In one of his last and most important dialogues, entitled the *Statesman*, Plato presents us with the following passage, spoken by a man who comes from outside the city gates and who is known only as the “Stranger”:

> We have separated off the elements which are quite different from statesmanship, the elements which are quite foreign and repugnant to it, but there still remain the precious elements which are akin to it. These include the art of generalship, the art of administering justice, and that department of the art of public speaking which is closely allied to the kingly art. This last persuades men to do what is right and therefore takes its share in controlling what goes on in a true community (*Statesman* 303e – 304a).¹

What are these foreign and repugnant elements that are so different from statesmanship? Obviously not generalship or the administration of justice; or even rhetoric, which although an extremely powerful, and thus dangerous art, at least is used to persuade men to do the right thing, making it very much like philosophy, the art of kings. No, it is

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something else that must be “separated” off from those elements that are so precious to
the statesman; something that Plato leaves unnamed, although perhaps not unrevealed.

Earlier in the Statesman Plato says the following by way of an exchange between
the Stranger and Young Socrates:

STRANGER: Very well, we must study these kings chosen by lot
and these priests with their ministerial assistants, very closely. But we
must also look at another group—quite a large mob, in fact, which is
coming clearly into view now that all these particular groups have been
distinguished.
YOUNG SOCRATES: And who are these you speak of?
STRANGER: A very queer crowd.
YOUNG SOCRATES: What do you mean?
STRANGER: A race of many tribes—or so they seem  to be at first
sight. Some are like lions, some like centaurs, or similar monsters. A
great many satyrs or chameleons, beasts that are masters of quick change
in order to conceal their weakness. Indeed, they take each other’s shapes
and characters with bewildering rapidity. Yes, Socrates, and I think I have
now identified these gentlemen.
YOUNG SOCRATES: Tell me about them. You seem to look
upon a strange sight.
STRANGER: Yes, strange until recognized! I was actually
impressed by them myself at first sight. Coming suddenly on this strange
cry of players acting their part in public life I did not know what to make
of them.
YOUNG SOCRATES: What players can these be?
STRANGER: The chief wizards among all the Sophists, the chief
pundits of the deceiver’s art. Such impersonators are hard to distinguish
from the real statesmen and kings; yet we must distinguish them and thrust
them aside if we are to see clearly the king we are seeking (Statesman
291a-c).

So it is a “deceiver’s art” that Plato fears, one used by those wizards of impersonation
who have been passing themselves off as real statesmen and kings and preventing the
people of the community from seeing clearly what they have been seeking. It is
“sophistry,” the specious art of the Sophists.
Plato’s concern over the Sophists can be traced back to dialogues that precede the Statesman. In the Euthydemus, for example, Plato has Socrates argue the following against two opponents who are claimed to be “masters with words”:

Now Euthydemus was getting ready to give the young man the third fall in this wrestling match, but I saw the boy was out of his depth, and hoped to give him time to rest that he might not let us down; so I said, to encourage him, My dear Clinias, do not be surprised if the arguments appear strange to you. Perhaps you do not understand what our visitors are doing with you. They are doing the same as the Corybantes do in their initiations, when the one to be initiated is being enthroned. There is dancing and play there also, as you know if you have been initiated; and now these are only dancing round you in play, meaning to initiate you afterward. So consider now that you are hearing the beginnings of the sophistic ritual (Euthydemus 277d).

This passage does not seem to reveal very much about the Sophists, until one calls to mind just who the Corybantes were. They were attendants of Cebele, the mother goddess of Crete, who, like the Stranger in the Statesman, is an outsider in Athens. The mythology that surrounds this goddess is interesting. It seems that Cebele, also known as Agdistis, was once androgynous. Fearing Agdistis, who possessed the power of both the male and female, the other gods castrated the goddess. From the blood and genitals of Agdistis, an almond tree grew up with its nuts already ripe. From these, Attis was conceived and grew to be a man of extraordinary beauty. Agdistis fell in love with Attis, and in order to prevent him from belonging to anyone else, she “robbed him of his reason.” Attis, overwhelmed by his loss, castrated himself. His spirit passed from his body and entered a pine tree, and violets grew where his blood had fallen. After two days, Attis was returned to the earth, where he died each year in the same manner.

It is this metonymic ritual that Plato seems to have in mind when he compares the initiation rites of the Corybantes with the initiation rites of the Sophists. Like the
followers of Cebele who are seduced by the goddess, the followers of the Sophists are seduced by the playful nature of these tricksters, until they are finally cut off from reason. All of this makes Plato’s concern about the Sophists in the *Statesman* much clearer. These wizards must be “thrust aside” because their magical arts enable them to fool the reasonless people of the community into believing the Sophists are true statesmen and kings. Plato fears the Sophists, then, because their art seems to have the same effect as the art of the real kings. In other words, the art of the Sophists is dangerous because it is too much like the greatest of all arts; it is too much like philosophy.

Even though he claims that he will, Plato does not bring the king and the philosopher together in the *Statesman*. Rather, the two are joined in the *Republic*. In this dialogue, Plato is far from silent about what he understands the kingly art to be. Speaking through Socrates, he says the following:

Unless, said I, either philosophers become kings in our states or those whom we now call our kings and rulers take to the pursuit of philosophy seriously and adequately, and there is a conjunction of these two things, political power and philosophical intelligence, while the motley horde of the natures who at present pursue either apart from the other are compulsorily excluded, there can be no cessation of troubles, dear Glaucon, for our states, nor, I fancy, for the human race either. Nor, until this happens, will this constitution which we have been expounding in theory ever be put into practice within the limits of possibility and see the light of the sun. But this is the thing that has made me so long shrink from speaking out, because I saw that it would be a very paradoxical saying. For it is not easy to see that there is no other way of happiness either for private or public life (*Republic* 473d-e).

And what is required of the philosopher king, according to Plato? He goes on in the *Republic* to say that:

We shall require of them to turn upward the vision of their souls and fix their gaze on that which sheds light on all, and when they have thus beheld the good itself they shall use it as a pattern for the right ordering of the
state and the citizens and themselves throughout the remainder of their lives . . . (Republic 540a).

This passage brings to mind the Republic’s “Allegory of the Cave” and “Simile of the Line.” Both are familiar to readers of Plato. The “Allegory of the Cave” is a story that recounts the plight of a group of men chained to a low wall within the dark recesses of a cave. These men can see only the rear of the cave, upon which shadows are being cast by puppet-like cutouts that are being moved back and forth in front of a fire that burns behind the low wall that bears the men. The men, of course, are deceived into thinking that the shadows are real. It is not until they break free from their chains and venture out of the cave and into the light that they glimpse the truth. Plato uses the “Simile of the Line” to repeat the lessons of the “Allegory of the Cave” philosophically. He argues that like the men who move from the shadows of the cave out into the light of the real world, all human beings should attempt to move from a state of “opinion” to the state of “true knowledge.”

With this in mind, it is easier to understand what Plato means in the Republic when he says that the philosopher king should fix his gaze on that “which sheds light on all”: In order to be a good statesman, the king should use the art of philosophy to seek the reality of “true knowledge” and resist being seduced by the play of shadowy “opinions” that offer him only the appearance of truth.

Plato takes up this argument in more detail in another of his early dialogues, which he entitles the Gorgias. In this text, Plato sets Socrates over against the “three wisest Greeks of the day,” Gorgias, Polus and Callicles. Not surprisingly, these three are characterized as Sophists who stand in marked contrast to the philosopher, Socrates. Plato has Callicles argue that the art of philosophy is a silly pursuit, and that it will only
lead its practitioners to ruin. Naturally, Socrates disagrees with Callicles. And he even goes about making his case in the _Gorgias_ by suggesting to Callicles that both of them have had “much the same experience” in their lives.

Each of them, it seems, is in love with two objects: Plato with Alcibiades and philosophy, and Callicles with demos and Demos. The play on words in the construction of the latter coupling is intentional. In his public life, Callicles desires to be with the common people of Greece; in his private life, he desires to be with a young lover who bears the name of the masses. And the trope runs deeper, still. Apparently, even though Callicles is extremely clever, he cannot resist either the words of his lover or those of the “general assembly.” For, as Socrates notes, when Callicles is with his lover, he never contradicts him but says whatever his lover wishes him to say; and when he is in the Assembly, he shifts “to and fro,” changing his argument to fit the whims of the group.

Socrates suggests that his desire is different from that of Callicles. His love for philosophy does not cause him to act capriciously. Rather, because philosophy “always holds to the same,” it allows Socrates to move steadily toward the truth. But what of his love for Alcibiades? What role does it play in this small scene that is carried out between Socrates and Callicles? In the _Gorgias_, Plato says only that Alcibiades is not like the “first love” of Socrates. Alcibiades is “unstable,” as he is “at the mercy now of one argument, now of another.” In other words, he is just like Callicles. Or, perhaps more correctly, he is worse than Callicles because the arguments that move him “to and fro” are _philosophical_ arguments, not those of the Sophists.

Plato waits a long time to disclose the truth about Alcibiades after he has made this disturbing little reference to him in the _Gorgias_. It is not until the _Symposium_ that
Plato really fleshes out the character of his unstable lover. In this dialogue, Alcibiades arrives late at a banquet at which Socrates and his friends have been making speeches in praise of love. He is drunk, and he stumbles to a seat next to Socrates, unaware that he has ended up so close to the man he desires. When he turns and sees who is seated next to him, he leaps up and cries: “You again Socrates! So that’s what you’re up to, is it? — The same old game of lying in wait and popping out at me when I least expect you.”

After he has calmed down, he is asked to give his own speech on love. He responds that he is too drunk to compete at speech making with the others at the banquet. But he does agree to speak in praise of Socrates.

The tribute to Socrates given by Alcibiades is beautiful, yet heartrending. It is a tale of unrequited love, a confession about passion that has never been returned. At the end of this tribute, after Alcibiades has told us how he lay with Socrates throughout the night but was unable to convince Socrates to make love with him, he says the following:

You can guess what I felt like after that. I was torn between my natural humiliation and my admiration for his manliness and self-control, for this was strength of mind such as I had never hoped to meet. And so I couldn’t take offense and cut myself off from his society, but neither was there any way I could think to attract him. I know very well that I’d no more chance of getting at him with money than I had of getting at Ajax with a spear, and the one thing I’d made sure would catch him had already failed. So I was at my wit’s end, and went about in a state of such utter subjection to the man as was never seen before. (Symposium 219d-e).

Here, Plato has not only linked the Symposium back to the Gorgias, but also to the Euthydemus. For like the Sophists who cut their followers off from reason with the seductive play of their sophisticated art, in the Symposium Socrates plays his own game, lying in wait for Alcibiades and seducing him with the art of philosophy, until, at his wit’s end, he is also cut off from reason. In Alcibiades own words: “The moment I hear
him speak I am smitten with a kind of sacred rage, worse than any Corybant, and my heart jumps into my mouth and the tears start into my eyes—oh, not only me, but lots of other men. . . .”

Pharmacological Rereadings

As Jacques Derrida has argued in his extraordinary essay “Plato’s Pharmacy,” this remarkable characterization of Socrates as a Sophist is woven deep within the fabric of the dialogues. This is particularly apparent in a dialogue like the Phaedrus, says Derrida. As he points out, the Phaedrus begins in an unusual way: Although Socrates and Phaedrus meet inside the city walls, Phaedrus convinces Socrates to follow him outside the city, away from the colonnades and onto the "open roads." This invitation is extended so that Socrates might hear the speech of Lysias, the speech that Phaedrus has in its written form hidden underneath his cloak. To accompany someone outside the walls of the city is highly unusual for Socrates, who prefers to commune with his friends and students behind the massive gates, which lock out that which is not allowed inside. But the speech of Lysias seduces Socrates, and he and Phaedrus settle down by the banks of the Ilissus, where Phaedrus begins the dialogue by immediately asking Socrates if it is somewhere near this spot that "Boreas seized Orithyia from the river." Socrates says that no, it is said that it was just a little farther down the river, where there is an "altar dedicated to Boreas."

One can easily see what draws Derrida to this dialogue. By locating Socrates and Phaedrus outside the walls of the city and beginning the dialogue with an exchange about myths, Plato is disrupting the boundaries of the text from the very beginning; throwing it,
as it were, over onto the side of the Sophists. According to Derrida, one can see this
disruption clearly if the first dialogical exchange between Phaedrus and Socrates is traced
a bit further:

PHAEDRUS: . . . [P]ray tell me, Socrates, do you believe that the story [of
Orithyia and Boreas] is true?
SOCRATES: I should be quite in the fashion if I disbelieved it as the men
of science do. I might proceed to give a scientific account of how the
maiden, while at play with Pharmacia, was blown by a gust of Boreas
down from the rocks hard by, and having thus met her death was said to
have been seized by Boreas, though it may have happened on the
Areopagus, according to another version of the occurrence. For my part,
Phaedrus, I regard such theories as no doubt attractive, but as the invention
of clever, industrious people who are not exactly to be envied, for the
simple reason that they must then go on and tell us the real truth about the
appearance of centaurs and the Chimera, not to mention a whole host of
such creatures, Gorgons and Pegasuses and countless other remarkable
monsters of legend flocking in on them (Phaedrus, 230c-d).

The traditional reading of this exchange is that Plato positions it at the beginning
of the dialogue in order to distance himself from the "clever" Sophists, who use stories,
or myths, to draw their listeners away from the "real truth," away from the logos of the
philosophers. But Derrida thinks that there may be something else going on here: Is "this
brief evocation of Pharmacia at the beginning of the Phaedrus . . . an accident?" Let us at
least retain this, says Derrida, "that a little spot, a little stitch or mesh (macula) woven
into the back of the canvas, marks out for the entire dialogue the scene where that virgin
was cast into the abyss, surprised by death while playing with Pharmacia."³

pp. 61-171. See, Philip C. DiMare. “Writing in the Absence of the Word of God: Derrida, Christianity and
³ Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 70.
Perhaps the idea that there is a small spot at the back of this Platonic canvas that marks out the entire dialogue can be taken a little further. As Derrida suggests, the term "pharmacia" is also "a common noun signifying the administration of the pharmakon, the drug: the medicine and/or poison." He finds this instance of pharmacological doubling intriguing: In the same moment one substance has the power either to heal or harm. But does Plato move from the myth of Pharmacia to the pharmakon? He does; and interestingly, by way of yet another myth. Toward the end of the Phaedrus, Plato relates this tale about the invention of writing:

SOCRATES: Very well. The story is that in the region of Naucratis in Egypt there dwelt one of the old gods of the country, the god to whom the bird called Ibis is sacred, his own name being Theuth. He it was that invented number and calculation, geometry and astronomy, not to speak of draughts and dice, and above all writing. Now the king of the whole country at that time was Thamus, who dwelt in the great city of Upper Egypt which the Greeks call Egyptian Thebes, while Thamus they call Ammon. To him came Theuth, and revealed his arts, saying that they ought to be passed on to the Egyptians in general. Thamus asked what was the use of them all, and when Theuth explained, he condemned what he thought the bad points and praised what he thought the good. On each art, we are told, Thamus had plenty of views both for and against; it would take too long to give them in detail. But when it came to writing Theuth said, "Here, O king, is a branch of learning that will make the people of Egypt wiser and improve their memories; my discovery provides a recipe for memory and wisdom." But the king answered and said, "O man full of arts, to one it is given to create the things of art, and to another to judge what measure of harm and of profit they have for those that shall employ them. And so it is that you, by reason of your tender regard for the writing that is your offspring, have declared the very opposite of its true effect. If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer our disciples, but only its semblance, for by telling them of many things without teaching them you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing, and as men filled, not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows" (Phaedrus 274d – 275b).
As one can see, in this myth Theuth brings his invention of writing to King Thamus, claiming that he has discovered a “recipe” (*pharmakon*) for “memory and wisdom.” But the king explains to him that his discovery is just the opposite of what it claims to be. Instead of being a “recipe” or “remedy” for forgetfulness, it is rather the very thing that will “implant forgetfulness” in the souls of men. Thus, what seems to be a remedy is really a poison, good only as a “reminder,” only as a “semblance” of wisdom.

Derrida is right when he claims that Plato attempts to make a very clear distinction between the use of, and the users of, the *pharmakon* as a cure or as a poison: In the dialogues, almost without exception, and especially in regard to Socrates and the “clever magicians” of argumentation, philosophers use the *pharmakon* to heal and sophists use the *pharmakon* to harm. Derrida suggests that Plato applies this term in these very different ways because he is attempting to make a clear distinction between philosophical purity and sophistical impurity. In so doing, says Derrida, Plato is seeking to exclude from his texts “any leaning toward the magic virtues of a force whose effects are hard to master, a dynamics that constantly surprises the one who tries to manipulate it as master and as subject.”

But is Plato successful in keeping the purity of philosophy and the impurity of sophistry separate in his dialogues, especially in regard to Socrates? Is he able to place the *pharmakon* in the hands of the master and still control the “magic virtues” of a force that constantly surprises one who attempts to manipulate it? Derrida thinks that he is not, that “between Socrates and the Sophists, the structure of the opposition belies not the

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4 Derrida, *Dissemination*, pp. 96 and 97.
difference that Plato would like to establish but rather the reciprocity that is suggested by the recourse to one and the same word.”

Love and the Lover of Wisdom

Derrida makes his case for the dangerous reciprocity that exists between Socrates and the Sophists in the dialogues by way of a discussion of the *pharmakeus*: the magician, the sorcerer, even the poisoner, who has the power to lead people astray. As he points out, in the dialogues, Socrates, like the Sophists, often wears the face of the *pharmakeus*. For instance, in the Symposium, Alcibiades, whom we have already met and to whom we will return, compares Socrates to Marsyas, the satyr who can “bewitch mankind” with his magic flute:

And then again, he reminds me of Marsyas the satyr.

Now I didn’t think even you, Socrates, will have the face to deny that you *look* like them, but the resemblance goes deeper than that, as I’m going to show. You’re quite as impudent as a satyr, aren’t you? If you plead not guilty I can call witnesses to prove it. And aren’t you a piper as well? I should think you were—and a far more wonderful piper than Marsyas, who had only to put his flute to his lips to bewitch mankind (*Symposium* 215b-c).

And in the Meno, Socrates is accused by Meno of “reduce[ing] others to perplexity:

Meno: Socrates, even before I met you they told me that in plain truth you are a perplexed man yourself and reduce others to perplexity. At this moment I feel you are exercising magic and witchcraft upon me and positively laying me under your spell until I am just a mass of helplessness (*Meno* 80a).

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Obviously, the *pharmakeus* is a dangerous individual, adept as he is at making things appear to be what they are not. But is Plato really turning Socrates into a Sophist by giving him the face of the *pharmakeus*, as Derrida claims? After all, right after having Meno accuse Socrates of possessing the power to “reduce others to perplexity,” he has him go on to warn Socrates that he would be “well advised not to leave Athens and live abroad,” since if he “behaved like this as a foreigner in another country” he “would most likely be arrested as a wizard” (*Meno* 80b). This seems to imply that Socrates must leave the city, live as foreigner, to be mistaken for a magician or sorcerer. As long as he remains in Athens, within the city gates, he need not fear arrest because his wizardry will be recognized as . . . what? Philosophy? The art of kings?

As Derrida says, it is almost as if Plato is pitting *pharmakeus* against *pharmakeus*: Two magicians, the Philosopher and the Sophist, locked in a great struggle, one on the side of good, the other on the side of evil. If this were the case, it would seem that the “structure of the opposition” between Socrates and the Sophists *does* belie difference and not reciprocity. But Socrates *is* arrested. And not as a foreigner in another country. He is arrested in Athens, Plato tells us in the *Apology*, in his own city, precisely because he “makes arguments defeat the stronger, and teaches others to follow his example” (*Apology* 19b). Precisely because he so often appears to be just like that other *pharmakeus*, like the Sophist.

Derrida, it appears, is right: the dangerous reciprocity between Socrates and the Sophists does seem to be in place; something Plato unwittingly admits in the *Apology* during the course of presenting the defense of Socrates. There, he has Socrates make mention of a certain writer who has already condemned him in his texts. As Socrates
says: “You have seen it for yourselves in the play by Aristophanes, where Socrates goes whirling round, proclaiming that he is walking on air, and uttering a great deal of other nonsense about things of which I know nothing whatsoever” (Apology 19c). The play to which Socrates is referring in the Apology is The Clouds, a comedy in which Socrates is equated with the Sophists. It is generally thought that Aristophanes is being unfair to Socrates in The Clouds, that he is being playful at Socrates’ expense. But interestingly, by suggesting that the arguments of Socrates are like those of the Sophists’, because they never arrive at the truth, Aristophanes is disclosing something important about Plato’s philosophy.

Beyond his role in the Apology, Aristophanes makes one more appearance in Plato’s dialogues. He is one of those who delivers a speech in praise of love at the gathering that is described in the Symposium. He begins his speech by saying that “if we had known [Love] as he really is,” we would have “raised the mightiest temples and altars, and offered the most splendid sacrifices, in his honor, and not—as in fact we do—have utterly neglected him” (Symposium 189c). But, says Aristophanes, in order to know love, we must first understand the “real nature” of the human being.

According to Aristophanes, the human race was originally divided into three: male, female and one who shared the nature of both. This third being had a rounded back and sides. It had “four arms and four legs, and two faces on one head, with one face on one side and one on the other. It had four ears, and lots of privates, and all the other parts to match.” Now these strange beings were so full of strength and energy that they became arrogant and attempted “to scale the heights of heaven and set upon the gods.” In response to this offense, Zeus declared that they should all be cut in half, so that “each
one would be only half as strong.” But when this was done, Zeus began to worry that the
great wounds that they had suffered when they were cut in half might frighten them, and
so he instructed Apollo to turn the face of each half away from its wound and to “heal the
whole thing up.” The result of all of this, says Aristophanes, was that each half was left
with a “desperate yearning for the other, and they ran together and flung their arms
around each other’s necks, and asked for nothing better than to be rolled into one.” In the
end, though, their cries were heard by Love, who drew these desperate creatures toward
each other and allowed them once again to be joined (Symposium 189d-190a).

As one would expect, there is more to come in this dialogue. Socrates speaks
after his accuser, Aristophanes, although not in words that are his own. The speech of
Socrates is a retelling of what the woman Diotima has taught him about “the philosophy
of Love.” According to Diotima, Love is not a god at all. Rather, he is a very powerful
spirit who is halfway between god and man. His father is Resource and his mother is
Need. He is neither mortal nor immortal, “for in the space of a day he will be now, when
all goes will with him, alive and blooming, and now dying, to be born again by virtue of
his father’s nature, while what he gains will always ebb away as fast.” In the end, says
Diotima, Love is forever lacking what he possesses (Symposium 203a-e). In other words,
he is just like Socrates, the pharmakeus. As Derrida says:

That is the name [pharmakeus] given by Diotima to Eros. But behind the
portrait of Eros, one cannot fail to recognize the features of Socrates, as
though Diotima, in looking at him, were proposing to Socrates the portrait
of Socrates (Symposium, 203c,d, e). Eros, who is neither rich, nor
beautiful, nor delicate, spends his life philosophizing (philosophon dia
pantos tou biou); he is a fearsome sorcerer (deinos goes), magician
(pharmakeus), and sophist (sophistes). A being that no “logic” can
confine within a noncontradictory definition, an individual of the demonic
species, neither god nor man, neither immortal nor mortal, neither living
nor dead, he forms “the medium of the prophetic arts, of priestly rites of
sacrifice, initiation, and incantation, of divination and of sorcery ("thusias-teletas-epodas-manteian") (202e).6

Understanding Love as a pharmakeus makes the juxtaposition of the speeches by Aristophanes and Socrates in the Symposium even more interesting. In both of these speeches Plato is suggesting that love is a powerful copula, a force that joins things together. But the similarities between the two are deceiving. For in the speech of Aristophanes, love is understood as a metaphor for healing; it acts as an expression of the reconciliation of alterity. But in the speech of Socrates, love is understood as a metaphor for disruption; it acts as an expression of the dissolution of wholeness.

This becomes clearer if one calls to mind that Alcibiades arrives at the gathering depicted in the Symposium just after Socrates finishes his speech in praise of love. Portrayed as the unfulfilled partner of Socrates, he represents both the lover caught between resource and need and the philosopher at his wits’ end who has been cut off from reason. Indeed, the entire movement of the Symposium unfolds inexorably toward this point where love and philosophy are brought together in the figure of Alcibiades. And in the end, Plato tells us through the words of Diotima, the one becomes the other:

For wisdom is concerned with the loveliest of things, and Love is the love of what is lovely. And so it follows that Love is a lover of wisdom, and, being such, he is placed between wisdom and ignorance—for which his parentage also is responsible, in that his father is full of wisdom and resource, while his mother is devoid of either (Symposium 204b).

For Plato, then, philosophy, like love, is not a healing art; it is not an art that covers over the fragile nature of the human being. Rather, it is an art that disturbs us by exposing the truth about humanity, the truth that it is our fate to love each other as we are born, as we age, and as we die. Interestingly, Plato makes this point in the Phaedrus—in

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6 Derrida, Dissemination, p. 117.
that dialogue with the “little spot,” the “little stitch or mesh” woven into the back of its canvas—when he turns from the discussion of the speech of Lysias to a discourse by Stesichorus, son of Euphemus. Here, once again by way of a story told by Socrates, he argues that “false is the tale’ that when a lover is at hand favor ought rather to be accorded to one who does not love, on the ground that the former is mad, and the latter is sound of mind” (Phaedrus 244a). This would be true, says Socrates, only if madness were “an evil.” But it is not; for in reality, the “greatest blessings come by way of madness, indeed of madness that is heaven sent.” The prophet, the shaman, and the poet, says Socrates, all achieved their greatest glory when possessed, sanity bringing them “little or nothing” (Phaedrus 244b-245a).

But what of the Philosopher, that lover of wisdom? Socrates assures us that there is more to the story, that we will come to the place of the Philosopher soon enough. The case must first be made, though, that love, like prophecy, healing, and poetry, is “a gift of the gods, fraught with the highest bliss” (Phaedrus 245c). The first step toward accomplishing this task is discerning the nature of the soul. Of this, Plato says the following, once again by way of a myth related by Socrates: When “perfect and winged” the soul “journeys on high and controls the whole world,” and it is called immortal. But when it has “shed its wings,” it “sinks down until it can fasten on something solid, and settling there it takes to itself an earthly body . . . ”; and these together, soul and body, are called mortal (Phaedrus 246c). And having fallen to earth and taken on its body, this mortal soul experiences “the extreme of her toil and struggle.” For unlike the immortal soul, which looks upon “that place beyond the heavens” where “true being dwells,” the mortal soul, although she has “by reason of her nature” had “contemplation of true
being,” has the utmost difficulty being “put in mind thereof by things here . . .” (Phaedrus 249c-250a). Some of these mortal souls, says Socrates, “when they had the vision, had it but for a moment; some when they had fallen to earth consorted unhappily with such as led them to deeds of unrighteousness, wherefore they forgot the holy objects of their vision. Few indeed are left that can still remember much . . .” (Phaedrus, 250a).

And which souls, burdened with their “load of forgetfulness,” take on which bodies? As one might expect, the soul that has seen the most of that place where true being dwells “shall not be planted in any brute beast,” but “shall enter into the human babe that shall grow into a seeker after wisdom or beauty, a follower of the Muses and a lover . . .” (Phaedrus 248c-d). And the others?

[T]he next, having seen less, shall dwell in a king that abides by law, or a warrior and ruler; the third in a statesman, a man of business, or a trader; the fourth in an athlete, or physical trainer, or physician; the fifth shall have the life of a prophet or a Mystery priest; to the sixth that of a poet or other imitative artist shall be fittingly given; the seventh shall live in an artisan or farmer; the eighth in a Sophist or demagogue; the ninth in a tyrant (Phaedrus 248d-e).

The philosopher, then, seeker after wisdom and beauty, follower of the Muses, lover, is drawn upward toward the gods, the Sophist downward toward the tyrant. Because of this, Socrates tells us, it is “meet and right that the soul of the philosopher alone should recover her wings, for she, so far as may be, is ever near in memory to those things a god’s nearness whereunto makes him truly god” (Phaedrus 249c).

Oddly, this myth seems to put us in mind of the speech by Aristophanes in the Symposium; that speech concerning Love, and by way of implication philosophy, as a metaphor for healing, as an expression of the reconciliation of alterity. And Plato seems only to reaffirm this in the Phaedrus when he goes on to tell us that “if a man makes right
use of such [philosophical] means of remembrance, and ever approaches to the full vision of the perfect mysteries, he and he alone becomes truly perfect” (Phaedrus 249c). What is to be made of this? Again, Derrida’s suggestion that we remember that little stain on the fabric of the Phaedrus is helpful. For just after Plato has Socrates tell us that in approaching the full vision of the perfect mysteries the philosopher becomes perfect—and in so saying, once again places the pharmakon, the cure, in the hands of the master—he goes on to have Socrates say that “upon drawing nigh to the divine” that seeker after wisdom is “rebuked by the multitude as being out of his wits” (Phaedrus 249d).

And so the Philosopher, it seems, because his soul has seen so much, and so much more than that of the Sophist, suffers from a “fourth sort of madness,” the “best of all forms of divine possession,” the madness of the lover. And like the lover who is “forever lacking what he possesses,” the Philosopher, condemned to an earthly place of remembrance and forgetting, has it charged by other men “that he is demented.” In the end, it may be that this is what Plato feared so much from the Sophists all along, and perhaps from the master himself. . . . in the midst of all their sound and fury, the voice of madness falls silent.

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