The Fable (Literature and Philosophy)*

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We would like to inquire into the “form” of philosophy; or more precisely, to place it in doubt; for, what if, in the end, philosophy were nothing but literature? We know how insistent philosophy—metaphysics—has generally been in defining itself by contrast to what we call literature. We also know, particularly since Nietzsche, to what extent the battle against metaphysics has approached or even identified itself with a specifically literary effort. We would like to ask, then, whether what philosophy has maintained since its “beginning” as a dream, a desire for a pure saying (a speech, a discourse which is purely transparent to what its signs ought to signify unmediatedly, i.e. truth, being, the absolute, etc.), has not always been compromised by the very practice of writing itself, that is, by the necessity of passing through a text. Therefore, we might also ask whether philosophy has not always been obliged to use modes of exposition (e.g. dialogue or narrative) which are outside its domain and which it usually has no power to control or even reflect upon. In other words, we would have to question this more or less veiled and

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silent obsession with the text, which is perhaps one of the deepest obsessions of metaphysics, but which nevertheless reveals one of its most primal limitations.

When using this type of language, certain remarks are in order:

1. First of all, the debt to Derrida's thought is obvious and requires a brief explanation. To the extent that the desire for a pure saying [un dir pur] is linked to the repression of writing and therefore to the thought of Being as presence, the doubt which we cast upon metaphysics is similar to that which Derrida has established in his own work. As a consequence, metaphysics (determined in this way) is no longer quite the same as in Heidegger's sense. In other words, Heidegger himself is likely to be inscribed within it. But to the extent that writing "as such" is not questioned directly, the problematic is not exactly the same. In fact, everything depends on what we mean by literature. Do we mean the letter (γράμμα, trace, mark, inscription ... writing), or do we mean only literature in the most commonly accepted, most decried sense (which is moreover a belated sense) as, for example, when someone says: "and everything else is literature?" In this latter, banal, and somewhat pejorative, but nonetheless revealing sense, literature signifies above all what has conventionally been called fiction. 1

2. Our task then is relatively simple. Drawing upon a distinction which is used by metaphysics itself as a basis for critique, we must ask: to what extent can one accuse metaphysics of the same transgression that it has always made against all discourse which it has not absolutely mastered or identified as its own? As a result, one can show that ultimately metaphysical discourse is not radically different from literary discourse. Moreover, in referring to Nietzsche rather than Derrida, we appeal to a debate which is apparently more limited (in that metaphysics is reduced to Platonism) and more superficial (in that only the question of appearance is raised). This debate threatens to become more crucial if, as Derrida has shown, to adopt a metaphysical concept is to turn it back against itself—one would have to say: in itself—or, if one could: between itself. In that case, metaphysics would preclude the possibility of breaking out from its various enclosures and devoting itself more obstinately and more desperately to the "wasteland"—the desert that "ensues" and has perhaps never ceased to "ensue."

3. This question also asks about the "completion" of metaphysics. Not only is it difficult, but one might say an inevitable impossibility, to ask philosophy about literature as though it were a question raised "from the outside." Similarly one cannot take this question to its extreme by entirely unfolding it. First of all, there has to be an outside. Then, if a means of access were perchance imaginable, the outside would have to