One cannot but approach the Timaeus with a certain reticence. Not only because it is, of all the dialogues, the one that has been most continuously available and effective. Not only because, as a result, it has been the subject of commentary and debate ever since the early Academy, including among its commentators even philosophers of the rank of Proclus and Schelling. But also because the dialogue itself calls for reticence, provided one is attentive to the texture of its discourses, noting, for instance, how the introduction to one of those discourses (the one that will be my concern) is marked by repeated occurrences of the word ἀλεπτόν: severe, difficult, troublesome, even dangerous. To say nothing—at least not yet—about the way in which the dialogue turns upon and withdraws its own discourse. Except that one can hardly hope, in interpreting the dialogue, to double the discourse with a saying that would be any more secure.

An element of insecurity is inevitable even at the beginning, even in beginning to read and to interpret the dialogue. Where is one to begin? Presumably at the beginning—at least if one is to follow the injunction given in the Timaeus itself, though not at the beginning, not even quite at the beginning of the particular discourse in which Timaeus advances it: “With regard to everything it is most important to begin at the natural beginning” (Tim. 29b).¹ In responding to this injunction one will not be able to evade entirely the series of questions that it unleashes. What is the natural beginning? Where, if anywhere, is the natural beginning—in what kind of where? Is this beginning—this origin

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¹ μέγιστον δὴ παντὸς ἀρχαθαὶ κατὰ φύσιν ἀρχῆν. Two constructions are possible, depending on whether παντὸς is taken together with μέγιστον δὴ or as depending on ἀρχαθαὶ. Both constructions have been proposed since antiquity. The other would read: “What is most important of all is to begin at the natural beginning.” See Taylor 1928, 73f.
with which one is to begin sufficiently manifest at the beginning that one can begin straightaway with it? Or is it perhaps the case that what is manifest in the beginning is precisely not the natural beginning, so that, instead of beginning with the natural beginning, one could only arrive at it by way of a discourse capable of bringing it to light? But suppose that, in undertaking to begin reading the *Timaeus*, one were to follow the injunction. Then, precisely thereby, one would have violated it; for one would have begun, not at the beginning, but with the injunction, which does not occur at the beginning of the dialogue. This entanglement, this impossibility, is an index of just how complex the question of beginning is and of just how readily it can lead one onto an errant path or into the thickest of thickets. One thing can be said with assurance, even if only in anticipation, without having properly begun, thus already in violation of the injunction: in the *Timaeus* nothing is more vigorously interrogated than the question of beginning.

And yet, when one comes to read the dialogue, surely—one will say—it is a question only of the beginning of the text: one ought to begin reading at the beginning of the text, at its natural beginning. But can one ever be certain where a text begins? Can one ever establish with assurance its natural beginning, bringing the concept of nature to bear upon discourse, to which one usually opposes it, as the Greeks opposed *φύσις* to *λόγος*? Is there anything natural about discourse, about a text? Is even its linearity something that would allow one to establish its natural beginning? Can one be certain that the beginning of the text does not require a retrospective activation by what comes later in the linear order of the text? Are there not texts that begin only after having already begun, that always require therefore double reading? Is the *Timaeus* perhaps such a text? Is it perhaps only in doubling back to the beginning that one can then read with understanding those opening words by Socrates. They are words that, at least since Proclus, have seldom ceased to provoke Plato’s interpreters.

The first three words of the *Timaeus* bespeak the dialogue as a whole. These three words, the words “one,” “two,” “three,” enact an operation that will be repeated at several decisive junctures and in several basic articulations in and of the dialogue. For with these words Socrates is counting; he is counting off the persons who, as he counts, are receiving him as their guest. Hence, these opening words do not just express the first three positive integers but also enact a counting. Indeed, as Jacob Klein has shown, the Greek understanding of number is intrinsically—and of course linguistically—linked to counting: the word that