

Anna Montebugnoli*

“Something remains to be said”: On the Metonymic Ontology of the Platonic *Chora*

1. Introduction

The history of the *chora* – the third kind of reality (*triton genos*) introduced by Plato in the middle of the *Timaeus* – and of its¹ interpretations² is that of a constant fluctuation and undecidability between its different meanings, in particular between that of matter and space, substance and place – one *or* the other, or both one *and* the other.³ It is, that is to say, the history of the attempts to translate it (without, as far as possible, leaving anything out), of the efforts to turn the mythical discourse on the *triton genos*, along with its metaphors and figures – nurse (*tithene*), shapeless (*amorphon*) receptacle (*hypodoché*), mother (*meter*), space (*chora*), place (*hedra*), bearer of imprints (*ekmageion*) –, into a logical sequence, following at least in part the familiar Platonic principle of ensuring a consistent nexus between the discursive, epistemological, and on-

¹ In the literature, the name *chora* is sometimes treated as a feminine noun and sometime in the neuter. Here I will treat it as the latter in order to stress its thirdness (*triton genos*).

² The debate on the nature of the third kind of reality introduced by the *Timaeus* begins with Aristotle and the Ancient Academy, continues throughout mid- and Neoplatonism, and up to modern and contemporary scholars. On the history of this debate, see in particular Luc Brisson, *Le Même et l'Autre dans la structure ontologique du Timée de Platon. Un commentaire systématique du Timée de Platon*, Academia Verlag, Sankt Augustin 1998, pp. 221–253.

³ For an interpretation of the third kind of reality as space, see Keimpe Algra, *Concepts of Space in Greek Thought*, E.J. Brill, Leiden 1995, pp. 72–120; Jean-François Pradeau, “Être quelque part, occuper une place. Τόπος et χώρα dans le Timée de Platon”, *Les Études philosophiques*, 3/1995, pp. 375–399. For an interpretation of the third kind as matter, see in particular Carlo Diano, “Il problema della materia in Platone: la chora del *Timeo*”, *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, 49 (1979), pp. 321–335; Mary Louise Gill, “Matter and Flux in Plato’s *Timaeus*”, *Phronesis* 32 (1987), pp. 34–53. For an interpretation of the third kind as an intermediate nature between space and matter, see Luc Brisson, *Le Même et l'Autre*, pp. 208–221; Barbara Botter, “Il ricettacolo di materia e spazio in *Timeo* 48e–53b”, in: C. Natali, S. Maso (eds.), *Plato Physicus, cosmologia e antropologia nel Timeo*, Hakkert, Amsterdam 2003, pp. 165–187; Francesco Fronterotta, “Introduzione” in: Platone, *Timeo*, Rizzoli, Milano 2003, pp. 51–70; Dana R. Miller, *The Third Kind in Plato’s Timaeus*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2003.

* University of Bergamo

tological planes. This principle clearly states that “true opinion” can never be separated from the *logos* and while things without the *logos* “are unknowable,” things with the *logos* “are knowable.”⁴ I am not concerned here with examining how diverse readings of the *Timaeus* arrange the order of these terms, sometimes giving priority to the philological concerns, then to the logical issues, and sometimes to the ontological inquiry into the kinds of being. Whether the focus is placed on the text and its philological coherence or on the diachronic consequentiality of Plato’s thought, it is the same criterion (although less cogent) as unveiling the structural similarity between an object, its knowledge, and the surrounding discourse that guides most attempts at unravelling the “myth” of the *chora* – or, rather, its “myth within the myth,”⁵ i.e. the “probable myth” of the third kind of reality, within the cosmological *mythos* of the *Timaeus*.

Such a *mythos* is much harder to decipher in so far as it is carried out under the sign of a “bastard reasoning” (*logismós nothos*),⁶ the only kind of reasoning appropriate to such a “difficult and obscure kind of thing”⁷ (*chalepón kai amydrón eidos*), which “the argument seems to demand”⁸ (*eisanankazein*) as a result of the “wandering cause”⁹ (*planomene aitia*) – i.e. the “necessity”¹⁰ that, together and against the “intellect” (*nous*), accounts for the universe and its movements –, and which can be known only in a “dreamlike”¹¹ fashion (*oneiropolein*). The rigorous and well-ordered series *episteme-being-logos* that organises ancient philosophy in general (and that of Plato in particular),¹² as well as its “weak” version *doxa-sensible-mythos*, is replaced within the discourse on the *chora* by the “irregular” and aporetic one *triton genos-dream-bastard reasoning*. Leaving aside the problems concerning each of these terms, it is worth noting that all the issues raised by the *chora* – the difficulty of comprehending it, the question of its role in the Platonic theory of ideas, even the possibility of its rigorous philosophical translation – relate to the gap between these two series. Therefore, the

200

⁴ *Theaet.* 201d1-3, translated by John McDowell, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, p. 94.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1995, p. 113.

⁶ *Tim.* 52 b2, translated by Robin Waterfield, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, p. 45.

⁷ *Tim.* 49 a3, p. 40.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Tim.* 48 a7, p. 39.

¹⁰ *Tim.* 48 a4, p. 39.

¹¹ *Tim.* 52 b3, p. 45.

¹² See in particular *Crat.* 439 b-440 c; *Resp.* VII 533 e-534 a; *Phaedr.* 247 c-e.

third kind of reality ends up being at the same time the negative correlative of the eidetic principle, the weakest point (on account of its passive indifference) of the ontological order, and the most reluctant to allow for any identification, in so far as it constantly and inevitably "slips" on the sequence of transpositions ordered by the *logos* series.

In fact, this resistance to the *logos* is what made the *chora* the central figure of the constellation of the "theories of difference" that have sought and are still seeking to rethink Western philosophy and culture by questioning its tradition. Among those, especially Derrida's analysis of Western logocentrism and Continental feminist thought (particularly Kristeva's and Irigaray's philosophy)¹³ have drawn attention to this Platonic concept, marking it as the sign of the difference, of the alterity and criticism of the ontological, logical, and symbolic order of the *logos*.

Therefore, instead of undertaking a definitory challenge that would risk running around in circles – with the terms bouncing between different series of concepts (space, void, bodies, elements) and systems (philosophy, physics, mathematics, geometry) –, this article aims at investigating the features of the *triton genos* within the framework of the philosophies of difference, not only by analysing its capacity to *deconstruct* the logocentric model, but also (and foremost) by focusing on its ability to *construct*, i.e. outline, a different way of organising the linguistic and ontological order of reality. Such an investigation, however, must go back to the letter of the Platonic text. In fact, my thesis is that Timaeus's exposition of the third kind already contains the clues to an understanding of the *chora* as a *function*, reorganising ontology, language, and experience, which is able to resonate with the themes of contemporary philosophy.

201

This return to the Platonic text should be understood in two ways. (1) It is the result of a twin aspiration, both genealogical and "anachronistic," that has guided the various theories of difference; an aspiration rooted in the desire of both drawing another "lineage" of the history of philosophy, and, at the same time, breaching its traditional chronological (and logical) order. Such a revolutionary

¹³ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Columbia University Press, New York 1984, in particular pp. 25–30; Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1985, in particular pp. 243–343.

drive tests itself first and foremost in the philological and philosophical deconstruction of the texts of the tradition. This double aspiration thus leads to a rethinking not just of the history of philosophical concepts, but also, before that, of its words and language; i.e., it leads to the identification of the traces of other ways of speaking and talking that make it possible to say what is left unsaid by the *logos*, therefore questioning both the absoluteness of its order and the image it draws of what exceeds it. In this context, the reading of the *Timaeus* represents (2) an attempt at finding one of the many possible genealogical threads of such linguistic and theoretical otherness.

Within this general hermeneutic framework, the article aims, more specifically, at (i) recognising in the *triton genos* the figure of a different way of naming things and their mutual relations, a way that can already be labelled a *metonymic* one – with specific reference to the theoretical meaning given to the term by the feminist thought of difference¹⁴ –, as opposed to the *metaphorical* one of the classic *logos*. However, according to the aforementioned principle of ancient philosophy's entangled nexus between language and being, this metonymic mode of signifying and naming necessarily follows directly from the way in which the argument of the *chora* redefines the classic scheme of Platonic ontology. Based on this, the article will (ii) try to bring to light the eccentric form of connection between ontology and language set up by the *triton genos*, and the central role of this reconfiguration of Platonic theory for the contemporary philosophy of difference. This implies, however, a rethinking of the classic series epistemology-language-ontology seen above. Such a rethinking proceeds from the recognition of the onto-metonymic order of the *chora*, the renunciation of the “logical” translation of the figures that describe its characters and functions, and finally the acceptance of both the impossibility of a “science” of the *triton genos* and the possibility of a different way of knowing and perceiving.¹⁵ The third aim of the article is therefore (iii) to track down the terms of another series, different from that of epistemology-language-ontology, which is able to give an account

202

¹⁴ See in particular Luisa Muraro, “To Knit or to Crochet. A Political-Linguistic Tale on the Enmity between Metaphor and Metonymy”, in: C. Cesarino, A. Righi (eds.), *Another Mother: Diotima and the Symbolic Order of Italian Feminism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London 2018, pp. 67–119.

¹⁵ On the knowledge of the *chora*, see in particular Luc Brisson, *Le Même et l'Autre*, pp. 197–208.

of the nexus between the onto-linguistics of the *chora* and its peculiar kind of knowledge and perception.

In this context, I shall start this line of reasoning with a quotation from Luce Irigaray's *Speculum* and, in particular, from the chapter entitled *La mystérique*, in which she writes about the difficulties of thinking and speaking in a different language from that of the *logos*:

Words begin to fail her. She senses something remains to be said that resists all speech, that can at best be stammered out. All the words are weak, worn out, unfit to translate anything sensibly. For it is no longer a matter of longing for some determinable attribute, some mode of essence, some face of presence. What is expected is neither a *this* nor a *that*, not a *here* anymore than a *there*. No being, no places are designated. So the best plan is to abstain from all discourse, to keep quiet, or else utter only a sound so inarticulate that it barely forms a song.¹⁶

"Neither a *this* nor a *that*," highlighted by italics, echoes the *Timaeus*'s syntagma *tode kai touto*, which is central to the understanding of the *triton genos*, in so far as it raises one of its main hermeneutic issues: that of what kind of linguistic "substance" the third kind confers on the sensible.

2. Metonymic ontology

2.1 Introducing the third kind

As is well known, the *Timaeus* is the only Platonic dialogue about nature (*peri physeos*), a mythical treatise¹⁷ about the origin and the organisation of the universe. Within this "physical" context, and with particular reference to the "wandering cause," the "necessity" opposed to the order of "reason,"¹⁸ *Timaeus* introduces a new kind of reality, a "third" after that of ideas and phenomena, "difficult

¹⁶ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 193.

¹⁷ On the mythical discourse of the *Timaeus*, see in particular Leonardo Taran, "The Creation Myth in Plato's *Timaeus*" in: J. P. Anton, G. Kustas (eds.), *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, Sate University of New York Press, Albany 1971, pp. 372–407; Luc Brisson, *Platon, les mots e les mythes*, Maspéro, Paris 1982; Thomas Kjeller Johansen, *Plato's Natural Philosophy: A Study of the Timaeus-Critias*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, pp. 48–68.

¹⁸ *Tim.* 48 a4-c 1, p. 39.

and obscure,” the nature of which is, first of all, to be “the receptacle (or nurse, if you like) of generation” (*pases einai geneseos hypodochén autén hoion tithenen*).¹⁹ The *triton genos* is immediately linked to the theme of generation, one of the main problems of Platonic philosophy, in so far as the need to preserve at any cost the separateness of the ontological planes makes it impossible to give an account of the participation of the phenomena in the ideas (and vice versa), and, consequently, of the existence of something as a sensible world, subject to becoming. This is, in fact, the *aporia* of the *Parmenides*: what kind of nexus can exist between objects so ontologically heterogeneous that any relation between them is impossible? The *Timaeus* (which follows the composition of the *Parmenides*) seems to be an attempt to find an answer to this puzzle by introducing, in the general scheme of Platonic ontology, two new figures: the demiurge, which shapes the universe according to the eidetic paradigm, and the *chora*.²⁰ The latter, in so far as it is described as the nurse and the receptacle of generation, seems able to give an account of the generative processes that rule the phenomenal world – i.e. the world of becoming – and, therefore, to solve, at least in part, the problem of the participation of *phainomena* and ideas (*eide*). However, the nourishing and “receptive” role of the *chora* (which has so many consequences for the Platonic ontological model) is not explored here, immediately giving way to the linguistic “awkwardness” that becomes apparent as soon as Timaeus’s argument focuses on the elements of the sensible. Such linguistic difficulty depends on the impossibility of defining them with precision, an impossibility that depends in turn on their ontological inconstancy. Therefore, after introducing the third kind of reality and connecting it to the theme of generation, Timaeus adds:

204

This [i.e. the fact that the third kind is the receptacle and the nurse of generation] is a true statement, but it doesn’t tell us everything we need to know about it. That degree of clarity is difficult, however, and not least because achieving it necessarily requires the raising of a prior problem about fire and its companions. The point is that it’s hard to say, with any degree of reliability and stability, that any of them is such that it should really be called ‘water’ rather than ‘fire’, or that any

¹⁹ 49 a6, p. 40 (translation slightly modified).

²⁰ On the relation between the *Parmenides* and the *Timaeus* see Francesco Fronterotta, “Introduzione” in: Platone, *Timeo*, pp. 30–51 and Luc Brisson, “Comment rendre compte de la participation du sensible à l’intelligible chez Platon?”, in: J.-F. Pradeau (ed.), *Platon: les forms intelligibles*, P.U.F., Paris 2001, pp. 55–85.

of them is such that it should be called by any particular name rather than by all four names, one after another.²¹

Thus, the comprehension of the third kind of reality seems to depend directly on an understanding of the linguistic issue connected to the phenomenal world. Moreover, it was the need to define the uncertain nature of the elements that led to the reconfiguration of ontological dualism: "What we have to do is see what fire, water, air, and earth were like in themselves before the creation of the universe, and what happened to them then. No one before has ever explained how they were created,"²² says Timaeus immediately before referring to the third kind of reality, the introduction of which is therefore enclosed between two references to the linguistic-definitory problem of the nature of the sensible. The images describing the *chora* are therefore deeply linked to the linguistic and ontological problem of becoming, for which the doctrine of the ideas was able to only partially account.

2.2. Organising the argument: the onto-linguistic circle

Experience, says Timaeus, shows how the elements tend to transform into each other in an inexorable circle of modifications and mutual production.²³ Therefore, "since it seems, then, as though none of them ever retains its identity, how could one insist without qualms and without making a fool of oneself that any of them is 'this' rather than something else?"²⁴ In order to solve the problem of the impossibility of any deictic designation of the phenomena connected to the ontological inconsistency of their elements, Timaeus proposes the well-known pronominal distinction between the permanent entities of being and the unstable ones of becoming:

By far the safest course is to treat them and speak about them as follows. Whenever we see something — fire, for instance — that is constantly changing, we should not label it 'this' fire, but 'something of this sort'. Likewise, we should never say 'this' water, but 'something of this sort', and the same goes for everything else that we indicate by means of expressions such as 'that' and 'this', under the impression that we're designating some particular thing and that these things have

²¹ *Tim.* 49 a7-b5, pp. 40–41.

²² *Tim.* 48 b3-6, p. 39.

²³ *Tim.* 49 c6, p. 41.

²⁴ *Tim.* 49 d1-3, p. 41.

the slightest stability. The point is that they run away rather than face expressions such as ‘that’ and ‘this’ and ‘just so’, and every form of speech that makes them out to be stable entities. We had better not speak of any of them like that. Instead, it would be safest to say ‘something of this sort’, an expression which can be used to describe each and every one of them, and is similarly applicable at every stage of the cyclical process. So, for example, we should refer to fire as ‘something that is regularly of this sort’ and so on for everything that is subject to creation.²⁵

This is an extremely problematic passage of the text, starting with the fact that, depending on how we translate the Greek text, the philosophical meaning changes radically.²⁶ However, what is important to emphasise here are two issues: 1. the close connection (as already seen above) linking Plato’s theory of language and his ontology, according to which different levels of being imply a different linguistic “bond”; 2. the peculiar way in which this connection – which in other Platonic dialogues is developed within the eidetic doctrine – is here entangled in a strange conceptual knot, which makes it impossible to isolate the sequence of images that describe the *chora* from the problem of what kind of language can name the elements of the sensible. These two considerations stress how the structure of the argument highlights both the *triton genos*’s link with the ontological and linguistic issues of Platonic philosophy, and its radical difference from the way in which these are dealt with in the doctrine of ideas.

In fact, the importance of the linguistic role of the third kind,²⁷ along with its generative nature, is brought to light by the way in which the text specifies that “the only safe referent of the expressions ‘this’ and ‘that’ is that within which each created thing comes into existence and puts in an appearance, and from which it subsequently passes away, but anything that is of such-and-such a quality – warm or white or any of the opposites, or any combination of opposites – should never have that terminology used of them.”²⁸ The *chora* is entitled

206

²⁵ *Tim.* 49 d5-e7, pp. 41–42.

²⁶ On this, see Luc Brisson, *Le Même et l’Autre*, pp. 180–197 and Francesco Fronterotta, note No. 193 to the Greek text of Platone, *Timeo*, Rizzoli, Milano 2003, pp. 261–263.

²⁷ On this, see Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, p. 64: “The latter [i.e. the *chora*] figures the place of inscription of *all that is marked on the world*. Likewise, the being-logical of logic, its essential *logos* whether it be true, probable, or mythic, forms the explicit theme of the *Timaeus*.”

²⁸ *Tim.* 49 e7-50 a4, p. 42.

to the same deictic determination that elsewhere Plato ascribes to ideas.²⁹ This attribution is all the more extraordinary if we consider the dizzying sequence of heterogeneous images through which the *triton genos* is described, which seems to contradict the acknowledgment of its stability. Indeed, to clarify the sense of its deictic determination, Timaeus immediately compares the third kind to the gold used by artisans to shape different figures, restating the difference between the latter, which are “something of this sort,” since they are all modifiable, and the former, which is always the same throughout the productive process.³⁰ Moreover, he compares it to “the stuff from which everything is moulded – to be modified and altered by the things that enter it, with the result that it *appears* different at different times.”³¹ Such an appearance, however, does not change the “essence” of the “receptacle of all material bodies” (*dechomeme somata physis*)³², the main feature of which is to “only ever ac[t] as the receptacle for everything,” and to “never com[e] to resemble in any way whatsoever any of the things that enter it.”³³ The argument moves forward by accumulating different images of the third kind: it resembles a mother, next to the ideas-father and the sensible-son; it is shapeless (*amorphon*), since it must receive the *schemata* of the *eide*, and lacks any kind of attribute, just like the odourless substances that are used for the production of perfumes, or like “the soft materials” or the “base staff” made “as uniform and smooth as possible” by artisans in order to create different figures.³⁴

We shall return to the series of comparisons used by Timaeus to describe “the mother and receptacle of every created thing, of all that is visible or otherwise perceptible,”³⁵ as well as to the problem of the way in which it “somehow” receives the ideas. For now, it is important to note how this sequence of images describing the *triton genos* is enclosed between two segments of the text concerning the problems of denomination and the nature of the elements – both segments relating to the *stoicheia*’s onto-linguistic alterity as compared to the *chora*, and to the nexus that links them to it. The argument thus proceeds as follows:

²⁹ See *Tim.* 52 b5-d1, p. 45.

³⁰ *Tim.* 50 b1-5, p. 41.

³¹ *Tim.* 50 c2-4, p. 42.

³² *Tim.* 50 b6, p. 42.

³³ *Tim.* 50 b8-c2, p. 42.

³⁴ *Tim.* 50 c7-51 a1, p. 43.

³⁵ *Tim.* 51 a4-5, p. 43.

In so far as we can use what we've been saying to arrive at a conception of its nature with some degree of accuracy, the best we can do is say that fire is the impression we receive when some part of it has been ignited, and water is the impression we receive when some part has been moistened, and earth and air are the impressions we receive in so far as it is the receptacle for copies (*mimemata*) of earth and air.³⁶

Leaving again aside the issue of the *mimemata* (i.e. the elements) and the following *excursus* on the connection between the phenomena and the ideas within the narrative context on the *triton genos* (to be discussed below), we find – along the line that connects the descriptive series of the *chora* and the definitory issue of the elements – another sequence of images of the third kind designating, this time, its spatial nature. In fact, while summing up for the third time the kinds of reality, Timaeus uses the term *chora* to describe the *triton genos*:

Then, third, there is space (*chora*), which exists for ever and is indestructible, and which acts as the arena for everything that is subject to creation. It is grasped by a kind of bastard reasoning, without the support of sensation, and is hardly credible. In fact, when we take space into consideration we come to suffer from dreamlike illusions, and to claim that every existing thing must surely exist in some particular place and must occupy some space.³⁷

After another brief interlude about the connection between dreams, figures of the *chora*, and *eide*,³⁸ the argument continues with yet another general ontological summary restating the link between the *triton genos* and the elements entering and leaving it:

208

As if it were not enough that the nurse of creation presents a complex appearance (as a result of being moistened and heated, of assuming the characters of earth and air, and of acquiring all the qualities that follow from all this), it is also thoroughly imbalanced (as a result of being filled with dissimilar and imbalanced powers), and not only is it shaken by the things it contains, so that it lurches haphazardly all over the place, but its motion in turn further shakes them. This stir-

³⁶ *Tim.* 51 b2-6, p. 43.

³⁷ *Tim.* 52 a8-b5, p. 45.

³⁸ *Tim.* 52 b5-d1, p. 45.

ring causes them to be constantly moving in different directions and to become separated. It's like when things are shaken and sifted by sieves or other devices for cleaning grain: the heavy, dense material goes one way, while the light, flimsy material goes and settles elsewhere. Likewise, when these four were shaken at that time by the receptacle (which was itself in motion, like an implement for shaking stuff), the least similar among them ended up the furthest apart, and those that were most similar were pushed the closest together.³⁹

If we combine all these paragraphs, what emerges is something like a spiral path – with a series of interruptions as regards the link between the three kinds, which constitute another thematic sequence, which we will see below – where the ontological-definitory problem of the elements entails the introduction of the third kind, and where the series of figures outlining its characters – (1) receptacle-nurse, (2) mother-shapeless-moulded staff, (3) space-place – is always followed by a new exposition of the linguistic and ontological problem of the sensible, or, more precisely, of its *stoicheia*, defined as (1) “something of this sort;” (2) a part (*meros*) of the third kind, and as (3) the series of movements of aggregation and disintegration that happen inside the *chora*. Therefore, each one of these descriptions deals with the onto-linguistic dimension of the sensible from a new perspective, linked more or less directly to the sequence of images of the *triton genos* that precedes it.

At this point, the identification of this scheme allows for three theoretical moves: highlighting the onto-linguistic function of the *chora*; underlining its character of *function* instead of seeking its correct conceptual translation – matter and/or space and/or mother etc.; and, finally, recognising the peculiar features of this function, emphasising its discontinuity and its radical heterogeneity to the nexus of similarity that the doctrine of ideas institutes between language and being.

209

2.3 Metonymy and metaphor

In fact, this analysis of the text sketches out an image of the *triton genos* as a criterion ordering the problematic definition of the elements (“as though none of them ever retains its identity, how could one insist without qualms and without making a fool of oneself that any of them is ‘this’ rather than something

³⁹ *Tim.* 52 d4-53 a7, p. 46.

else?”⁴⁰) and giving partial reliability to the substantial instability (“looks as though there’s a cyclical process whereby they generate one another”⁴¹) of the sensible. At the same time, the *triton genos* is in turn defined by the ontological and linguistic relation it establishes with the things it comes into contact with. Indeed, the *chora* makes it possible to name the elements on the basis of the way in which its peculiar ontological consistency allows for and organises their coexistence: its spatial (*chora, edra, hypodoché*), material (*ekmageion, chrysos*), and generative (*meter, tithene*) nature arranges the elements according to a nexus of conjunction, proximity, and combination, which determines – in agreement with, once more, the general rule of connection between language and being – a linguistic organisation consistent with the peculiar ontological form. Such an onto-linguistic relation between the *chora* and the elements is based on a principle that can be defined as a *metonymic* one. In fact, through a series of operations entailing the “concatenation,” “combination,” “contiguity,” and “alignment”⁴² of the elements, the *triton genos* signifies the same as that which in linguistics describes the metonymic signification. Such operations are both the effect and the denomination of the variety of its way of being. Thus, 1. fire is nothing other than the burning part (*meros*) of the *chora*, which is in turn made visible and nameable as such just as long as the relations of contiguity and proximity do not transform it into water (i.e. the liquid part of the *chora*), air (i.e. the aerial part of the *chora*), or earth (i.e. the earthy part of the *chora*); 2. the expression “something of this sort” can now be understood as an indication of the metonymic modality of language, which signifies on the basis of a nexus of spatial and material contiguity and proximity, and which is always modifiable according to the combinatory possibilities deriving from the peculiar way in which the elements are brought together in the *chora*; 3. between the movements of the aggregation and disaggregation of the elements and those of the *chora* there is a mutual implication, in so far as it is the same onto-metonymic principle that guides the processes of the composition and disruption of the former and organises the *partial* and transitory figures of the latter.

210

⁴⁰ *Tim.* 49 c7-d4, p. 41.

⁴¹ *Tim.* 49 c6-7, p. 41.

⁴² Roman Jakobson, “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances”, in: Roman Jakobson, Moris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin-New York 2002, pp. 73–75.

Thus, in this brief exposition of the third kind in the *Timaeus* we get a glimpse of an alternative to the classic order of being and *logos*, which works, on the contrary, according to the metaphorical criterion of similarity – i.e. phenomena as imitations of ideas – and substitutability – i.e. phenomena in place of ideas. The difference in the metonymic signification and ontology manifests itself here “negatively” as a lack of those definitory criteria that rule the eidetic nexus between ontology and language and, “positively,” as the multiplication of the figures that describe its equivocality. In fact, it is worth noting that this difference does not present itself as a pure otherness or as a simple denial of the metaphorical order of the *logos*, i.e. as an antagonism that expresses itself as absence of form (*amorphon*) and qualification – which instead characterise the world of the eidetic order. The *chora*’s “positive” onto-linguistic – i.e. metonymic – ability to signify and organise the sensible acts as a counterpart to such a privative dimension (which does exist, as the sequence of the third kind’s attributes prove).

Therefore, the *triton genos* and its signification find themselves close to, or, rather, *in the middle* of the metaphorical operations of the *eide*, the description of which interrupts, as mentioned above, that of the third kind and its connection with the elements, sketching out a different thematic sequence, i.e. that of the metaphorical semantic operation. The outcome is a complex and almost inextricable “twine of threads” – both metaphorical and metonymic – that weave the ontological and “linguistic fabric of reality.” However, it is far from a homogeneous fabric: the *chora* is an irregular figure, in which the elements constantly aggregate and disaggregate as a result of the connections of similarity as well as of spatial, “material, and causal”⁴³ proximity, in which the “likenesses of real existences” are “modelled after their patterns in a wonderful and inexplicable manner”⁴⁴ and which, in an equally “mysterious way, partakes of the intelligible.”⁴⁵ Those two ontological and linguistic axes stand together, in the same fashion in which metaphorical and metonymic signification are bonded: that is, as stated by Muraro, “in a relation that is not one of pacific complementarity but one of competitive rivalry.”⁴⁶ The difficulty understanding and naming the *chora*, its connection with the ideas and the sensible, its thirdness, the multiplicity

⁴³ Luisa Muraro, “To Knit or to Crochet”, p. 54.

⁴⁴ *Tim.* 50 c4-5, p. 42.

⁴⁵ *Tim.* 51 a4-b2, p. 43.

⁴⁶ Luisa Muraro, “To Knit or to Crochet”, p. 69.

of its figures, all the stumbling, the hesitations, and the involuted forms of its exposition depend, therefore, on the conflictual coexistence of these two different kinds of signification and ontological organisation. Indeed, one reshapes experience “as an ideal representation,” by “defining things” and “duplicating the world in a representation”;⁴⁷ while the other “articulates experience into its parts”⁴⁸ and signifies things through “what accompanies them, in natural sequences or human usage.”⁴⁹ With regard to the latter, i.e. natural sequences or human usage, it is not by chance that the descriptive series of the *triton genos* are equally distributed between generative images, on the one hand, and techno-poietic ones, on the other. We need now examine these images in order to better understand the problem of the perception and knowledge of the *chora*.

3. Three kinds of aesthetics

As seen above, the series of spatial, generative, and poietic figures of the third kind depends on its metonymic ontology, the mechanism of which such figures describe:⁵⁰ space and place, mother and nurse, the receptacle of generation, and at the same time the material-surface of inscription and the production of the figures of the phenomenal world destined to be endlessly modified on the basis of the combinatory and “syntactic” character of the *chora*. This in turn owes its onto-linguistic feature to the sequence of images outlining its work of reconfiguring the sensible and its peculiar “exchange” therewith. Thus, between the metonymic language through which the *chora* makes it possible to name the elements (and through which these in turn make the *chora* visible) and its different figures, there is a reciprocal relation, in so far as the former cannot be understood without the latter and vice versa. The connection that we have analysed between the exposition of the elements’ denomination mechanisms, on the one hand, and the descriptive series of the *chora*, on the other, not only recognises the onto-metonymic function of the third kind, but also explains the untranslatability of its figures into rigorous philosophical terms. In the ontologically and linguistically suspended space of the description of the *triton genos*, the criteria of translation and conceptual adaptation that can usually be applied to the mythical word

212

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2010, p. 64.

(*mythos*) – and particularly to the Platonic *eikotoi mythoi* – do not apply, this despite the fact that “the cosmo-ontologic encyclopedia of the *Timaeus* presents itself as a ‘probable myth’, a tale ordered by the hierarchized opposition of the sensible and the intelligible, of the image in the course of becoming and of eternal being,”⁵¹ which would seem to frame the argument of the *triton genos* as a “myth within the myth [...], an open abyss in the general myth.”⁵²

The particular onto-linguistic nature of the *chora* determines the heterogeneity of its exposition as compared to both the “true *logos*” and the probable *mythos*,⁵³ therefore advising against any purpose of translating it into logical terms as well as of converting its mythological form. In fact, “the thought of the *chora* exceeds the polarity [...] of the *mythos* and the *logos*.”⁵⁴ Thus, its thirdness represents an alternative to the “*scala naturae*” of classic metaphysics and to its polarisations – *logos-mythos*, truth-probability, sensible-intelligible, *doxa-episteme*, etc. However, such an alternative is not just a pure otherness, or a simple eccentricity compared to the order of being. The discourse on the third kind does not simply suggest the existence of something behind the series of being and its *logos*. It actually reveals the “secret” of its inner mechanism, that of a metonymic ontology that is usually subordinate to the metaphorical one and that here, on the basis of its generative, linguistic, and poietic ability, lays out an organisation of the sensible that is parallel and opposite to that of the metaphorical ontology.

The generative, spatial, material, and techno-poietic images of the *chora* therefore do not represent a series of attributes of a single theoretical object (whether it be space, matter, or a hybrid of the two), or different manifestations of a mythological character (some sort of mother-uterus receiving both the semen of the ideas and the poietic order of the demiurge), or a link between the mythical and logical words. That is, they are neither “*fundamental elements*, ‘translations’ that resist being converted back into authenticity and logicity,”⁵⁵ nor “absolute metaphors,”⁵⁶ nor Ur-metaphors of the metaphysical and physical order; and, finally, they cannot be understood literally, as their material heaviness

⁵¹ Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, p. 113.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁵⁵ Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, p. 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

and spatial hindrance would describe an external existence to the absolute and unique order of metaphorical ontology.⁵⁷

Rather, these are figures of metonymy. They represent “pieces” of its peculiar linguistic ontology, aspects of the sensible world that is organised by it, and technical modalities of this organisation and of its modification. The maternal gestation and generation (*meter* and *tithene*), the modelling procedures of the “soft materials” and the rules of their figurative composition (gold, *ekmageion*), the cycles of physical transformation (the shift from fire to air, to water, to earth, and back), and spatial modification (the gathering and division of the elements): all of these figures name portions of the phenomenal world, variable ways of being, according to criteria of spatial, material, causal, and temporal proximity. The metonymic functioning of the *chora* is indeed further clarified as a mechanism for the combination and recombination of parts of the sensible; an operation conflicting with that of the eidetic metaphorical ontology which, in so far as it establishes standards of recognition and similarity, as well as of appointing identities and defined characters, allows the *fixing* of the order of the phenomenal world by *marking* the positions within it.⁵⁸

In this sense, the processes of the decomposition and reconfiguration of the parts of the *chora* acquire an aesthetic dimension. Contrary to the organisation of the sensible by means of determinations and crystallisation, the third kind describes the procedures through which the sensible is rearticulated, as well as the “corresponding forms of visibility”⁵⁹ of this rearticulation. In this regard, the metonymic function of the *chora* takes the form of what Rancière calls an “aesthetic ac[t],”⁶⁰ i.e. an act that opens “new possibilities” and new “modes of transformation”⁶¹ of the sensible world. Such an aesthetic dimension of the *chora* thus assumes three different deeply intertwined forms:

214

⁵⁷ See Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy”, in: Id., *Margins of Philosophy*, The Harvester Press, Brighton 1982, pp. 207–271.

⁵⁸ On this, see Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Continuum, London-New York 2004, pp. 9–19.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

1. The first form can be labelled as mimetic-generative aesthetics, which is particularly evident in the connection between the *triton genos* and the *eide*. In fact, the nature of *chora*, says Timaeus, "is to act as the stuff from which everything is moulded – to be modified and altered by the things that enter it, with the result that it appears different at different times. And whatever enters it and leaves it is a copy of something that exists for ever, a copy formed in an indescribably wonderful fashion."⁶² Such a wonder, linked as it is to the problem of the participation of the ideas in the *chora*, can be explained in light of the unusual manner in which metonymic and metaphorical ontology are brought together in this passage of the *Timaeus* that describes how both of them – each in its own way – constitute the sensible. The copies (*mimemata*), which in the context of the doctrine of ideas are the result of a complex series of equivalences and analogies between the paradigms and their imitations, become here the "intermediate" form consequent to a double generative process – on the one hand, the figure of the mother and the receptacle "nourishing" and giving an account of the becoming, and on the other, the figures of the father and the paradigms that, in so far as they leave (even though feeble and temporary) traces of their existence, make it possible to (re)shape the forms and the images of the phenomena. The *mimemata* are therefore the result of the coming together of these two processes of production-generation, the effect of a combinatory *mimesis* of ideas-paradigms-father and receptacle-nurse-mother,⁶³ each one carrying out its autonomous way of "modelling" the sensible.

2. A second form of aesthetics, which can be referred to as a poietic-mimetic one, is sketched out by the series of "handcrafted" images that describe the third kind, as in the case of gold that can be moulded into "all the shapes there are" while remaining always the same,⁶⁴ or as in the case of "liquids which are to receive the scents" that are made odourless by artisans, or, again, as materials that, in order to be able to receive all kind of impressions, must be smoothed over by craftsmen.⁶⁵ Therefore, the third kind's lack of form, on which all these figures insist, must not be understood as a condition of existence, or as a substantial property of the *triton genos*. On the contrary, it is described as the result of the poietic pro-

⁶² *Tim.* 50 c2-6, p. 42.

⁶³ *Tim.* 49 a6-50 d3-4, pp. 40-42.

⁶⁴ *Tim.* 50 a5-b5, p. 42.

⁶⁵ *Tim.* 50 e8-51 a1, p. 43.

cesses and techniques of the “anesthetisation” of the materials, i.e. as the result of a series of procedures that make it possible to remove all forms, along with all primary and secondary qualities, in order to ascribe new ones. Thus, these figures of the *chora* do not describe the negative nature of a passive substance or matter, but rather the poietic-aesthetic process, which consists of the constant manipulation of the forms of the sensible, the outcomes of which do not depend on the classic rules of *mimesis* – i.e. the imitative canon, based on the nexus of similarity linking the copy to the model – but instead on the handcrafted work of the modification of sensible objects, one whose repeatability and transformative power determines the (transitory) arrangements of the sensible.

3. A third configuration of the aesthetics of the *chora* relates to its peculiar form of knowledge, similar to the eccentric gnoseology of the dream. In fact, when we “take [...] into consideration” the third kind of reality, which can be “grasped by a kind of bastard reasoning, without the support of sensation,” and “is hardly credible,”

we come to suffer from dreamlike illusions, and to claim that every existing thing must surely exist in some particular place and must occupy some space, and that nothing exists except what exists on earth or in the heavens. This dreaming keeps us asleep and makes it impossible for us to determine the truth about these and other related matters; we find it impossible to speak the truth even about the realm of true being, where illusion plays no part. And the truth is this: since even the conditions of an image’s occurrence lie outside the image itself – since it is an ever-moving apparition of something else – it has to occur in something other than itself (and so somehow or other to cling on to existence), or else it would be nothing at all.⁶⁶

216

The third kind is both what makes it possible for the images to exist, in so far as it offers them a space for their manifestation, and what confers on them their transitory and mutable characteristics, i.e. what makes them *phantasmata*, residual images lingering in the visual memory. What it does is to transform such images into dreams (along with the “mnestic” materials of the eidetic world) and *phantoms*, “erratic” figures wandering through different ontological and temporal planes of being, moving between the fixed and eternal existence of

⁶⁶ *Tim.* 52 a8-c5, p. 45.

ideas and the unstable and temporary plane of experience. In so doing, these images "measure" the ontological, aesthetic, gnoseological, and *chronological* distance that separates the time of dreams from that of wakefulness. In fact, in so far as they are traces and sensible memories of the eidetic paradigm, they make visible the gap between being and becoming, i.e. between ideas and *mimemata*; a gap that is, first and foremost, a temporal one, marked as it is by their phantasmatic existence, which makes them *anachronistic* signs of the ontological articulation of being, or, rather, signs of its anachronism. The *chora* is, indeed, "anachronistic; it 'is' the anachrony within being, or better: the anachrony of being. It anachronises being,"⁶⁷ in so far as it receives, produces, and records the traces of the ideas, of the passage of their phantasmatic images, of the constant movements of the poietic-mimetic processes of the combination and recombination of the sensible. To this anachronistic ontology there corresponds a likewise anachronistic aesthetics, the representations of which are always "out of time," offset, misaligned from the ideal model; an anachronic and phantasmatic aesthetics, which outlines an epistemological and perceptual framework closer to that of dreams than to that of truth (or even opinion).

Therefore, the metonymic ontology of the third kind allows for a composite aesthetics that illustrates at the same time the process of the modification of the sensible, its possible taxonomies (linguistic, poietic, mimetic ones), the anachronism of its representations and the oneiric mechanism of its "bastard" knowledge. Thus, in the brief exposition of the *triton genos*, the series ontology-logos-epistemology is replaced by that of chorology⁶⁸-*taxis*⁶⁹-aesthetics. Or, rather, both series are brought together – next to and in opposition to each other – to describe the weaving process of the fabric of the sensible.

4. Conclusion

217

Everything said so far applies only to the few pages that the *Timaeus* devotes to discussion of the third kind of reality, which ends, not by accident, with the return of the demiurge:

⁶⁷ Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, p. 94.

⁶⁸ On the ontological meaning of this term, see John Sallis, *Chorology: On the Beginning in Plato's Timaeus*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1999.

⁶⁹ The term refers here to all different kinds of operations of linguistic conjunction (hypotaxis, parataxis, syntaxis).

This explains, of course, how they [i.e. the elements] came to occupy different locations even before they had become the constituents of the orderly universe that came into existence. Not only were they disproportionate and erratic, however, before that event, but even when the organization of the universe was first taken in hand, fire, water, earth, and air, despite displaying certain hints of their true natures, were still wholly in the kind of state you'd expect anything to be with no god present. Finding them in that condition, then, the first thing the god did, when he came to organize the universe, was use shapes and numbers to assign them definite forms.⁷⁰

The demiurge fixes and inscribes the eidetic order – which until then had existed “somehow” next to that of the *chora* – through the shaping of the universe, starting (again) from the elements. Such a work of shaping is conducted according to the rules of the *logos*, i.e. by “measuring” the sensible on the ideal model and, in so doing, immobilising it through proportions and arranging it into numeric-geometric figures that *arrest* the metonymic transitions of the *chora*.⁷¹ The introduction of the god-artisan, the second father after the ideas, makes it possible to affirm and enforce the priority of the ontological order of the *logos* through the submission of metonymy and its ontology to the logical and ontological signification of metaphor. In so doing, it establishes what Muraro calls the “hypermetaphoricity regime,”⁷² in which the oppositional balance between metonymy and metaphor is broken in favour of the latter. Here, in this passage of the *Timaeus*, the dominion of the *logos* that will rule most of the history of metaphysics – thus becoming the main polemical target of the philosophies of difference – is instituted. The Platonic argument of the third kind therefore represents, by virtue of its heteronomy, equivocity, and anachrony, the always available possibility of another genealogical beginning and the point of “catastrophe” of the (historical, logical, and epistemological) traditional order. That is, it represents the possibility of a metonymic reconfiguration of the sensible – and thus of a different language – that is able to give ontological, linguistic, and aesthetic form to what remains to be said.

218

⁷⁰ *Tim.* 53 a4, p. 46.

⁷¹ Here I am referring to Lacan's well-known theory of language, metonymy, and the signifying chain. Luisa Muraro deals with the Lacanian interpretation of Jakobson's linguistic theory in “To Knit or to Crochet” (see in particular pp. 82–89).

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 112.