpose of philosophy (and it is not clear that Foucault would have been aware of them, given the short time that elapsed between the beginning of his exchanges with Hadot and his untimely demise as a result of AIDS), it was nonetheless Foucault who suggested that Hadot apply to the Collège de France, and the two began an exchange that is reflected in the introduction to Foucault's *Usage des plaisirs* and the chapter of *Le souci de soi* entitled "La culture de soi," reflecting how much Foucault felt indebted to his colleague.<sup>421</sup> Nonetheless, the central point of divergence between Hadot (along with Derrida) and Foucault can be said to revolve around the concept of metaphysics of presence, although Hadot did not employ that term directly. The central difference between the Stoics and the Platonists is to be found in the theme of *apophasis*, what cannot be expressed about eternity, metaphysics, and being in language. If such experiences or concepts cannot be expressed, it is not because they do not exist, but rather because the domain of language itself is fundamentally restricted in that it fallaciously corrupts these concepts via the falsehood of presence. These things cannot be made present or transmitted by speech or writing, they are truths that can only be experienced from within.<sup>422</sup> This philosophy of non-presence, of aporia and of apophaticism is common to Derrida and to Patočka, who will form the subject of the following chapter in their relation to one another and to Heidegger.

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<sup>421</sup> See account of the exchanges between the two scholars in Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 305–6. Hadot's references to his influence on Foucault's work can be found in the following loci: Foucault, *Le souci de soi*, 60; Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs*, 15.

<sup>422</sup> Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 239–54.

**Convergences and differences in Derrida and Patočka's approaches to the care of the soul and to Europe's Greek heritage**

*Derrida's critique of Patočka's atheist Christianity*

In *The Gift of Death* (*Donner la mort*), Derrida sustains his sole explicit analysis of and engagement with Patočka's thought. Specifically, Derrida focuses on a portion of Patočka's book *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*. He identifies in Patočka's project a desire to untangle the *repressed* and *incorporated* Platonism within Christianity, "which suppresses yet retains Platonic mystery."<sup>423</sup> The aspect of mystery is important because it goes to the heart of the mystical experience and the scintillating, elusive core of being that places humans in a relationship of responsibility towards their own being and towards one another. The mystery is what is veiled and what is not accessible to everyday consciousness, it is what lies beyond the pale of average experience, and it is, according to Derrida, "tied to a culture of death, in other words, to the different figures of the gift of death or putting to death."<sup>424</sup> Platonism engages with this question more so than other philosophical traditions because:

the means of which Platonic responsibility triumphs over orgiastic mystery is the movement by which the immortality of the individual soul is affirmed—it is also the death given to Socrates, the death that he is given and that he accepts, in other words the death that he in a way gives to himself when in the *Phaedo* he develops

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<sup>423</sup> Derrida, "The Gift of Death," 11.

<sup>424</sup> Derrida, 12.

a whole discourse to give sense to his death and as it were to take the responsibility for it upon himself.

Plato's *Phaedo* is then the central text for appreciating the secret links between death and responsibility, taking responsibility for death and reversing the question of who gives death: when death is accepted, it is no longer received passively, but rather accepted fully and received as a matter of one's own responsibility. This attitude towards death, consisting of "attentive anticipation of death, care brought to bear upon dying, meditation on the best way to receive, give, or give oneself death, experience of a *vigil* over the possibility of death, and over the possibility of death as impossibility,"<sup>425</sup> is precisely the definition of philosophy itself in the *Phaedo*. Insofar as the individual comes to "respond" to death in a carefully considered way, a way in which death is made one's own and accepted as both fundamental and unknowable, rather than passively receiving it as a surprise, a shock, or an event of sacrificial significance, this approach to death effectively overcomes (or "*disciplines and [makes] subservient*"<sup>426</sup>) the *orgiastic* element of death inherent in war and especially religious sacrifice.

According to Derrida, "Patočka is quite right to speak here of mystery or secrecy in the constitution of a *psyche* or of an individual and responsible self. For it is thus that the soul separates itself in recalling itself to itself, and so it becomes individualized, interiorized, becomes its very invisibility. And hence it philosophizes from the

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<sup>425</sup> Derrida, 14.

<sup>426</sup> Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, 106.

beginning.”<sup>427</sup> However, throughout *The Gift of Death*, Derrida seeks to operate a distinction between Patočka’s Neoplatonic appreciation of philosophy as *meletē thanatou* and death as approached in Heidegger. Specifically, whereas Heidegger constantly sought to de-Christianize his thinking, Patočka allegedly attempts to do the inverse.<sup>428</sup> The consequence of this is that: a) Christianity has not fully worked through its Platonic heritage (which Derrida analyzes using the psychoanalytic valences of the terms *incorporation* and *repression*, which he finds in the French translation of Patočka<sup>429</sup>), and, b) that “Europe will not be what it must be until it becomes fully Christian.”<sup>430</sup> This so-called “fully Christian” Europe, however, would also be fully Greco-Roman, while simultaneously being totally liberated from Christianity and its Greco-Roman heritage because of the metabolization (or perhaps actualization) of the repressed and incorporated nature of those inheritances. Derrida’s critique of Patočka is that this is not only an impossibility, because of the fallacy of full presence that it implies, almost in a messianic way, but also that it would bear tremendous risks of totalitarianism, on one hand, and total irresponsibility, on the other. Drawing from Rodolphe Gasché’s analysis of Derrida’s critique of Patočka, one can conclude that because, on one hand, Platonism requires total transparency for a democratic system to truly function, it eliminates mystery and the ownmost of the self, which results in the type of totalitarianism into

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<sup>427</sup> Derrida, “The Gift of Death,” 16–17.

<sup>428</sup> Derrida, 24–25; see also: Gasché, “European Memories: Jan Patočka and Jacques Derrida on Responsibility,” 295.

<sup>429</sup> Derrida, “The Gift of Death,” 11, 22, et passim.

<sup>430</sup> Derrida, 30.

which democracy degenerated under Communism in Eastern Europe, a system that Patočka himself not only criticized, but which was also directly responsible for his death at the hands of his secret-police interrogators; and on the other hand, that a fully-Christian Europe would revolve around the “*mysterium tremendum*, by which the unique and singular self is called to responsibility by God’s gift alone,” which would mean that no one has to answer to any earthly collectivity: it would suffice for each human being to satisfy his own sense of responsibility, meaning that due to an absence of responsibility to others or to the collectivity, total irresponsibility could result.<sup>431</sup> In other words, Derrida is pointing out the totalitarian risk<sup>432</sup> inherent in “Patočka’s attempt to free Christianity from its Platonic foundation and to conceive of a Europe emancipated from both Athens and Rome.”<sup>433</sup>

Nonetheless, Derrida’s analysis of Patočka’s thought reposes mainly on one chapter (chapter 5) of *Heretical Essays*. I would venture that had Derrida examined more closely Patočka’s more sustained work on the topic of Platonism and Europe (in a work entitled *Plato and Europe*), his conclusion would have been more nuanced, and perhaps his criticism would not have been so radical.<sup>434</sup> In Derrida’s analysis of Heidegger’s approach to death as “that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. [...]”

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<sup>431</sup> Gasché, “European Memories: Jan Patočka and Jacques Derrida on Responsibility,” 307–8.

<sup>432</sup> “From there it takes very little, a single step, to envisage an inevitable passage from the *democratic* (in the Greek sense) to the *totalitarian*.” Derrida, “The Gift of Death,” 35.

<sup>433</sup> Gasché, “European Memories: Jan Patočka and Jacques Derrida on Responsibility,” 308.

<sup>434</sup> See, for an exploration of the profound influence of Patočka on Derrida, and which suggests that Derrida and Patočka are thinkers that expand on one another’s thought: Sternad, “Jan Patočka, or: The Hidden Source of Jacques Derrida’s ‘Phenomenology of Religion.’”

No one can die for me if ‘for me’ means instead of me, in my place,”<sup>435</sup> he identifies Heidegger as grouped together with Kant, Hegel, Levinas, and Kierkegaard as “[belonging] to this tradition that consists in proposing a [...] *thinking* that repeats the *possibility* of religion without religion.”<sup>436</sup> Because Derrida does identify that this mode of “*thinking*” seeks to identify a subterranean logic within Christian thinking of the gift as infinite love (e.g. the Eucharist) that therefore dispenses with the “need of *the event of a revelation or the revelation of an event*,”<sup>437</sup> it is precisely for that reason that his critique of Patočka’s thought as a political philosophy leading to a Platonic or Christian totalitarianism, is curious.<sup>438</sup> Since in his own admission, there is no need for the *event* to actually occur (moreover, such a thing would be possible as it would eliminate the future always-to-come), we are not speaking in terms of a philosophy that could properly be called “political” in the sense of agonistic or somehow operative. If Patočka’s philosophy is radical, even revolutionary, it is in the sense of the ineffability of the substance of the conversion (*metanoia*) that he calls for, not in the implications of a political system based on a novel hybridization of Christianity and Platonism. This is because, for Patočka,

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<sup>435</sup> Derrida, “The Gift of Death,” 42.

<sup>436</sup> Derrida, 50. On the atheistic Christianity articulated by Patočka, see, e.g., Hagedorn, “‘Christianity Unthought’—A Reconsideration of Myth, Faith, and Historicity.”

<sup>437</sup> Derrida, “The Gift of Death,” 50.

<sup>438</sup> While admitting that he is “stretching things a little further than he [Patočka] or the letter of his text would allow,” Derrida also critiques Patočka for failing, like Heidegger, to dispense with the concept of original sin, by which man is always in an *ab initio* relationship with sin, before even having committed a single action. Derrida seeks to assert that therefore, for Patočka, responsibility is predicated on one’s relationship to guilt for that sin, and therefore something external and existing independently of the individual, rather than something internal predicated on the individual’s relationship to death. See, Derrida, 51–53.

rather than considering the *metanoia* he calls for in terms of an event that could be described in messianic terms (i.e. the apocalypse or the advent of the reign of Christ), it is instead an emergence, a dynamic process via which the truth (of philosophy taken as *meletē thanatou*) emerges. This emergence is not a discrete moment and is not necessarily universal. Instead, it is a process and it cannot properly be considered as bearing the risks of totalitarianism that Derrida brings up, because it is not a regime or collective state that could ever be institutionalized as such.<sup>439</sup>

*Patočka and the care of the soul as the essence of philosophy*

For Patočka, care of the soul is the fundamental legacy and innovation of Greek philosophy. As in Hadot, in Patočka we read that philosophy is capable of bringing the individual to a level of consciousness that is equivalent to that of the gods, for there is no difference in the *quality* of the lives of men as compared to those of the gods, the only difference is length, as the gods are immortal whereas men's lives are finite in time.<sup>440</sup> Patočka discusses the fact that Greek tragedy shows us that man is a creature of truth, but that the truth is a damnation for him, because it reveals to him his mortality and his small, finite place within the universe; yet, the Greek innovation of philosophical truth is the creation of a plan for redemption within which man is destined not for damnation, but for

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<sup>439</sup> Actually, if this concept is considered in Derridean terms, it is not a *presence*, it is a constant becoming (*devenir*). The apocalypse and the *metanoia* are always becoming; in a sense, they are death itself taken in a specific relation to life that *does not* result in the end of history or a finality of being that would in some way be immortal or put an end to mortality as such.

<sup>440</sup> Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 13–14. This is recuperated in Orthodox Christianity as the concept of *theosis* (or deification): see, on this point, Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 225ff.

greatness.<sup>441</sup> The myth of Œdipus shows the truth of what it means to be human—to wit, a creature at once damned and sacred. Greek philosophy is inherently bound up with myth insofar as it posits an initial disclosure of the truth and seeks to penetrate the veil of what it means to *be* Œdipus *after* his knowledge was obtained: in other words, what it means to be blind and wandering, and yet to know the truth.<sup>442</sup>

It is in that state of blindness and wandering that Greek philosophy sets forth its program to enable man to attain greatness within his damnation. It is possible for mankind to reach divine omniscience and a cosmic perspective through *meletē thanatou*, an authentic care for death, which enables him to become either degenerate or great.<sup>443</sup> According to Patočka, this is the legacy of Europe, and it began to collapse after the 15<sup>th</sup> century. We now live in an age in which Europe has entirely collapsed and in which the project of millennia has capsized, along with the foundations of the European State and its system of law.<sup>444</sup> The entirety of European culture was built on the spiritual foundation constructed by the Greek philosophical apparatus and which radiated outwards from the territory of Europe as a result of European domination of its colonized territories and peoples.<sup>445</sup> Yet, it was precisely that colonial enterprise that, in conjunction with the alienating forces of technology and science, caused the downfall of Europe. Europe had meant a project that was intended to bring about the City of God on Earth; instead,

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<sup>441</sup> Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 35.

<sup>442</sup> Patočka, 49. See also, on this topic, Girard, *La violence et le sacré*.

<sup>443</sup> Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 36.

<sup>444</sup> Patočka, 36.

<sup>445</sup> Patočka, 41.

Europe wrought terror and domination, which led to its losing its way by losing touch with its ancient project.<sup>446</sup>

Patočka identifies this project as care for the soul, the means by which man may be free of decadence, both of society and of the flesh. In *Plato and Europe*, Patočka attempts a genealogy of this tradition. He begins with Democritus, for whom the care of the soul implied freedom from tradition and the ability to seek out the truth. For Democritus, the soul must remain faithful to truth by considering things as they are instead of according to the strictures of some greater ideal.<sup>447</sup> This relentless search for the truth, according to Democritus, is a form of care of the soul that enables the soul to travel through eternity and correspond with what is divine and eternal. For Plato, on the other hand, it is only philosophy that allows the soul to be what it can be. Only focusing on the physical world is harmful to the soul. Instead, according to Plato, understanding is what enables man to become what he is meant to be.<sup>448</sup> Patočka identifies three manifestations of care of the soul in Plato: firstly, it is a complete plan of existence; secondly, it is a plan for a new political life; and, thirdly, it is a clarification of what the soul is itself.<sup>449</sup> This implies, in the first manifestation, an ontocosmological aspect which is always present but never directly articulated by Plato.<sup>450</sup> This is the ineffable and the

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<sup>446</sup> Patočka, 89.

<sup>447</sup> Patočka, 77.

<sup>448</sup> Patočka, 81.

<sup>449</sup> Patočka, 86.

<sup>450</sup> Patočka, 97. Eddo Evink describes this third ontocosmological aspect as both the most “‘authentically human movement,’ [because] only in this movement human existence in the true sense can be found.” and as the “moment of surrender *par excellence*”. He relates it to

open-ended aspect of Plato that Patočka most-centrally focuses on in his formulation of Negative Platonism (see *infra*.) The second manifestation is the care of the soul in the community when faced with a conflict between two ways of life: justice and injustice. According to Socrates, sustaining injustice was preferable to doing injustice, and his death reflected that, as it was the death of a just and truthful man at the hands of the unjust and untruthful. This is the type of sacrifice that Patočka glorifies in his *Heretical Essays*; a sacrifice that is a manifestation of *metanoia*, in which a wholly-accepted death represents freedom from death.<sup>451</sup> The third manifestation concerns the inner life and concerns questions such as mortality and incorporeality. It is the most intimate and innermost current of the care of the soul.<sup>452</sup> This question of the inner life means that the soul, in relation to itself, must consider “the problem of the status of its own being [...]: whether in its being it is something fleeting, or whether in its depths it is not something eternal.”<sup>453</sup> The third point (the question of inner life) and the first point (the unformulated ontocosmological aspect of Platonic thought) are more important than the second point (the relationship of the soul to life in the community) in *Plato and Europe*, while the second point is more the focus of the *Heretical Essays*. Nonetheless, they are

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Heideggerian *aletheia*, revealing the meaning of being both in the world and in an individual sense. Evink, “Jan Patočka and the Christian Heritage,” 50.

<sup>451</sup> Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 97. Patočka is clearly making Socrates out to be a Christological figure in this instance, an exceptionally moral figure whose death redeems mankind of eternal death itself. This conclusion is also reached by Eddo Evink, who claims that it is only by reading Plato from a Christian perspective that Patočka is able to claim that the roots of Europe are uniquely Greek, and not Christian. Cf.: “Jan Patočka and the Christian Heritage,” 59.

<sup>452</sup> Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 97.

<sup>453</sup> Patočka, 123.

all basically inseparable from one another and contingent upon one another, given that one can never be realized independently from the others.

*Patočka and the horizon of death as non-event*

In the *Gift of Death*, Derrida's critique is mainly focused on the implications of Patočka's thought for the second aspect of the Platonic system of care of the soul. Above, I posited that Derrida's critique of the second point is too absolute insofar as it does not consider the nature of the *realization* of the relationship of the individual to the community in a perspective of authentic care of the soul. Specifically, for Patočka, the dignity and singularity of man is that the world (reality) manifests itself in him.<sup>454</sup> At first glance, this seems to pit Patočka on a direct collision course with structuralist argumentation, for which the phenomenon is a lie, it is illusory. But perhaps we are not dealing with a properly phenomenological question here.<sup>455</sup> Perhaps, in fact, the

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<sup>454</sup> Patočka, 136. However, just because man is the locus of this revealing, "it does not mean he is adequate to that experience." (Patočka, "Negative Platonism," 201.) By this, Patočka means that the truth may manifest itself in man, but it does not mean that therefore it is *metaphysically present* in any concrete way in man. The conclusion of inadequacy means that the truth is not present *qua* truth in any subject *qua* subject. Instead, the experience one might describe as mystical or properly philosophical is one in which the subject is dissolved; it is an experience that points to the beyond of subjectivity as a frontier that is not adequate for the understanding of such truths, which do not obey the observational, phenomenological, or linguistic rules of science or positivism.

<sup>455</sup> Perhaps it would be possible to draw a relationship between something like what Althusser describes as Marx's *rupture épistémologique*, borrowing a term from Gaston Bachelard, by which Marx was able to separate from the ideology that shaped him during his earlier writings, to access an absolute truth about history and philosophy. See: Althusser, *For Marx*, 32–35.

Similarly, in Seminar IV, Lacan discusses the young Anna Freud's dream of strawberries which Freud recounts in his *Traumdeutung* (Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams.") and about which he rather astonishingly concludes: "*Rien nous force à penser que la petite Anna Freud fut inassouvie ce soir-là, bien au contraire. Ce qui se maintient dans le rêve comme un désir, certes exprimé*

phenomenon is not at all relevant here. Patočka specifically argues that the dignity and singularity of man resulting from the way truth is able to manifest itself in him is in relationship to *meletē thanatou*, the attentive contemplation of death. The Platonic myth, according to Patočka, is the myth that insofar as things are indestructible, man must be even more so, and so man, by death, is freed of his thingliness, his material being, and passes into a state of absolute freedom.<sup>456</sup> This is precisely what is argued in the *Phaedo*, and elsewhere, as “Plato’s grand myths are all about life *after death or before natality*, about life before this life.”<sup>457</sup> But being a myth, it speaks of a truth without addressing the question of after the truth. How does man position himself once he has obtained the truth, which is damnation? This is the question that is proper to philosophy. And it is in this light that Patočka argues that to the degree that the “showing of existence” is the “most essential element within man,” it has “some essential *relation to the finitude* of our existence.” (136) In other words, this finitude concerns not only the finitude of life, the fact of mortality, but also the limits of experience, of the phenomenon and the event. Mere being, pure experience, the reality of freedom as an absolute, permanent state, is not attainable in this life, for they are *not real*. The phenomenon itself is not a reality, just as

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*sans déguisement, mais avec toute la transposition de l'ordre symbolique, c'est le désir de l'impossible. Et si vous pouviez encore douter que la parole joue ici un rôle essentiel, je vous ferais remarquer que si la petite Anna Freud n'avait pas articulé cela en paroles, nous n'en aurions jamais rien su.*” (Lacan, *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan, livre IV : la Relation d'objet, 1956-57*, 183.) I would argue that fundamentally, Lacan is saying that Anna Freud’s speaking of her dream is revealing a fundamental truth about impossible desire (also inarticulable desire), which provided the material via which Freud was able to make a fundamental discovery. Had it not been for that dream, psychoanalytic knowledge might have been less than what it is.

<sup>456</sup> Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 123.

<sup>457</sup> Patočka, 137.

the experience of death itself, of being dead, is not a reality.<sup>458</sup> It is a horizon, the always-future moment, and something that is present, like a “*doublure*” in every moment, but it is never a tangible, lived reality. To cite Patočka directly:

We already showed that the phenomenon—that existence manifests itself—is something that cannot be converted into existents themselves, into their reality and their internally real structures. It is something, then, which is essentially *not-real*. And what is death? Is not *death* something like *the reality of this not-reality*? As long as we live, we always live face to face with this most fundamental situation, whereas death is at the same time the *completion of our freedom*, completion in the sense that from the world of things we cross to *mere being*.<sup>459</sup>

After Patočka had concluded the seminar session from which this citation is drawn, an anonymous attendee began an exchange with Patočka during the question-and-answer session, qualifying Plato as the philosopher of faith, because “Plato’s philosophy is evidently what he says of it: he speaks about it, but it cannot be said, it can only be comprehended.”<sup>460</sup> Patočka agrees with this anonymous person’s affirmation, and although Patočka merely acquiesces, it seems to me that this is a central point to understanding his project in *Plato and Europe*. Comprehension is neither a state of enlightenment nor of freedom from the world. Freedom from the drives, and from the need of choosing between good and evil (amongst other things) is a constant of life. There is no extinction of tension until death itself. Care of the soul, and specifically the practice of *ἐξέτασις*, or self-examination, careful scrutiny, is what “makes the soul fixed

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<sup>458</sup> See, for an analysis of Patočka’s “a-subjective phenomenology,” which describes how Patočka’s break from Husserl led to the articulation of a theory of the phenomenon independent both of objects and subjective perception, Bégout, “La phénoménologie décapitée ?”

<sup>459</sup> Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 136–37.

<sup>460</sup> Patočka, 148.

and disciplined, or [...] unrulable, undisciplined, unbounded, a decadent existence, which is the victim of the negative infinite, license. Why negative infinite? Because desires, pleasures, and pains can grow forever, they always demand more and more, and by this they distance man from possible form, they deprive him of a solid shape.”<sup>461</sup> The goal of philosophy is therefore to channel libido (vital energy, desire) into something that grows the soul, rather than something that limits it and brings it down. It is to point the way towards freedom from the non-reality of the phenomenon by indicating the contemplation of the *reality* of something that is not phenomenologically available (namely, subjectivity as *Sein-zum-Tode*) as the hypostasis of non-reality that supports and founds the rest, while remaining inaccessible as an object of direct contemplation or lived existence for the very reason that it is outside of both.

*Patočka's negative Platonism: ineffable metaphysics*

In an earlier text on negative Platonism, Patočka elaborated a position on philosophical apophaticism in which we can see the same ideas expressed in an earlier, yet more detailed form. Rather than referring directly to care for death as the basic philosophical problem, in this text, Patočka instead refers to Plato's concepts of the One or the Idea as the fundamental metaphysical concepts that are properly the realm of philosophy, but which exist only in the negative. Like Hadot, Patočka discusses how the metaphysical content of philosophy has been assimilated and recuperated by Christianity.<sup>462</sup> However,

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<sup>461</sup> Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 199.

<sup>462</sup> Patočka, “Negative Platonism,” 178.

he also explains that this metaphysical content is itself problematic in light of the history of philosophy, for philosophy will always demonstrate that any metaphysical assertion is nothing but “the result of faulty linguistic usage, of transparent linguistic fallacies.”<sup>463</sup> Rather than fight his battle for metaphysics by asserting that metaphysical facts do, in fact, exist, Patočka assents: “Metaphysics has no independent subject matter of its own. Where it assumes it does have one, objective and logical analysis will soon show that it is nothing but a fiction generated primarily by the structure of our language, a fiction with no counterpart in reality.”<sup>464</sup> Because there is no such thing as a “metaphysical fact” in any positive sense, Patočka returns to an analysis of “being” and the verb “to be,” demonstrating that fundamentally, they are “fictions as well,” as they have no positive content nor referent independent of language.<sup>465</sup> And yet, from Heidegger, being is what is most close to Da-sein in the sense that it discloses itself to Da-sein (while stating that Da-sein as object, as physical being, is not being) while at the same time being purely transcendent in the sense of pointing beyond mere objective, physical existence.<sup>466</sup> For Patočka, “logical positivism encloses humans within the limits of language and, supposedly, with the help of that language, within the sensible and the given.”<sup>467</sup> Insofar as that is true, logical positivism would prevent any proper interrogation of the meaning of being, which, for Heidegger was the principal preoccupation of philosophy, and would

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<sup>463</sup> Patočka, 176.

<sup>464</sup> Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 188.

<sup>465</sup> Patočka, “Negative Platonism,” 189.

<sup>466</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 33–41.

<sup>467</sup> Patočka, “Negative Platonism,” 190.

also prevent any investigation of anything that transcends individual sense experience or the “*I* that is subject to sense passivity as a mere object of investigation or study.”<sup>468</sup> Patočka critiques Heidegger for “conceiving of Being by way of a finite subject [Dasein]” and argues that as a result, the entire problematic of Being “has to be thought through again, so that we avoid subjectivistic consequences.”<sup>469</sup> While Patočka foregrounds the experience of freedom as that which “contains no vision, no final terminus, which our activity, ever object oriented, could ever grasp [because it] has no substrate, if by a substrate we understand some finite and positive content, some subject, some predicate, or some complex of predicates,”<sup>470</sup> I believe that in his later work, it is death and the contemplation of death that supplants freedom as this experience without substrate. It is possible to read his essay on “Negative Platonism” by substituting what he calls the “experience of freedom” with death as the object of philosophy and Plato’s insistence that the *meletē thanatou* is in fact the only way of correctly practicing philosophy.

Patočka furthermore attempts to dismantle linguistically-based critiques of metaphysical philosophy by having recourse to the Platonic concept of *chōrismos*, or separation, between the Idea as what is referred to as the archetypal referent that exists outside of space and time but to which each particular signifier refers. The aporia of the *chōrismos* is that because the Idea and the Object do not overlap in any way whatsoever,

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<sup>468</sup> Patočka, 193.

<sup>469</sup> Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 176. Cited in Gasché, *Europe, or the Infinite Task*, 229.

<sup>470</sup> Patočka, “Negative Platonism,” 196.

how do they interact in that the Idea is the predicate by which a signifier can become a sign or symbol? This is the *aporia* that cannot be resolved by recourse to language or philosophical hermeneutics.

It is a gap that does not separate two realms coordinated or linked by something third that would embrace them both and so would serve as the foundation of both their coordination and their separation. *Chorismos* is a separateness, a distinctness *an sich*, an absolute one, for itself. It does not entail the secret of another continent, somewhere beyond a separating ocean. Rather, its mystery must be read out of the *chorismos* itself, found purely within it. In other words, the mystery of the *chorismos* is like the experience of freedom [or the contemplation of death], an experience of a distance with respect to real things, of a meaning independent of the objective and the sensory which we reach by inverting the original, “natural” orientation of life, an experience of rebirth, of a second birth, intrinsic to all spiritual life, familiar to the religious, to the initiates of the arts, and not least, to philosophers.<sup>471</sup>

It is not possible, then, for objective and positivist philosophies or sciences to state any truths for they themselves rely on language, enclose man within language, which is a fallacious system, unable to say anything outside of itself.<sup>472</sup> Even the concept of

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<sup>471</sup> Patočka, 198–99.

<sup>472</sup> Elsewhere, Patočka discusses how the great pre-Socratic philosophers Heraclitus and Parmenides attempted to “make some order out of [the] σήματα τοῦ ἔοντος (signs of being)” they observed in what remains after sifting through everything negatable and transient to arrive at “what is enduring and entirely positive.” The problem with the approach to categorize and describe this enduring and entirely positive thing is that philosophy itself then becomes “a whole row of signs [...] built one on top of the other. One stands upon the next, one justifies the next.” (*Plato and Europe*, 75.) Philosophy, in this positive approach, antithetical to the negative one that Patočka advocates, becomes nothing more than a self-referential symbolic system, devoid of any meaningful content. In Derridean terminology, it becomes entrapped in a system in which meaning is always deferred, whereas Patočka wants to indicate that there is meaning, but it is not expressible within the confines of language. Of course, one must consider the arguments of Martin Hägglund in relation to negative theology in this respect, for such a discourse as Patočka’s runs the risk of making his thought entirely opposed to Derrida’s thinking of *différance* and the trace (see Chapter I, B, 2 *infra*). Nonetheless, insofar as there is a truth of death (perhaps the affirmation that God *is* death sums it up nicely), the apprehension of this incomprehensible truth which can never be experienced *as* death is the common ground between the two thinkers.

nothingness, insofar as such a system might conclude that there is *nothing* outside of language, is itself a linguistic construction. Therefore, because “it hypostasizes the unrealizable, the unreal, [...] is not the doctrine forced at this point to admit it fails[?]”<sup>473</sup> Instead, nothing positive or definitive can be said of the Idea as “it is the only nonreality that cannot be explained as a construct of mere realities. It is not an object of contemplation because it is not an object at all. It is essential to understanding human life, its experience of freedom, its inner historicity.”<sup>474</sup> This is why Platonism, according to Patočka, “shows forth not only man’s dignity but also the limits he cannot transcend.”<sup>475</sup> But Platonism, in this sense, must only be a negative Platonism, a Platonism that functions through the apophatic.<sup>476</sup> “Negative Platonism is that precarious position of philosophy that cannot lean on anything on earth or in heaven of which Kant spoke. It is, however, always rich because it preserves for humans one of their essential possibilities, philosophy purified of metaphysical claims.”<sup>477</sup> The reason that apophaticism, or negative

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<sup>473</sup> Patočka, “Negative Platonism,” 201.

<sup>474</sup> Patočka, 204.

<sup>475</sup> Patočka, 204.

<sup>476</sup> James Dodd has analyzed the difference between Patočka’s position and the Platonic position as one based on the abyss separating man from the divine. Instead of the Platonic formulation of *meletē thanatou* as preparation for spiritual union with the divine once liberated from earthly flesh, Patočka believes that the divine is unknowable and fundamentally inaccessible to (sensory) knowledge. Therefore, the care for the soul is to find “the soul’s own properly historical truth that lies in the abyss.” For Patočka, in *Heretical Essays* [cf. chap. 1 of the present dissertation] is done through taking cognizance of responsibility, of overcoming an orgiastic approach to life and to death. (Dodd, *Violence and Phenomenology*, 122.)

<sup>477</sup> Patočka, “Negative Platonism,” 205.

Platonism (Patočka's elsewhere-labelled "a-subjective transcendental philosophy"<sup>478</sup>), is so important to Patočka is that it provides the foundation for a philosophy that engages with the transcendence that the Czech philosopher so deeply believed was a reality, but a reality that cannot be transmitted in language for the reasons exposed above. It would seem that the "transcendence" is a term that immediately raises Derridean objections: there is no such thing as "transcendence" and, covertly, Patočka is importing (or safeguarding) the whole history of metaphysics, of presence to self, of pure presence and of *parousia* into the garden of philosophy. But rather it is a transcendence that is precisely *not present* in Patočka; an a-humanist, a-subjective, ex-static, and ineffable transcendence. In other words a transcendence that *is* truth, but a truth that cannot be known otherwise than as horizon, than as *aporia*. In this, Patočka and Derrida are both negotiating their position towards their own philosophical inheritance from Martin Heidegger, which will form the subject of the next portion of this chapter.

### **Patočka and Heidegger: being and historicity**

At the end of the first section of this chapter, I pointed out that what is at stake here for all of the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers studied in this dissertation is how to write about the subject faced with death in the European philosophical tradition given that any discourse about this topic, which is the very object of metaphysics (i.e., existence beyond physical

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<sup>478</sup> Gasché, *Europe, or the Infinite Task*, 229.

existence), runs up against two essential limitations: the first, we have addressed above, is the question regarding the limitations of language. We have seen how Lacan and Patočka deal with this question in ways that intersect with those of Derrida himself. The second limitation has to do with time and historicity as they intersect the question of disclosure of the essential structure of being. It is undisputed that human beings are historical creatures, who are born into a world already-shaped by the past; in turn, each subject is confronted with its own individual past as registered within memory. The question of inheritance is then at the very heart of the question of what is being, as being itself is inherited from the past and open to the future; its present, given that it can only be meditated on self-reflectively—and it is questionable whether or not such self-reflection can ever yield something like an absolute truth about being—*is not present*; it is available only in a temporally-deferred and a subjectively-mediated form.

Such preoccupations are central to the work of Heidegger, Patočka, and Derrida. In this section, I will discuss how Heidegger's attempts to retrieve the truth of being through the individual connection with a people, culture, and language *via* the Greeks resulted in—and indeed, to a certain extent, were founded upon—an ethnic chauvinism that privileged Europeans, but especially Germans and the German language, to the exclusion of members of other cultures, but especially Jews, whom he saw as rootless and therefore divorced from the truth of being. Heidegger's ideological affinities with the most problematic aspects of the legacy of European intellectual history is a problem insofar as he is undisputedly a towering figure in 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy with enormous influence on those who came after him, and yet each of them has had to confront this problematic legacy in an individual way so as to retrieve what is of value in Heidegger

while being attentive not to adopt positions and ideologies that would be exclusionary and racist. Therefore, in the second part of this section, I will discuss firstly how Patočka conceived of Europe as a philosophical tradition that was universal; unlike Heidegger, he did not believe that any ethnicity or nation had a privileged access to that thought. Instead, he believed that European philosophy (and therefore, care of the soul) was inherently universal in its concerns and therefore set out a task of uncovering the truth of being that could be appropriately and legitimately taken up by all men in the type of *metanoia* that we discussed above. Throughout my discussion of Heidegger and Patočka in relationship to historicity and being, I will attempt to show how Derrida's criticism of both thinkers, in his own attempt to salvage what he could while distancing himself from what he could not accept, were based on partial information. With regard to Heidegger, Derrida rejected those parts of Heidegger's thought and legacy that he knew were anti-Semitic, but I will argue that, had Derrida known about the full extent of Heidegger's racist and anti-Semitic beliefs, he would have responded differently than he did on the basis of the information available to him at the time. On the other hand, with regard to Patočka, I will attempt to show how Derrida's critique of Patočka is perhaps not irreconcilable with his own project regarding Europe, being, and the legacy of *meletē thanatou*. It seems to me that Patočka's privileging of Europe, while initially seeming problematic, is in fact setting forth an open-ended project, or task, that can be taken up by all humanity, and is not necessarily as intimately tied to Christianity as Derrida argues in *Gift of Death*.

*Heidegger: chauvinism and the privilege of philosophy*

Although it has been said that *De la grammatologie* was “the key text of the post-war reception and ‘translation’ of Heidegger in France”<sup>479</sup> – Derrida’s relationship to Heidegger is to be nuanced because of what Derrida identified as the problematic logocentricity and latent Catholic-metaphysics of Heidegger’s own thought on being. Heidegger’s seminal *Being and Time* begins with an invitation to return to the essential questions regarding being (what does it mean “to be”) that, according to Heidegger, have been occulted since the Ancient Greeks’ *gigantomachia peri tēs ousias*.<sup>480</sup> Although Heidegger specifically states that “‘being’ is the most universal and the emptiest concept [and] as such it resists every attempt at definition,”<sup>481</sup> he also states that “the indefinability of being does not dispense with the question of its meaning but forces it upon us.”<sup>482</sup> Derrida points out that the question is already trapped within the logocentric system in which “being” is already always a word, a concept, available for inquiry.

Heidegger writes:

“‘being’ is the self-evident concept. ‘Being’ is used in all knowing and predicating, in every relation to beings and in every relation to oneself, and the expression is understandable ‘without further ado’. Everybody understands, ‘the sky is blue’, ‘I am happy,’ and similar statements. [...] The fact that we live already in an understanding of being and that the meaning of being is at the same time shrouded in darkness proves the fundamental necessity of repeating the question of the meaning of ‘being’.”<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>479</sup> Syrotinski, “From Etymology (*Etymos Logos*) to Translation, via Badiou and Paulhan,” 24.

<sup>480</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1–12.

<sup>481</sup> Heidegger, 1.

<sup>482</sup> Heidegger, 3.

<sup>483</sup> Heidegger, 3.

Derrida's reply is to notice, perhaps almost regretfully, that Heidegger's project is, *ab initio*, entrapped in a logocentric system to which he is blind. "*Le mot 'être', ou en tout cas les mots désignant dans des langues différentes le sens de l'être, serait avec quelques autres, un 'mot originaire' (Urwort), le mot transcendantal assurant la possibilité de l'être-mot à tous les autres mots. Il serait pré-compris dans tout langage en tant que tel.*"<sup>484</sup> This assumption that the word "to be" or "being" is somehow pre-understood is inherently present in Heidegger's work, to which Derrida was nonetheless heavily indebted and with regard to which he allows that Heidegger's situation with respect to the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism was ambiguous: "*elle y est comprise et la transgresse à la fois.*"<sup>485</sup> It is perhaps Derrida's relationship to Heidegger that itself is ambiguous, wishing at once to criticize but at the same time remain within the Heideggerean framework of presence.<sup>486</sup> Derrida recognizes that although the word "being" overdetermines what it signified, it is nonetheless necessary to "*passer par la question de l'être, telle qu'elle est posée par Heidegger et par lui seul, [...] pour accéder à la pensée rigoureuse de cette étrange non-différence et la déterminer correctement.*"<sup>487</sup> Although Derrida wants to criticize Heidegger's reliance on an inherited linguistic pre-

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<sup>484</sup> Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 33.

<sup>485</sup> Derrida, 35.

<sup>486</sup> See, for a critical perspective on Derrida's own logocentric critique of Heidegger, seen partially as a conflict between the two on the meaning of the word (λόγος: Platonic for Derrida [reason, word]; pre-Socratic for Heidegger [coming into truth]), Sheehan, "Derrida and Heidegger." See also, on Derrida and pre-Socratic philosophy: O'Connell, "Derrida and Presocratic Philosophy."

<sup>487</sup> Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 36.

determination and conceptualization of being, he recognizes a debt or a reliance on Heidegger's thought which enables the correct thinking and understanding of the non-difference between signifier and signified.<sup>488</sup>

In an interview on "What comes before the question?"<sup>489</sup>, Derrida sketches out what this might mean to think within Heidegger and the Greek tradition of "what does being mean?" in which questioning is the form *par excellence* of philosophical inquiry, beginning with the Greek question *τι ἐστίν*, or "what is?", asking whether there is something that comes *before* the question, something preceding questioning, that would be an *affirmation*.<sup>490</sup> In this interview, Derrida insists that Heidegger himself was

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<sup>488</sup> See Derrida's discussion of Heidegger : "La structure, le signe et le jeu," 412–13. See also, on "le concept du jeu", Derrida, "La différance," 7.

<sup>489</sup> Dick and Ziering Kofman, *Derrida*, sec. Extras.

<sup>490</sup> *τι ἐστίν* is the most basic question of metaphysics, v. Derrida, *La voix et le phénomène*, 28.

Not content with an answer that lists specific forms of the thing being questioned, Socrates, in the *Theaetetus*, refuses to be satisfied with a list of the various sciences as an answer to his question as to what Science is, and replies "We did not ask with a wish to count them, but to know what [*ti esti*] *science itself* is." According to Wittgenstein, "this contemptuous attitude towards the particular case [is] linked with the desire to uncover the essence. The question *Ti esti* suggests that there is a *was*, an identical essence, despite and beyond the differences. This tendency to generalize is the 'real source of metaphysics'." Cited in Di Cesare, "Heidegger's Metaphysical Anti-Semitism," 188.

Nonetheless, Di Cesare is discussing this in relationship to Heidegger's metaphysics of the Jew, because he constantly wonders in his personal notebooks *who is a Jew, what is a Jew?* He relies on a metaphysics of National Socialism that led Carl Schmitt, the theoretician of the Nazi *Weltanschauung*, to answer the question with the tautology "the Jew is the Jew." (cited in Di Cesare, 188).

Hereby, we are furnished with an object-lesson in Derrida's teaching: when you begin to ask *ti esti*, categories break down and can be deconstructed (even self de[con]struct).

In other words, the reliance on Spirit belies the fact that the "Spirit" of the Germans is always haunted by metaphysics, the phantom (*Geist*) that haunts *Geist* itself. See Derrida, *Of Spirit*, 40.

suspicious of the Greek philosophers' privileging of the present participle, the *being*, or *ὄν* of *ontology*, and therefore the *presence* of being, meaning that the present is *present* or that there is a *presence* of the presence. Heidegger's first suspicion regarding being comes from the fact that being is indefinable because meaning only emerges from difference [*"definitio fit per genus proximum et differentiam specificam"*] and being is universal insofar as "we live already in an understanding of being [yet] the meaning of being is at the same time shrouded in darkness" precisely because it cannot be understood via its difference – and yet, it is precisely only *via* difference that it would become understandable, and yet it *is* understandable: the "*average and vague understanding of being is a fact*".<sup>491</sup> Heidegger's second suspicion regarding being is related to the not accepting of the "*mython tina diegeisthai*, that is not 'telling a story', that is, not determining beings as beings by tracing them back in their origins to another being—as if being had the character of a possible being."<sup>492</sup> Heidegger is specifically refusing origin stories that refer to some supreme consciousness or divine entity that would somehow ground being, existence, good and evil, in a superior mind capable of holding these truths as eternal and absolute.<sup>493</sup> This is exactly why Heidegger insists that if "in the future man

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<sup>491</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 2–3. Emphasis in text.

<sup>492</sup> Heidegger, 5. This is related to the German obsession with the Platonic injunction against *mythos-logos* discussed in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Le mythe nazi*, 32–37.

<sup>493</sup> Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," 237n. I cannot cite Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism" without in good conscience pointing out that, despite the fact that Hannah Arendt believed that this text was Heidegger's crowning achievement, Heidegger refers in a number of places to the presence of evil without ever referencing the Holocaust. Although this silence might not surprise us in an era that postdates the publication of the philosopher's private "black notebooks" that serve to elucidate and confirm his anti-Semitism, which was intimately linked to his philosophy, it cannot *not* be mentioned in good conscience. Secondly, Heidegger founds the category of the human upon its distinction with that of the animal, which Heidegger believes to be "poor in world" [*Weltarm*]. This, too, cannot *not* be mentioned in good faith, as this distinction is not only

will be able to think the truth of Being, he will think from ek-sistence.”<sup>494</sup> Man is always within being, there is no time, no space, and no thought without being or from without being, and yet since meaning is only produced via difference, and being does mean something, it is understood at least in an average and everyday way, man is in some way already always in ex-stasis or ex-sistence from the very being in which he is captured. Thence the term Da-sein, rather than the human. Heidegger’s 1929 *Being and Time* is much more radical and much more anti-humanist than many of his later works precisely because of this abstraction of the human and the insistence on ex-stasis<sup>495</sup>; many of Sartre’s missteps in this direction are due to a highly-questionable translation of Da-sein into French as *réalité humaine*, which precisely elides and circumvents the very subversion that Heidegger’s neologism implies.<sup>496</sup> Derrida identifies his own thought of the trace as deriving from Heidegger’s set of questions regarding the ontic and the ontological and specifically that in order to conceive of *being*, one must necessarily put being in relation to the Other, and not necessarily a present other, but an Other past or an

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morally questionable but also intellectually suspect. See, for example, Derrida’s critique of Heidegger’s views on the human-animal distinction in Derrida, *L’animal que donc je suis*. See also Derrida, *Of Spirit*, 47ff.

<sup>494</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 239.

<sup>495</sup> Derrida sees in the abstraction of the “human” into “Da-sein” « *une sorte de rupture avec une pensée de l’être qui a tous les traits d’une relève [Aufhebung] de l’humanisme.* » “Les fins de l’homme,” 162.

<sup>496</sup> See account of the translation of Da-sein as *réalité humaine* by Kojève, then in translations by Henri Corbin, and how it was reprised by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* in: Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought*, 53. Derrida refers to this as Sartre’s “traduction monstrueuse à bien d’égards” in “Les fins de l’homme,” 315.

Other future. Succinctly, as we have described above, meaning only comes from *différance*, from a reference to alterity but a non-present alterity.

These questions bring us to the question of temporality and the temporality of being, which in the context of Derrida's thought must necessarily be expressed as the question of non-present temporality and the absence of being (otherwise expressed as the impossibility of a present), and Derrida understands this via both Heidegger's historicity of Da-sein, and Freud's theories of the drive and especially of memory-traces.

In his introduction to Heidegger's *Basic Writings*, Professor David Farrell Krell traces Heidegger's preoccupation with questions relating to Being to the summer of 1907 when the pastor of Trinity Church in Constance gave seventeen-year-old Martin Heidegger a copy of Franz Brentano's dissertation, *On the Manifold Meaning of Being according to Aristotle* (1862).<sup>497</sup> Before going any further, let us pause and consider that this may be the very type of story-telling regarding the origin against which Heidegger warns us in *Being and Time*. Whether it be a screen-memory or a convenient tale for the biographers, this story is nonetheless certainly not in any way *the* origin-point of Heidegger's thinking (as though it were possible to identify such a thing), however propitious a role it might have played. Farrell Krell situates the Greeks at the origin of not only Heidegger's questions, but also at the origin of Brentano's, for the scope of Brentano's dissertation was to unravel the manifold meanings of a "word that had long puzzled Aristotle—to on

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<sup>497</sup> Farrell Krell, "General Introduction: The Question of Being," 3.

[τὸ ὄν], ‘being’.”<sup>498</sup> And yet while the origin of Heidegger’s engagement with the Greeks is certainly anterior to his reading Brentano’s dissertation, we cannot help but admit that the questions Brentano raised were doubtlessly highly influential in Heidegger’s own intellectual development. Furthermore, we cannot avoid the realization that “the Greeks” were, and always remained, a fixed reference point for Heidegger, just as they were for the European philosophical tradition through the mid-twentieth century (at least).<sup>499</sup> Insofar as the past becomes the grounding and the relation of the development of thought in the present, Heidegger was acutely aware of this reality and his own conception of human subjectivity, *human reality*, Da-sein (being-there), was firmly grounded in a notion of historicity and temporality. It is, of course, not by accident that the title of his *magnum opus* was *Being and Time*, even though the second portion on Time was never completed.

A synoptic presentation of Heidegger’s thoughts on the temporality of being is not my goal, but I would like to present aspects thereof, scilicet Da-sein’s grounding in the past and its relationship to a tradition, and also Da-sein’s relationship to language, which Heidegger describes as the “house of being”<sup>500</sup> (we live in language but our thoughts about Being are also constrained by and formed within and by means of language), and

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<sup>498</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>499</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy ask with relation to German philosophy’s engagement with Platonic questions of art, myth, and mimetism: “*pourquoi toute une strate de la pensée allemande, depuis au moins les romantiques, s’est-elle attachée de manière privilégiée à ce genre de problématique – au point de la constituer, comme c’est le cas chez Nietzsche, en problématique centrale ? Et pourquoi, tout au long de ce travail, cette pensée s’est-elle acharnée – selon, encore, une expression de Nietzsche – à ‘renverser le platonisme’ ?*” in *Le mythe nazi*, 36.

<sup>500</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 236–37.

which, of course, springs from a connection to the past and to the ancestors from whom the “mother tongue” was inherited. These are both questions that are central to Derrida’s own thought, both on Heidegger and beyond.

Heidegger’s thinking regarding the temporality of being took on a more *Volkish* tone<sup>501</sup> as time went on, and therefore, especially read in light of some of the more sulfurous comments in the so-called *Schwarze Hefte*, is inseparable from Heidegger’s anti-Semitic ideology.<sup>502</sup> Nonetheless, it cannot be discarded out-of-hand, as a result of its influence on later philosophers and especially on Derrida. In the second part (II) of the Introduction to Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, we find a synopsis of Heidegger’s thoughts on the temporality of being in §6. Here, we discover that Da-sein is fundamentally grounded in time and cannot be in any sense without time: “Da-sein is always is as and ‘what’ it already was. Whether explicitly or not, it *is* its past.”<sup>503</sup> Any futurity is predicated upon the past, as Da-sein’s being “on each occasion ‘occurs’ out of its future [...and] Da-sein grows into a customary interpretation of itself and grows up in that interpretation. It understands itself in terms of this interpretation [...].”<sup>504</sup> The “elemental historicity” of

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<sup>501</sup> Derrida remarks that with time, Heidegger lifted the use of the quotation marks he had previously always used when talking about “Spirit” [*Geist*] as though he became more and more convinced of the reality of the Spirit of the German people as time went on. See *Of Spirit*, 67.

<sup>502</sup> See, Trawny, *Heidegger & the Myth of a Jewish World Conspiracy*. See also, Farin and Malpas, *Reading Heidegger’s Black Notebooks 1931-1941*; Mitchell and Trawny, *Heidegger’s Black Notebooks*.

<sup>503</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 17.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid.

Da-sein is so fundamental that “Da-sein is determined by historicity in the ground of its being” and therefore “Da-sein can discover, preserve, and explicitly pursue tradition”.<sup>505</sup>

Reading the foregoing alongside other parts of Heidegger’s work in light of the revelations of the *Schwarze Hefte*, it is impossible not to recoil at what nowadays ought to appear as a highly-reactionary, highly-*Volkish* project linking authentic being to a German *Blut-und-Boden* mentality.<sup>506</sup> Nonetheless, this was not clear for various reasons to many thinkers after the Second World War, and it is only now that it is no longer possible to adopt an equivocal or ambiguous attitude towards Heidegger: we must read him and appreciate him both for his genius and for his influence on Western philosophy, but we must also be very careful to identify, rigorously understand, and denounce those aspects of his thought which support a racial-nationalistic ideology based on notions of rootedness, tradition, inheritance, and community. For example, when Heidegger discusses the revelation of *Mit-Dasein* that occurs within the understanding of the use of a tool in *Being and Time*<sup>507</sup>, the very fact that we understand how to use a tool is revelatory of Da-sein’s insertion within a historical and community attached to the land.<sup>508</sup> Heidegger explicitly defines others as not “everybody else but me—those from whom the I distinguishes itself” but rather “those from whom mostly one does *not*

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<sup>505</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 18.

<sup>506</sup> Derrida anticipates this by identifying in Heidegger a discourse linking force (paternity) to blood and soil: *Of Spirit*, 35.

<sup>507</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 62–77. (I.III.A. §15)

<sup>508</sup> Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*.

distinguish oneself, those among whom one is, too.”<sup>509</sup> The other is therefore the same as me, not the one different than me.

From the *Schwarze Hefte*, we know that Heidegger explicitly thought that that which is “modern”, industrial, technological was Jewish for the Jews were the people without tools, those who did not work with their hands and who therefore were barred from an authentic temporal-national being.<sup>510</sup> They could only parasite true nations, such as the Germans, and thereby prevent them from attaining authentic being.<sup>511</sup> Reading the “Question concerning Technology” in this light, it is impossible not to draw the conclusion that the “enframing” [*Gestell*] and the “freedom” that Heidegger discusses<sup>512</sup> were explicitly anti-Jewish concepts, or at least suffused with a highly-reactionary, highly-*Volkish* project linking authentic being to a German *Blut-und-Boden Weltanschauung*.<sup>513</sup> Nonetheless, this was not clear for various reasons to many thinkers after the Second World War, and it is only now that it is no longer possible to adopt an equivocal or ambiguous attitude towards Heidegger: we must read him and appreciate him both for his genius and for his influence on Western philosophy, but we must also be vigilant about the underlying racist and nationalistic ideologies that underpin them. I do not agree with the line of argumentation formulated by Jean-François Lyotard, *inter alia*, according to whom it is possible to separate the genius of Heidegger’s thought from its

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<sup>509</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 111.

<sup>510</sup> Di Cesare, “Heidegger’s Metaphysical Anti-Semitism,” 184.

<sup>511</sup> Di Cesare, 183–86.

<sup>512</sup> Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology.”

<sup>513</sup> Di Cesare, “Heidegger’s Metaphysical Anti-Semitism,” 193.

topical historical-cultural context.<sup>514</sup> According to this line of thinking, there is some genius within Heidegger's thought that is entirely separable from its political and ideological implications, foundations, and prejudices. Heidegger is certainly a giant in his own right, but he was a Nazi sympathizer and a convinced anti-Semite, and both racist and *Volkish* ideology suffused his work and his thinking. It might be possible to say that the *Schwarze Hefte* reveal this outlook as the *hypokeymenon* of Heidegger's thought, as both latent content and subject thereof. Now that we know this, we cannot, and indeed must not, attempt to silence it.<sup>515</sup> The question is perhaps how, in so doing, to avoid reproducing in our indignation the rage Heidegger expressed in his private journals against Jews, against modernity, against Freud and psychoanalysis, against the defeat of the German people and its Will, both of which he saw as having been entrapped in a concentration camp on the scale of the nation?

What likely appealed most to Derrida in Heidegger's formulations regarding temporality and the temporality of being as being founded in a certain tradition are

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<sup>514</sup> See, Lyotard, *Heidegger et "Les Juifs."*

<sup>515</sup> Derrida himself commented on "Heidegger's Silence" in a talk given in the very lecture hall in Heidelberg University where Heidegger had given his speech on the University in the Third Reich, and in which he sided with the position that within *Being and Time*, there was material that needed to be saved, reworked, reinterpreted, and used in the future. Nonetheless, Derrida did believe that Heidegger's silence on the matter of his Nazi sympathies and especially on Auschwitz was inexcusable. Derrida obviously did not know that in the *Schwarze Hefte*, Heidegger would blame the Jews for their own extermination in the camps, as he believed the factory-logic of the death camps, of which Auschwitz was the ultimate example, was itself, at heart, a Jewish invention. Overall, we must pardon those thinkers who, in the 1980s and 90s, tried to salvage what was of value in Heidegger's work during the initial "crisis" provoked by the revelation of Heidegger's Nazi sympathies. Had the *Schwarze Hefte* from the years before, during, and immediately after the War have been published at that time, I do not believe that any of them (Lacoue-Labarthes, Lyotard, Derrida, *et alii*) would have reacted, written, spoken, or acted in defense of Heidegger in the same way. See, Derrida, "Heidegger's Silence: Excerpts from a Talk given on 5 February 1988."

Heidegger's remarks on the search for the origin, which are so close to Derrida's own preoccupations about the impossibility of locating the *archi-trace*, the origin of meaning. Returning to our discussion about §6 of Heidegger's Introduction (II), Heidegger says that because tradition can be constricting and suffocating, it can "deprive Da-sein of its own leadership in questioning and choosing."<sup>516</sup> Below, an excerpt *in extenso* of Heidegger's thoughts on origin and on the recuperation of the past in an authentic manner:

The tradition that hereby gains dominance makes what it 'transmits' so little accessible that initially and for the most part it covers it over instead. What has been handed down it hands over to obviousness; it bars access to those original 'wellsprings' out of which the traditional categories and concepts were in part genuinely drawn. The tradition even makes us forget such a provenance altogether. Indeed, it makes us wholly incapable of even understanding that such a return is necessary. The tradition uproots the historicity of Da-sein to such a degree that it only takes an interest in the manifold forms of possible types, directions, and standpoints of philosophizing in the most remote and strangest cultures, and with this interest tries to veil its own groundlessness.<sup>517</sup> Consequently, in spite of all historical interest and zeal for a philologically "objective" interpretation, Da-sein no longer understands the most elementary conditions which alone make a positive return to the past possible—in the sense of its productive appropriation.<sup>518</sup>

This passage is followed by a few pages over which Heidegger retraces the status of being in philosophical inquiry from the Greeks, through the Medieval period, to the

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<sup>516</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 18.

<sup>517</sup> Again, it seems that here Heidegger is explicitly insisting that authentic being and an authentic understanding of being spring from a knowledge of Europe's Greek past. The "strange cultures" that he refers to here are perhaps a thinly veiled expression of disdain for Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's interest in Eastern spirituality and philosophy. For Heidegger, these are irrelevant systems of thought and ideas for the Occidental, who must, in order to not become uprooted, focus on the philosophy that springs out of his own native soil. See Heidegger's remarks on this in his "Spiegel" interview: Heidegger, "Only a God Can Save Us," 281.

<sup>518</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 19.

Enlightenment and after. He concludes that where Aristotle erred was that “Beings [...] are conceived as presence (*ousia*)” and that “this Greek interpretation of being comes about without any explicit knowledge of the guideline functioning in it, without taking cognizance of or understanding the fundamental ontological function of time [...]. On the contrary, time itself is taken to be one being among others.”<sup>519</sup>

It is precisely in the criticism of Aristotle but the desire to return to the Greeks that we can divine Heidegger’s “aspiration to a Greece that does not exist, that has never existed, that can only exist thanks to Germany. It is the mystical and nocturnal, archaic and tragic, purely pagan Greece, sung by Hölderlin, wished by Hegel, longed for by Nietzsche. Greece is the *Heimat*, the land of autochthony, of being-at-home with oneself.”<sup>520</sup> This seems to be the central point of most of the critiques of Heidegger’s relationship to Greece seen as fraught with a certain German Romantic ideal of Greece that was adopted by National Socialism. Heidegger famously tries to return to a pre-Socratic Greece via the thought of Heraclitus and Parmenides as a time that might hold the “traces” of an authentic being that is only accessible to Germans.<sup>521</sup> According to Lacoue-Labarthes and Nancy, the German conviction of a light-Greece (broadly corresponding to Nietzsche’s Apollonian) and a dark-Greece (to his Dionysian) has four major consequences: firstly, the creation of a Greece specific to Germany, a Greece that is more Dionysian than Apollonian (but not exclusively so); secondly, this “mystical”

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<sup>519</sup> Heidegger, 23.

<sup>520</sup> Di Cesare, “Heidegger’s Metaphysical Anti-Semitism,” 186.

<sup>521</sup> E.g. Heidegger and Fink, *Heraclitus Seminar*.

Greece supplies energy for Germany's own self-identification as German – Nietzsche believed that the Nordic “Dorians” were the only nation capable of withstanding the pernicious and corrupting influence of Oriental mysticism; thirdly, that art, theatre, and musical tragedy are the tools via which this identificatory process operates, which is why Wagner thought of himself as the German Shakespeare, Dante, or Cervantes — his Bayreuth festival was supposed to be the locus of a “total work of art”; fourthly, the construction, formation, and production of the German People (*Volk*) is accomplished *via* and like a work of art, which, evidently has its roots in the *mimesis* of a Greece that never existed anywhere outside of the imagination of German romantics.<sup>522</sup> This Greece is a Greece that produced the myth as art: they made *Darstellung* and *Gestaltung* of their soul and their blood; they created an organic art that engenders life—therefore, in the same way, the Nazi state shall be a form of art that engenders the life of the German nation.<sup>523</sup> Trawny directly links this narrative to Heidegger's engagement with National Socialism, stating that “all that connected Heidegger to National Socialism stems from this narrative of the ‘first beginning’ with the Greeks and an ‘other beginning’ with the Germans. On the basis of this story, Heidegger embraces ‘the National Socialist revolution’ and places himself in its service.”<sup>524</sup>

In an infamous comment in an interview given to “Der Spiegel” and published posthumously in 1976, Heidegger claimed that the Germans had a special qualification

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<sup>522</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Le mythe nazi*, 42–50.

<sup>523</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 64–65.

<sup>524</sup> Trawny, *Heidegger & the Myth of a Jewish World Conspiracy*, 16.

for transcending the modern technological world in thought because of the “inner relationship of the German language with the language of the Greeks and with their thought.”<sup>525</sup> It is well known that Heidegger was especially fond of etymology as a tool for locating the true nature of words, their inner being. The most famous example of this is Heidegger’s specious interpretation of the word *alethia* (truth) as un-forgetting, positing that the etymon was the river Lethe through which souls had to pass on their way to the underworld in Greek mythology.<sup>526</sup> Heidegger’s etymological obsession came from the fact that he believed it was possible to draw original meaning out of the river of forgetting in order to uncover the ancient connection with the Greeks that is hidden within language.<sup>527</sup> Heidegger believed that only certain languages were capable of entering into dialogue with the “essential languages” in order to uncover the authentic being-within-language, and of course German has a privileged relationship with Greek in his eyes in this respect.<sup>528</sup>

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<sup>525</sup> Heidegger, “Only a God Can Save Us,” 281–82.

<sup>526</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 29.

<sup>527</sup> See discussion of archaeological metaphor applied to etymology in the thought of Heidegger in Wampole, *Rootedness*, 198–99. It is worth noting the similarity between Heidegger’s view and that of Schliemann, Freud, and much of the late-19<sup>th</sup>-century thought on Ancient Greece in most of the so-called human sciences.

<sup>528</sup> Crépon, *Les promesses du langage*, 173ff. Crépon also discusses Heidegger’s certitude that the constitution of “a people” is performed through a shared language and through the confrontation with the Other, as the Other defines the in-group both by making apparent their differences and by providing, in specific contexts (confrontation with the “Greeks”) the meaning of being. On this point, Derrida will vigorously break with Heidegger in *Le monolinguisme de l’autre*, a work in which he will denounce the concept of a “maternal language” and especially of basing “fraternity” or “brotherhood” on the fact of a shared “maternal” language. See *Ibid.*, 193–4.

However, this is precisely where Derrida and Heidegger can be said to part ways. Although in a way, Derrida is always working with the concept of origin (*via* terms such as *trace*, *pneuma*, *haunting*, *ghost*, etc.) but precisely in order to establish the impossibility of draining the river Lethe in order to recover the original meaning and a true connection with the past. Nonetheless, this is, perhaps, the essential material with which Derrida works, playing and subverting the notion in both Heidegger and Freud that an origin is possible. Citing Paulhan and Badiou, Michael Syrotinski points out that etymology only provides more words, never “truth” per se, and that it opens up an endless cycle of not only national specificity or universalism, but also of language itself in which words engender more words, but never a truth of any sort.<sup>529</sup> This is directly related to temporality and origin: “no present or presence as such exists, ever did exist, only an endless difference and deferral that Derrida names ‘*la différance*’ with an ‘a’.”<sup>530</sup> Meaning and time combine for Derrida, not in a nostalgic or referential way to the past in which some truth might be recouped and made into being, into a present-perfect being with no past and no future. Instead, the temporality of meaning is always deferral.<sup>531</sup>

Language is evidently also a material, and a material that constructs and in which or with which is constructed subjectivity. Lacan, during the latter half of his career, coined the term *lalangue* to express the multiple domains of language, spanning

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<sup>529</sup> “From Etymology (*Etymos Logos*) to Translation, via Badiou and Paulhan.”

<sup>530</sup> Hillis Miller, “Brisure,” 43.

<sup>531</sup> I think that one of the most convincing and important of Derrida’s texts on this subject is to be found in his commentary on the New Testament Book of Revelations: Derrida, *D’un certain ton apocalyptique naguère adopté en littérature*.

grammar, semiotics, slips of the tongue, discourses and discursive practices, the structure of the unconscious mind, and the commonality (or ex-istance) of language which is never the subject's own and within which the subject constructs him- or herself.<sup>532</sup> Heidegger believes that the materiality of this language physically connects the present and the past. Like an archaeological object, it is capable of being excavated to reveal what came before, as though language contained within itself all its previous stages of linguistic development, and these previous stages have priority in terms of discovering the authentic nature of being, or authentic subjectivity non-mediated by the horrors and distortions of the quotidian and the modern. It can be said that it is therefore also the tool that Heidegger uses to exclude, to discriminate, and to set certain men apart from others as being worthy of the question of being, etc.

*Patočka and the universality of European thought*

Given his intellectual indebtedness to Heidegger, it is perhaps not surprising that a particularly problematic aspect of Patočka's work is his relationship to historicity, and especially his claim that philosophy is not only Europe's inheritance and the key to its own authenticity, but also that philosophy (and therefore history) itself is European.<sup>533</sup> Europeans seem in Patočka's work to have a privileged relationship not only to the truth

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<sup>532</sup> See, on the subject of *lalangue*, for an explanation of the concept and also its insertion within Lacanian theory, its application to psychoanalysis and to science as a discursive practice, Milner, *L'amour de la langue*.

<sup>533</sup> See, for an excellent article on Patočka and his work on Europe: Novotný, "Europe, Post-Europe, and Eurocentrism."

of being, but also to temporality itself, as he believed that by developing a conception of human life seen as independent from its prior entrapment by its dual focus on labor and ancestor-worship, European philosophy created history; in other words, prior to Greek philosophy, there was no such thing as history according to Patočka.<sup>534</sup> Europe's singularity is, in Patočka's eyes, born of the fact that "*only in Europe* was philosophy born in this way, in the awakening of man out of tradition into the presence of the universe, only in Europe, or better said, in what was the embryo of Europe—Greece."<sup>535</sup> Not only is philosophy uniquely European, but so is history: "History is the history of Europe; there does not exist any other. Everything else is *analysis* of an entirely different level, not the continuation of a certain unitary task, capable of universalization."<sup>536</sup> For Patočka, that "unitary task" is the care of the soul, that which emerged out of the Greek philosophical system that itself founded history.

This type of argumentation is undeniably problematic, for it contains within it risks of Eurocentrism, feelings of ethnic superiority, an idealization of Europe and especially European antiquity that reposes upon specious claims to possess, understand, or know the heavily-ideologically-elaborated "Golden Age" of Greek antiquity that has been an object of fetishistic devotion for a certain European intelligentsia at least since the Renaissance. It furthermore runs the risk of justifying exclusionary, racist,

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<sup>534</sup> See chapter 1 of this dissertation. See also, as evidence that Patočka's thought on this subject was influenced not only by Heidegger, but also Husserl, from his earliest writings: Patočka, "Masaryk's and Husserl's Conception of the Spiritual Crisis of Humanity (1936)."

<sup>535</sup> Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 88.

<sup>536</sup> Patočka, 212.

nationalistic, and anti-Semitic trends that have also been present in Europe for millennia by providing ammunition to claims of European intellectual, cultural, and by extension, even racial, superiority. Moreover, it is unclear how Patočka's own religious beliefs factor into these claims, and it is likewise unknown how familiar Patočka was with the thinking of other historical and philosophical traditions, especially Eastern ones, to make such claims.<sup>537</sup> It smacks of Heidegger's own disdain for Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's interest in Eastern spirituality and philosophy, which he judged irrelevant systems of thought and ideas for the Occidental, who must, in order not to become uprooted, focus on the philosophy that springs out of his own native soil.<sup>538</sup>

One of Patočka's listeners challenged him on this point, asking "how do we convince ourselves there really is no other history than the history of Europe?" I believe that the discussion that ensued is a centrally important facet for evaluating Patočka's thought, and I shall cite it here extensively:

P: It goes without saying that there are entirely different civilizations and that they understandably have their past and their recorded past. China, for example, has ancient annals. But each of these civilizations is a world in and for itself; to understand Chinese civilization, you have to penetrate into its distinctive principles, but once you get into them, you remain enclosed inside them. What is characteristic of Europe as Europe is that its distinctive principle is: generality.

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<sup>537</sup> Although Patočka may have been personally unfamiliar with Eastern thought, Chinese scholar Kwok-Ying Lau has argued that Patočka's thought is fundamentally non-Eurocentric namely because its implications reaffirm the relevance of Chinese classical philosopher Lao-Tzu's *Tao*, which had been mocked by Hegel as fundamentally nonsensical. See, Lau, "Jan Patočka: Critical Consciousness and Non-Eurocentric Philosopher of the Phenomenological Movement."

<sup>538</sup> Heidegger, "Only a God Can Save Us," 281. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger similarly expresses the belief that a hidebound reliance on tradition causes Da-sein to lose touch with the wellsprings of philosophy, and "makes us wholly incapable of even understanding that such a return [to the source] is necessary. The tradition uproots the historicity of Da-sein to such a degree that it only takes an interest in the manifold forms of possible types, directions, and standpoints of philosophizing in the most remote and strangest cultures, and with this interest tries to veil its own groundlessness." (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 19.)

I think Husserl might be right when he says that in all other civilizations, there is myth, that means a tradition with which a human being has to identify with his life, essence, tradition, custom; that they have this peculiar stamp that you must immerse yourself in them, step into the continuity of their tradition. Not so in Europe. Everyone understands European civilization, because *the principle of European civilization is—roughly spoken—two times two is four*. From that arises a singular continuity and the possibility of generalization. For that reason, European civilization became universal, while those others, should they be generalized would signify the swallowing up of others by a particular tradition, but not by the principle of insight into the nature of things. *As its foundation, European civilization has insight into the nature of things, while all others have tradition as their foundation*. Of course, all this must be taken with a grain of salt. *In our civilization this counts only a fortiori, or a parte posteriori, not absolutely*. The Christian tradition or the tradition of classical literature, and so on—these are all traditions. Nonetheless, the most characteristic thing about European civilization is this *insight*, from it follows the possibility of generalization, the possibility of consequences as science, technology, and so on. That also means a particular, peculiar way of penetrating beyond the original sphere and thus, as well the continuity of certain problems. That all human problems are defined from the perspective of *insight*, that they can then logically develop, all this underlies the distinctive form of European history.

I do not say there are not problems in this, but this is the reason why from the European perspective it is possible to assess other civilizations, but it is not possible to assess Europe from the point of view of all these other civilizations.

Q: Yes, I think I understand that. But I still just think that history is not so simply identical with openness or generality.

P: History, no.

Q: Yet, it does not seem to me that these other worlds somehow stand still, that they constantly draw only from myth and constantly repeat themselves.

P: Yes, you are absolutely right, I did not intend it like that. I did not want to say that man is not a historical being and that every civilization is not in its own manner historical and that it does not evolve in its own way. That is certain. But history as a specific continuum, phrased in the way we have become used to: antiquity, Middle Ages, and so forth, this is specifically European and we project it onto other civilizations. We use this European standard for them and we cannot do otherwise. For this reason, and in this sense, we say that history is the history of Europe.

However, usually people do not realize—and eventually even those other nations do not realize—that Europe “forced upon them” its own schema and its own conception of history. They relatively passively accepted it, but *it is a certain spiritual violence. In these civilizations, there does not exist originally, spontaneously, something as history in the sense I have now spoken about*.

I am trying to debate with you here this crazy, roundabout thesis of mine that European history, which culminated in these universals—for European civilization arose through the means of modern technology and science into a world civilization, a planetary one—*cannot be understood except from this point*

*of reference that we call the care of the soul.* For this reason, I maintain that history in this understanding—not history as the substantial history of man in every civilization and every tradition formed by some peoples somewhere—this is the history of Europe.

Q: Do you then think that history, as the comprehending of the dynamic of being is precisely that which is European, that it is as if we were forcing our comprehension of this dynamic even upon all the rest?

P: “Dynamic of being”—that is too demanding. I should say that we force upon all the other nations the historical consequence of that, that our tradition is the tradition of insight, and not the tradition of pure traditionalism or something comprehended only by the fact that we live with and assimilate it. I think this is a marked difference. European civilization is abstract. For this reason, European history could generalize itself in such a way.

This preeminence is very delicate. Man is constantly problematic. Take, for example, the books of Lévi-Strauss; there you will find an underlying skepticism about this modern hyperrationality, expressed in the following terms: What if man had not gone any further than the latter stone age? Was that not the acme of humanity, a norm when man was able to remain in a state placing him in an elevated and spiritual place in nature, where he was not threatened by the horrible ends to which civilization is now heading? All sorts of nostalgia, which in European life always surface with periodical urgency—which we call Renaissance or romanticism—they are all related to the sentiment that something is not quite right with this peculiar abstract civilization, that somewhere *it has a deep “wound.”* And you know, today this problem is not any less urgent than it always has been, indeed, it is more urgent now, it takes on a form that can then be articulated precisely in this abstract form. And you see, this urgency presses down upon us even in our concrete daily life.<sup>539</sup>

This long citation of a dialogue between Patočka and his questioner certainly contains problems. How are we to account for Patočka’s insistence that history and philosophy are European because only European thought is generalizable and universally understandable, in other words, uniquely open and not restricted by the confines of tradition and a specific set of cultural values and assumptions?<sup>540</sup> Is this not irredeemably

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<sup>539</sup> Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 221–23. Emphasis mine.

<sup>540</sup> See, for an analysis that considers Patočka’s approach to history as an unfinished Eurocentric “negative universalism” to be both rich in lessons as well as to contain dangerous pitfalls for the reader: Bernard, “Patočka’s Figures of Political Community.”

problematic as an ethnocentric and chauvinistic point of view? Setting aside our instinctive revulsion at a discourse that seems impossibly myopic, not to say dismissive of other cultures' philosophical traditions that ought to have the right to maintain themselves in equal dignity with Europe's own, perhaps we can entertain for a moment what Patočka means, without necessarily adhering to it.

Patočka is telling us that history, conceived of as *progress*, is a uniquely European concept that has been extended and applied to other cultures as a result of European domination. This progress is to be construed with reference to Antiquity: Antiquity is the ultimate reference, a past time that serves as the yardstick for all present culture. The Middle Ages forgot Antiquity, the Renaissance rediscovered it, and now we are faced with a situation in which the ultimate and most important facet of Ancient thought, the care of the soul, has been lost under the influence of its having been incorporated by Christianity, whose metaphysics, along with philosophy's own, have been shown to be fallacious linguistic constructs by contemporary philosophy. Furthermore, technology has destroyed man's ability to properly engage with reflection on being, and therefore with the care of the soul, and has led to a decadent and corrupt Europe, which tramples underfoot the very values upon which it was founded.<sup>541</sup> Although it was technology and

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<sup>541</sup> This is a very Heideggerian understanding of technology. See, Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology." See also, Patočka, "The Dangers of Technicization in Science According to E. Husserl and the Essence of Technology as Danger According to M. Heidegger (Varna Lecture, 1973)." Claire Perryman-Holt has written about how the concept of sacrifice in Patočka is the means by which he proposes overcoming Heideggerian *Gestell* ('enframing') by re-sacralizing the profane: cf. "Jan Patočka and the Sacrificial Experience."

Rodolphe Gasché concisely examines how Patočka believes that the insight that the "world is one of decline" is a "universal experience" and how "Greek philosophy itself, with its talk about that which never ages, is a response, more precisely, a resistance, to the universal insight in question." This is what is universal and universalizable in Greek philosophy, as it confers "a kind of immortality" and therefore "Europe, or the care of the soul, then, is, for Patočka, synonymous

science that enabled Europe to achieve domination, and to universalize its conception of history, it is also precisely technology and science that prevent an understanding of what care of the soul means, Europe's most fundamental heritage.

Thus, Europe has transmitted a sort of stricture, a generalized and generalizable conception of history that is not necessarily its own at heart. It is European, but it is not the essence of what Patočka is identifying as European thought. Therefore, and here I am extrapolating, we can return to Patočka's idea of Negative Platonism as relevant to the foregoing. Insofar as the golden core of European thought is the concept of care of the soul (*meletē thanatou*), and insofar as this concept (life, death, soul, self) has no positive content at heart, and can only be approached by apophaticism, and lastly, insofar as care of the soul is believed to be uniquely European, then can we say indeed that it is universal and generalizable, not because it is somehow superior or privileged, but because it is devoid of any positive content, of any reference to tradition or to culture, it is simply what humans are ultimately capable of achieving, not in language, but in the thinking of an aporia by the experience of the *disclosure* of a never-disclosed metaphysical truth that is the ineffable object of the European philosophical tradition conceived of as care of the

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with a freedom of humankind manifest in the break with, or the distance to, humankind's universal experience of the general fall of the world and all that is." Because Europe has "given up on resisting the universal decline," it is now in crisis. (Gasché, *Europe, or the Infinite Task*, 225–26.)

Although, as stated above, this is a Heideggerian approach, James Dodd has emphasized the extent to which Patočka expanded the "social categories from the nineteenth century such as 'nihilism' and 'decadence'" beyond the "rather myopic conviction concerning the fundamental decadence of the contemporary world, and the fact of its failure" one observes in Heidegger (*inter alia*) by "conceiv[ing] of decadence as above all a kind of distortion, one that obscures from us how we harm ourselves in what we do, by substituting a narrative of existence that fails to address, or even pose adequately, the fundamental question of who we are." (*Violence and Phenomenology*, 112–13.) See also, Dodd, "An Essay on Jan Patočka's Philosophy of History."

soul or as *meletē thanatou* and as a horizon of possibility that is approachable but never present as such.

This is ultimately why I believe that Derrida's critique of Patočka in *The Gift of Death* is based on a partial and limited reading of Patočka's work. Derrida's contention that the *metanoia* Patočka calls for in *Heretical Essays* can result in either totalitarianism, in which there is full transparency and no secrets from the collectivity, or total irresponsibility, in which each individual is accountable only to his own conscious and never to the collectivity, is false when viewed through Patočka's own thinking on presence. Because, like Derrida, Patočka is operating in a system of thought in which presence is never an absolute, in which presence is always mediated and nuanced by time itself, and particularly the horizon of death as future and the *après-coup* instantiation of death as eternal return, Derrida's critique that Patočka's system of thought would result in the advent of a dystopian society does not properly obtain. Rodolphe Gasché's book-length project *Europe, or the Infinite Task* deeply and substantially engages the idea of Europe in the work of Husserl, Heidegger, Patočka, and Derrida.<sup>542</sup> Gasché situates Patočka as the most "advanced" in his relationship to the Greek past of Europe in relation to his forbears, Heidegger and Husserl, because where Husserl situates philosophy as the idea of a universal rational science, and where Heidegger situates philosophy as the thought of Being, Patočka situates philosophy in the thinking of the care of the soul,

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<sup>542</sup> Gasché, *Europe, or the Infinite Task*.

which he equates with Europe's spiritual and historical foundations.<sup>543</sup> According to Gasché, Derrida goes even further than Patočka in “highlighting the multiplicity of the sources and identities that intersect in the European heritage.”<sup>544</sup> For Derrida, Europe *is* the inheritance of Greece, but it is open to other influences precisely *because* of this inheritance, which has allowed the Greek project to be modified from without while still remaining Greek within—fundamentally Greek, not a composite or sediment-formation in which the foreign would have become superimposed upon the Greek, and Derrida himself has no “desire to replace the Greek by the non-Greek.”<sup>545</sup> Gasché states that Derrida oriented “his whole thought toward the heritage of the classical tradition, [but] he complicated at the same time [...] the continuity between Greece and Europe, and this to the point of rendering all talk of a spiritual unity of Europe obsolete.”<sup>546</sup> Derrida's “complication” of the question of the Greek inheritance within Europe is to operate his habitual operation of “shuffling the deck,” of showing that the foreign influences that have shaped European thought are part of that European thought and part, therefore, of the Greek tradition that we have inherited, but which we can only consider through our contemporary lens, modified as it has been by the passage of time and the non-hermetic evolution of Europe throughout the ages. Europe's influence by other cultures has made then a pure or unmediated access to Greek thought impossible; although Europe is the

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<sup>543</sup> Gasché, 212ff.

<sup>544</sup> Gasché, 293.

<sup>545</sup> Gasché, 294.

<sup>546</sup> Gasché, 291–92.

inheritor of Greek thought, its ongoing (re)interpretation is our constant task.<sup>547</sup> Gasché wants to demonstrate that for Derrida, this concept of Europe as a task, as unfinished business that must be taken up in every moment by every generation, sets him apart from Patočka (and Husserl and Heidegger).

I want to suggest that the difference between the Derridean and the Patočkean conceptions could merely be a question of *style*. Derrida's style, like Lacan's, is one of his hallmarks. His philosophy is inseparable from the form in which it is presented, as the form is the vector for the philosophic and textual approach that Derrida himself developed. He subverts the texts and philosophical systems he studies while opening up new avenues of thought at every turn. But fundamentally, does Derrida not also adhere to a certain apophaticism, a certain negative philosophy?<sup>548</sup> When Derrida writes in *Et Cetera* that "a gift, a pardon, a hospitality, even death (and therefore so many other things) can only be possible *as impossible*, as the im-possible, i.e. unconditionally," is he not making the same basic argument as Patočka in his essay on "Negative Platonism" (and by extension, in *Plato and Europe* and *Heretical Essays*)?<sup>549</sup> It seems to me that Derrida's foregrounding (like Gasché's) of Patočka's Christianity in the *Heretical Essays* is perhaps a question of aesthetics. Yes, Patočka is engaging with a heretical version of Christianity in the *Heretical Essays*, but he is not engaging with it as something possible or present, something present to itself. He is remaining within his own apophaticism,

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<sup>547</sup> Gasché, 266.

<sup>548</sup> Gersh, "Negative Theology and Conversion."

<sup>549</sup> Derrida, "Et Cetera."

sketching out what he believes to be the path of redemption, but with no plan, no active teleology, to actuate it. Therefore, like Derrida, Patočka is describing Europe as a project and an inheritance, one that must be taken up as a task by each person, and therefore, one that is inherently open-ended in its outcome. Derrida and Patočka can be read as complementary thinkers whose approach to the care of the soul and its consequences have far reaching implications for phenomenological philosophy, ethics, Europe as a project, historicity, and most especially, the exhortation of philosophy to lend attentive care to one's own death as a means of self-knowledge and of leading a good life.

Nevertheless, what differentiates them is their approach to the *meletē thanatou* itself as the *correct practice of philosophy*. On one hand, Patočka was guided by his faith, which provides him a vector that *is* entirely philosophical, with an outlet for *meletē thanatou* in the participation in the mysteries of the liturgy and of the eucharist and the entire philosophical tradition of the Church, which at heart is also Greek. In other words, for Patočka, philosophy and faith are in many ways one and the same, he did not need to separate them radically. For Derrida, even though his conclusions are in many instances similar to those of Patočka, his *correct practice of philosophy as meletē thanatou* was not related to faith or to religious belief. On the contrary, Derrida did not participate in a religious activity that would have been a prolongation, a complement or a continuation of his philosophical activity. Derrida nonetheless, in the image of Socrates himself, through rhetoric, through dialogue, and through his teaching, was indeed engaged in a thorough and deep practice of *meletē thanatou*, one that he transmits to his readers as *aporia* in his ruminating, referential, circular style. Whether shuffling in circles or racing forward, Derrida is always at pains to plunge his reader into *aporia*, into an aporetic experience of

philosophy as *meletē thanatou* that is not just the proper, but indeed the only, practice of philosophy.

## CODA: MELETĒ THANATOU AS AFFIRMATION OF LIFE

*Ce qui précède définit seulement une façon de penser. Maintenant, il s'agit de vivre.<sup>550</sup>*

As work on this dissertation comes to an end, meanwhile, daily life has been interrupted by the Covid-19 “Coronavirus” global pandemic. This crisis began to unfold as I was finalizing this dissertation and making edits to its final draft, and therefore, as the news came in of the daily worsening of the epidemic and as the restrictions on everyday activities became progressively stricter, I was rereading the work I have written over the past four years. That lent a particular immediacy to the process of recalling and revisiting how the thinkers who form the object of this dissertation—Derrida, Patočka, Nietzsche, Freud, Plato—received, reinterpreted, and grappled with a thinking of death, which, since Plato, has defined the true practice of philosophy. Although I had not planned to write these concluding remarks about current events, my synoptic rereading of this dissertation just as the crisis began to unfold seemed to me not only to justify my conclusion that a consideration of the legacy of the *meletē thanatou* is so important for reading Derrida, but also, more broadly, that reading Derrida (along with Freud, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Plato, and Patočka) is so important for enabling one to adopt, through the contemplation of death, an invincible, and indeed indispensable, logic of *survival*.

Indeed, in the final analysis, the *meletē thanatou* is not opposed to Derrida’s affirmation of life; the fact that deconstruction contains a sustained thinking about death

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<sup>550</sup> Camus, *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, 92.

does not infirm the fact that it would be primarily a life-affirming and change-affirming philosophy. On the contrary, Derrida and his philosophy affirm life and stand on the side of life, precisely *because* of their attentive care given to the study of death, *because* he affirms the practice of philosophy as *meletē thanatou*, Derrida *also* affirms that the practice of philosophy as *meletē thanatou* is a practice of life and of survival.

A crisis such as the present one causes a disruption in the normal fabric of being and time: suddenly, the temporality of life is altered; one is called on to take cognizance of the fact that each moment, each touch, each breath contains within it the risk of illness, disability, death.<sup>551</sup> In other words, there is a foreshortening by means of which one is drawn to a thinking of the *end*. Camus put it in the following words: “*en réalité, il n’y a pas d’expérience de la mort. Au sens propre, n’est expérimenté que ce qui a été vécu et rendu conscient. [...] L’horreur vient en réalité du côté mathématique de l’événement.*”<sup>552</sup> Many people are unwilling or unable to bear a thinking of the *end* such as this: we have seen many manifestations of disavowal or of panic in public and private reactions over the past several weeks. And yet, this foreshortening, this bringing-to-mind of the end is merely a forced evocation of the *normal state of things* and of the *regular course of existence*. Although commonly conceived of as a fear of death due to the uncertainty that one might die or lose loved ones from the pandemic, in fact, we all know what end lies in store for us: it is death. What is uncertain is not the end, merely *when* it will occur. When,

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<sup>551</sup> Crisis is also the Greek word for decision or judgment, which we can see more clearly in English and in the Romance languages in the two meanings of the adjective “critical” (e.g. a critical remark vs. a critical decision), for a crisis is also a decisive moment, a moment of acute and imperative change.

<sup>552</sup> Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 32.

in *Demeure, Athènes*, Derrida speaks of the debt that we owe to death, that we owe ourselves to death, indeed, we know that this debt is going to come due sooner or later, but a crisis such as the present one leads people to fear that the creditor's knock on the door is imminent, they imagine they already hear the bell ringing in their minds. Usually, either panic or disavowal ensues; both of which result in the lack of a capacity to engage in a *meletē thanatou*, a non-thinking.

The consequences are known: delays in implementing policies, flouting of the rules intended to control the epidemic, but also panicked reactions that in certain cases prevent supplies from being distributed where they are most needed. The anxiety, like the disavowal, prevent many from helping—indeed, from even seeing—the most vulnerable amongst us, those who are worst affected by a crisis such as this, whose lives and livelihoods are most endangered. And, as in all crisis situations, where man is confronted with an overwhelming and superior force, magical thinking about the sacred elements of the State and of the Nation abound, in an effort to attribute eternal meaning (and thereby erasure) to the particularity of each death.

These thought patterns are not only socially harmful, they are corrosive to being itself: the intolerable fear of death is *opposed to life*. It is, inversely, the *meletē thanatou* that enables one to take the side of life in situations such as these.<sup>553</sup> This is an object-lesson not only in the importance of *meletē thanatou*, but also of Derrida's philosophy as a philosophy of life. For it is indeed philosophy which teaches us to regard every moment as

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<sup>553</sup> In psychoanalytic terms, something like the *meletē thanatou* (the acquisition of a tolerance for uncertainty and change) enables the psychoanalyst to take the side of the life forces against the death forces in a treatment.

containing the possibility of death, to acquaint ourselves with the knowledge that each moment of life is factually backed by “a dark side of the moon” which is the possibility that that moment may be the final moment. And this acquaintance is today, as in Antiquity, the possibility of obtaining a cosmic perspective and freedom from anxiety.

This is why, *because of* Derrida’s ongoing and unbroken engagement with a thinking of death, and indeed a thinking of Plato,<sup>554</sup> we can say that Deconstruction is indeed a philosophy of life: it teaches that it is *thanks to* the *meletē thanatou*, the attentive care and study given to death that we can appreciate each moment of life as a moment of survival. It is this knowledge that enables us to do what is right for others, to act selflessly, and even to sacrifice oneself for the greater good, for each moment that one yet breathes, one has the opportunity to put that moment to good use.<sup>555</sup> Indeed, in this light, the *ars moriendi*, the *meletē thanatou*, appear in their true light as an *ars vivendi*. As Heidegger elliptically puts it in *Being and Time*: “*With regard to its ontological possibility, dying is grounded in care (but care presences out of the truth of being).*”<sup>556</sup> For the truth of death is apprehended only *in* life, and only as an *aporia*, which is why the *meletē thanatou* is a being-toward-death: it is a stance, a position, not a destination or an answer. In other words, an *aporia*, an irretrievable origin and a never-present destination.

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<sup>554</sup> See in particular on Derrida’s Platonism in comparison with Deleuze and Foucault, and on the central importance of Plato read through Nietzsche, Heidegger and Freud for Derrida: Wolff, “Trios”; Alliez, “Ontologie et logographie”; Derrida, “Nous autres Grecs.”

<sup>555</sup> And in this light, reading Patočka alongside Derrida helps us to take full stock of the importance of this Platonic/Nietzschean/Heideggerian legacy in Derrida’s thought.

<sup>556</sup> *Being and Time*, 233.

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