Dragan Kujundžić, University of Florida

Mythology, Philosophy, Anthropology, Deconstruction. The Legacy of Jacques Derrida

> Thus myth brings into operation a form of logic [logos] which we may describe, in contrast to the logic of non-contradiction of the philosophers, as a logic of the ambiguous. … [Myth requires] not the binary logic of yes or no but a logic different than that of logos.
>
> Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*

Jacques Derrida (1930, El-Biar, Algeria-2004, Paris, France) was probably the most famous philosopher of our time. He may have been the most famous philosopher ever, the first truly global philosopher, the recipient of numerous honorary doctorates from India to Brazil, from Germany to England and the United States. An enormously prolific writer and lecturer, Jacques Derrida is the author of over seventy books and forty seminars which now started to appear in print. The first seminar (the last one Derrida held in 2002) to have been published is dedicated to the topic of "The Beast and the Sovereign" and has just been published in French and in English, in two volumes. Jacques Derrida started his career working on Edmund Husserl's phenomenology in the 1950s in Paris (*Ecole Normale Superieure*) among one of the greatest generations of philosophers and social scientists of our time. During Derrida's formative years, the philosophers working in Paris included Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Lacan, Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Claude Levi Strauss, Sarah Kofman, Helene Cixous, etc. With all of these authors Jacques Derrida engaged in various way, by writing books about them, polemicizing with them, or with some of them co-authoring books. Among his books are *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, *Margins of Philosophy*, more recently *The Concept of 9-11*, *Politics of Friendship* and, relevant for our topic, *Khora* and "Plato's Pharmacy" from his book *Dissemination* (all these books were written and published between 1970 and 2003).

His philosophical practice is often referred to as "deconstruction," a name which he embraced with some reservation. "Deconstruction" is inspired by and related to (but by no means identical with) Martin Heidegger's (and earlier Friedrich Nietzsche's) notion of "Destruktion" ("destruction") of Western Metaphysics, that is, with the deconstruction of the entire philosophical tradition from its inception to our time.

What does "deconstruction" consist of? What does it "deconstruct"? Deconstruction coincides with the rewriting of the concept of man and humanities in the twentieth century, a notion that the definition of what is a "man," given by traditional anthropology or philosophy, failed to give a non-essentializing account of what is a human. Martin Heidegger, for example, in his criticism of humanism, proposed to study the conditions under which a being in the world evolves out there in the openness of existence, which he called a *Da-sein*. His landmark book, *Being and Time*, defines a human in his being by focusing on the finitude of each singular being, and from there rewriting the entire metaphysical tradition of interpreting the classical definitions of what a man is, based, for example, on his/her self consciousness, intelligence or rationality (Descartes *cogito ergo sum*, for example).

The deconstruction of Western Metaphysics is an enterprise that takes up the entire tradition, and proceeds to read it from its very inception, from the moment even before it appeared on the stage of history, in order to find in the foundations of European culture the formative forces that are at work in it to the present day. But also, to find in these formative foundations forces that allow the tradition to be re-worked, deconstructed, and freed from the metaphysical ballast, to open the tradition toward its better and more just future.

It is there where the relationship of myth and philosophy comes into play. No other philosopher has ever thought through the relation between myth and philosophy so persistently, as is the case with Jacques Derrida. Numerous are Derrida's references and works in which he engaged with the notion of myth, but nowhere probably more importantly or for the "deconstruction" of the philosophical tradition more persistently, than in his essay on Plato's *Timaeus*. What is the theme of this celebrated dialogue by Plato? Here is a brief summary from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

> "In the *Timaeus* Plato presents an elaborately wrought account of the formation of the universe. Plato is deeply impressed with the order and beauty he observes in the universe, and his project in the dialogue is to explain that order and beauty. The universe, he proposes, is the product of rational, purposive, and beneficent agency. It is the handiwork of a divine Craftsman ("Demiurge," *dêmiourgos*, 28a6), who, imitating an unchanging and eternal model, imposes mathematical order on a preexistent chaos to generate the ordered universe (*kosmos*). The governing explanatory principle of the account is teleological: the universe as a whole as well as its various parts are so arranged as to produce a vast array of good effects. It strikes Plato strongly that this arrangement is not fortuitous, but the outcome of the deliberate intent of Intellect (*nous*), anthropomorphically represented by the figure of the Craftsman who plans and constructs a world that is as excellent as its nature permits it to be" (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-timaeus/).

Plato's *Timaeus* is a dialogue that elaborates upon the mythical cosmogony of the entire universe and all the created species. It does not get more mythical than that. More importantly for the project of "deconstruction" of the Western Metaphysics and the entire tradition of philosophy ensuing from Plato and Platonic philosophy (practically making an imprint on our entire shared cultural tradition and civilization to this day), in this dialogue Plato proposes a set of binary oppositions based on the difference between the *mythos* and the *logos*. In his creation of the world, the Creator orders the world from the chaos of the *myth* towards the rational, logical (*logos*) ordering. This description of the creation of the world, coincides with the binary oppositions set up, as a hierarchy, in the history of philosophy (and starting with Plato), between the myth and the logos as well. *Myth bad, logos good*. This binarism governs, subsequently, entire structures of knowledge (written/oral, female/male, unconscious/conscious, visible/invisible, sensitive/cognitive, material/spiritual, formless/form, sensible/intelligible, fiction/reality, literature/philosophy, non-serious/serious, the raw and the cooked, etc), always privileging in this pair the element closest to the *logos*. The history of metaphysics (or philosophy) is a history of imposition of logos over the forces of mythos, bringing mythos into the fold of the logical ordering (for example in Hegel's *History of Philosophy*). This is what Hegel had to say about myth and philosophy:

"The myth is always a mode of representation which, as belonging to an earlier stage, introduces sensuous images, which are directed to imagination, not to thought; in this, however, the activity of thought is suspended, it cannot yet establish itself by its own power, and so is not yet free. The myth belongs to the pedagogic stage of the human race, since it entices and allures men to occupy themselves with the content; but as it takes away from the purity of thought through sensuous forms, it cannot express the meaning of Thought. When the Notion attains its full development, it has no more need of the myth" (Hegel 20).

Here you have the classical philosophical exclusion of the myth on the account of "pure thought," logos. This is an exemplary move for the entire constitution of philosophy or history of metaphysics. Derrida would say, not so fast!

In the middle of the dialogue *Timaeus*, however, Plato introduces a "third genus," (*triton genos*, 48a, 52a) which belongs neither to the mythical, nor to the logical, and yet strangely belongs to both. That third genus, third concept or term Plato calls the space or *khora*. *Khora* is described as a *receptacle* or a *nurse* of all generation.

> Plato, *Timaeus*, Khora
> 49b
> *HIS new beginning of our discussion of the universe requires a fuller division than the former; for then we made two classes, now a third must be revealed. The two sufficed for the former discussion: one, which we assumed, was a pattern intelligible and always the same; and the second was only the imitation of the pattern, generated and visible. There is also a third kind which we did not distinguish at the time, conceiving that the two would be enough. But now the argument seems to require that we should set forth in words another kind, which is difficult of explanation and dimly seen. What nature are we to attribute to this new kind of being? We reply, that it is the receptacle, and in a manner the nurse, of all generation.*

> ДИАЛОГИ ПЛАТОНА ,ТИМЕЙ

> 49b *Начало же наших новых речей о Вселенной подвергнется на сей раз более полному, чем прежде, различению, ибо тогда мы обособляли два вида, а теперь придется выделить еще и третий. Прежде достаточно было говорить о двух вещах: во-первых, об основополагающем первообразе, который обладает мыслимым и тождественным бытием, а во-вторых, о подражании этому первообразу, [78] которое имеет рождение и зримо.В то время мы не выделяли третьего вида, найдя, что достанет двух; однако теперь мне сдается, что сам ход наших рассуждений принуждает нас попытаться пролить свет на тот вид, который темен и труден для понимания. Какую же силу и какую природу припишем мы ему? Прежде всего вот какую: это – восприемница и как бы кормилица [79] всякого рождения.*

Khora gives place to all things created, but itself always withdraws. It is the condition of all creation and the conceptualization of the creation (as in Plato's *Timaeus* narrative about the myth of the creation of the world), yet it partakes in neither. This third term thus destabilizes the foundational set of binary oppositions that, precisely, it helps bring forth into being.

Jacques Derrida analyzes in his own text *Khora* the narrative folds of Plato's text, in order to show that the textuality of Plato's dialogue, its narrative, its very *text*-ure, its *literary* qualities, give space to the philosophical argument in ways which both inaugurate the philosophical, logical thesis, and which that philosophical dialogue (and the subsequent tradition) ignores or represses. Thus, the narrative, "literary" elements of this philosophical text (Plato's *Timaeus*) operate themselves as *khora* of this dialogue, a receptacle giving form to the logos of the philosophical *mytho-logy*. The text of Plato's dialogue is the formative receptacle of the philosophy of Plato, which the forces of the philosopher's *mytho-logy* (the metaphysical, the cognitive, the idealistic, the intelligible) subsequently repress and obscure as the sensual, mythological, narrative, literary, written, etc.

The figure of Socrates in Plato's dialogues in general is emblematic of such a "third position," in which Socrates, between a sophist and a philosopher, practices the method of *maieutics*, receiving and nurturing the knowledge and thus giving it a form. Like khora, Socrates is a receiver of knowledge, but the knowledge does not get to be "produced" before that welcoming gesture and reception.

> If *khora* is a receptacle, if it/she gives place to all stories, ontologic or mythic, that can be recounted on the subject of what she receives and even of what she resembles but which in fact takes place in her, *khora* herself, so to speak, does not become the object of any tale, whether true or fabled. A secret without secret remains forever impenetrable on the subject of it/her [a son sujet] Derrida, *Khora* 117)

Jacques Derrida's deconstructive intervention (inaugural and original, no one until he did had seen *khora* in these terms in the entire centuries old tradition of reception of *Timaeus*) consists in pointing out this destabilizing figure of *khora* for any metaphysical hierarchy based on the privilege of *logos*. Since *khora* is a receptacle which gives form, it also gives space (as its etymology implies, *khoros*-space) to the very logos which claims to govern it, which the logos systematically subsequently (that is the whole history of metaphysics, philosophy and culture, civilization), represses. Derrida goes on to claim the "primacy" of *khora* that comes before any being or any logos and explores the destabilizing force of this "space" for the binary opposition that governs our thinking. When we think we are objectively writing or thinking about *khora* we are always already formed by the receptacle of this tradition.

In her essay "Abjection, Death and Difficult Reasoning: The Impossibility of Naming Chora in Kristeva and Derrida," a feminist philosopher Tina Chanter writes:

"Derrida evokes here the necessity that philosophy be carried by the image, the necessity, then, **that the truth of philosophy be borne by the myth of non-philosophy [emphasisDK]**, or rather–to put it in a way that does not already decide in favour of the logos: its truth cannot be sustained outside mythos. This would make myth a kind of receptacle, that which gives logic not just its expression but its life. Mythology would therefore be like a mother to all thoughts, just as khora would be like a nurse to all things. "This necessity" says Derrida "(khora is its sur-name) seems so virginal that it does not even have the figure of a virgin any longer" (K: 126).

In *Dissemination*, Jacques Derrida turned to the myth of Theuth in order to make a similar operation on the history of philosophy, this time to show how the myth of writing, which in Plato's Phaedrus is likened to a *pharmakon* (meaning both a medicine and a poison, and also meaning a scapegoat, *pharmakeus*) is what both makes any philosophy possible, by means of the stabilizing space of writing giving logos a permanence, and a substrate, a mythological foundation of thinking, which needs to be sacrificed, eliminated and repressed, in order for the logos of philosophy to constitute itself.

274 с Сократ. Так вот, я слышал, что близ египетского Навкратиса [**79**] родился один из древних тамошних богов, которому посвящена птица, называемая ибисом. А самому божеству имя было Тевт [**80**].d Он первый изобрел число, счет, геометрию, астрономию, вдобавок игру в шашки и в кости, а также и письмена. Царем над всем Египтом был тогда Тамус, правивший в великом городе верхней области, который греки называют египетскими Фивами, а его бога – Аммоном [**81**]. Придя к царю, Тевт показал свои искусства и сказал, что их надо передать остальным египтянам. Царь спросил, какую пользу приносит каждое из них. Тевт стал объяснять, а царь, смотря по тому, говорил ли Тевт, по его мнению, хорошо или нет, кое-что порицал, а кое-что хвалил. е. По поводу каждого искусства Тамус, как передают, много высказал Тевту хорошего и дурного, но это было бы слишком долго рассказывать. Когда же дошел черед до письмен, Тевт сказал: "Эта наука, царь, сделает египтян более мудрыми и памятливыми, так как найдено средство для памяти и мудрости". Царь же сказал: "Искуснейший Тевт, один способен порождать предметы искусства, а другой – судить, какая в них доля вреда или выгоды для тех, кто будет ими пользоваться. **275** Вот и сейчас ты, отец письмен, из любви к ним придал им прямо противоположное значение. В души научившихся им они вселят забывчивость, так как будет лишена упражнения память: припоминать станут извне, доверяясь письму, по посторонним знакам, а не изнутри, сами собою. Стало быть, ты нашел средство не для памяти, а для припоминания. Ты даешь ученикам мнимую, а не истинную мудрость. Они у тебя будут многое знать понаслышке, без обучения, b. и будут казаться многознающими, оставаясь в большинстве невеждами, людьми трудными для общения; они станут мнимомудрыми вместо мудрых".

Федр. Ты, Сократ, легко сочиняешь египетские и какие тебе угодно сказания.

Сократ. Рассказывали же жрецы Зевса Додонского [**82**], что слова дуба были первыми прорицаниями. Людям тех времен, – ведь они не были так умны, как вы, нынешние, – было довольно, по их простоте, слушать дуб или скалу, лишь бы только те говорили правду. с. А для тебя, наверное, важно, кто это говорит и откуда он, ведь ты смотришь не только на то, так ли все на самом деле или иначе.

Plato, Phaedrus, 274 c-

Socrates I have heard a tradition of the ancients, whether true or not they only know; although if we had found the truth ourselves, do you think that we should care much about the opinions of men?

Phaedr. Your question needs no answer; but I wish that you would tell me what you say that you have heard.

Soc. At the Egyptian city of Naucratis, there was a famous old god, whose name was Theuth; the bird which is called the Ibis is sacred to him, and he was the inventor of many arts, such as arithmetic and calculation and geometry and astronomy and draughts and dice, but his great discovery was the use of letters. Now in those days the god Thamus was the king of the whole country of Egypt; and he dwelt in that great city of Upper Egypt which the Hellenes call Egyptian Thebes, and the god himself is called by them Ammon. To him came Theuth and showed his inventions, desiring that the other Egyptians might be allowed to have the benefit of them; he enumerated them, and Thamus enquired about their several uses, and praised some of them and censured others, as he approved or disapproved of them. It would take a long time to repeat all that Thamus said to Theuth in praise or blame of the various arts. But when they came to letters, This, said Theuth, will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories; it is a specific both for the memory and for the wit. Thamus replied: O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.

Phaedr. Yes, Socrates, you can easily invent tales of Egypt, or of any other country.

In Plato's dialogue, Derrida convincingly shows, the *logos* [performs] a "restoration of internal purity" (Derrida, Plato's Pharmacy, 128) in order to "transform mythos into logos (Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" 134) but that restoration is a myth as such, a myth of untroubled, pure origin of itself. Thus, writing, which gives place to philosophy (for example, Plato's *Dialogues*), has to be purged, excised, repressed, in order for the purity of thought (remember Hegel) to appear. This operation or repression actually constitutes "the dominant structure of the history of metaphysics" (Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" 149).

Just in time for this conference, a book came out a few weeks ago about *Derrida, Myth, and the Impossibility of Philosophy*, written by a young scholar Anais Spitzer. So I am very glad to present you with the latest research in the realm of philosophy and mythology. Spitzer's book follows Derrida in re-introducing myth as a constitutive ingredient to thinking and to re-structuring (deconstructing) the foundation of philosophy as we have known it to this day.

Affirming and thinking through *mythos* involves accepting that doing so is incompatible with traditional pathways of thought. It requires thinking without any expectation of arriving somewhere certain [for example Hegel's "pure thought']. In this respect, being non-affirmative, the unaccountable, maintaining a relation to the non-logofiable [that is, what cannot be subsumed under the cover of logos], the indecideable and the non-dialectical [all this is written contra-Hegel] components of thought (Spitzer, 144).

The implications of Derrida's privileging *khora* as a destabilizing force of the entire tradition are numerous. They have found the way into Derrida's thinking about law and justice, his thinking about friendship and hospitality, writing and thinking, etc. Derrida's notion of a gift and the economy of exchange based on *khora* (obviously trying to go beyond certain theories of potlatch from Marcel Mauss to Georges Bataille) stipulates a notion of the gift which is not one, a gift which goes beyond giving in order to avoid any economy of exchange and profit. Derrida's notion of hospitality is radicalized by the recourse to *khora*, since it dreams of a hospitality in which the guest becomes a host, an opening to the other which is fraught with risks yet unconditionally hospitable. The implications for "practical" politics, for example of emigration, but also for the entire realm of cultural and political practices that would be affected by an unconditional receiving and hospitality, are tremendous.

All these cultural realms (our entire tradition) are marked first and foremost by certain forces of originary hospitality (a *khora*, in short) which give space to all our political, cultural, symbolic, existential, etc "practices," but which these practices, every time anew, repress and forget. Deconstruction consists in revealing and unleashing the forces of the originary potential for justice, welcoming of a being or event, in every cultural or political practice we are engaged in.

And this is the conclusion drawn by Anais Spitzer as well, in her book. Myth is indispensible for the constitution of philosophy:

> Without *mythos*, philosophy would not be possible. *Mythos* gives to philosophy, no thanks to giving [a play of word: it gives without calling itself a gift; it gives beyond the economy of the gift giving] philosophy's very possibility, depth and contours. It impassions thought, calls it forth, and stirs us to think that which, inevitably to some extent, always remains veiled. The disfigurations of mythos make possible the very figurations of logos, and of lived experience [the lived myths of out conference titles!]. In this way, mythos is both *the* impossibility, and *the possibility*, of philosophy (Spitzer 149).

This makes the "myth" of *khora* the most *archaic*, and *at the same time* the myth most *alive* (to gesture towards the title of our colloquium which is about "live" and literary mythologies). In that consists the legacy of Jacques Derrida.

Literature

Jacques Derrida. *La dissemination*. Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1972. [English Edition: Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*. Translation Barbara Johnson. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981].

-------*Khora*. Paris: Editions Galilee, 1993. [English Edition: Jacques Derrida. *On the Name*. Edited by Thomas Dutoit. Translation Ian McLeod et. al. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995].

Chanter, Tina, "Abjection, Death and Difficult Reasoning: The Impossibility of Naming Chora in Kristeva and Derrida," Khoraographies for Jacques Derrida, Edited by Dragan Kujundzic, *Tympanum 4*, 2000.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. *Volume II.* Translated by E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simpson. New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1974.

Plato. Phaedrus. http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/1/6/3/1636/1636.txt

Fedr (in Russsian). http://psylib.ukrweb.net/books/plato01/21fedr.htm

Timaeus. http://www.ellopos.net/elpenor/physis/plato-timaeus/necessity.asp

Timei (in Russian). http://www.psylib.org.ua/books/plato01/27timei.htm (relevant

chapters in both online texts 48-50)

Spitzer, Anais, N. Derrida, *Myth and the Impossibility of Philosophy*. New York: Continuum, 2011)

Vernant, Jean-Pierre. *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*. Translated by Janet Lloyd (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980).

··

Recent publications by Dragan Kujundžić in Russian, related to the work of Jacques Derrida:

*t*Race*s: Race, Deconstruction, Critical Theory. Etienne Balibar With Jacques Derrida.* [РАС*СЛЕД*ОВАНИЯ: РАСА, ДЕКОНСТРУКЦИЯ, КРИТИЧЕСКАЯ ТЕОРИЯ] Edited with Introduction by Dragan Kujundžić. *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie 111*, Moscow, October, 2011.