

PHAEDRUS

Phaedrus is commonly paired on the one hand with Gorgias and on the other with Symposium—with the former in sharing its principal theme, the nature and limitations of rhetoric, with the latter in containing speeches devoted to the nature and value of erotic love. Here the two interests combine in manifold ways. Socrates, a city dweller little experienced in the pleasures of the country, walks out from Athens along the river Ilissus, alone with his friend Phaedrus, an impassioned admirer of oratory, for a private conversation: in Plato most of his conversations take place in a larger company, and no other in the private beauty of a rural retreat. There he is inspired to employ his knowledge of philosophy in crafting two speeches on the subject of erotic love, to show how paltry is the best effort on the same subject of the best orator in Athens, Lysias, who knows no philosophy. In the second half of the dialogue he explains to Phaedrus exactly how philosophical understanding of the truth about any matter discoursed upon, and about the varieties of human soul and their rhetorical susceptibilities, is an indispensable basis for a rhetorically accomplished speech—such as he himself delivered in the first part of the dialogue. By rights, Phaedrus' passionate admiration for oratory ought therefore to be transformed into an even more passionate love of philosophical knowledge, fine oratory's essential prerequisite. Socrates' own speeches about erotic love and his dialectical presentation of rhetoric's subservience to philosophy are both aimed at persuading Phaedrus to this transformation.

In his great second speech Socrates draws upon the psychological theory of the Republic and the metaphysics of resplendent Forms common to that dialogue and several others (notably Phaedo and Symposium) to inspire in Phaedrus a love for philosophy. By contrast, the philosophy drawn upon in the second, dialectical, half of the dialogue is linked closely to the much more austere, logically oriented investigations via the 'method of divisions' that we find in Sophist, Statesman, and Philebus—where the grasp of any important philosophical idea (any Form) proceeds by patient, detailed mapping of its relations to other concepts and to its own subvarieties, not through an awe-inspiring vision of a self-confined, single brilliant entity. One of Socrates' central claims in the second part of the dialogue is that a rhetorical composition, of which his second speech is a paragon, must construct in words mere resemblances of the real truth, ones selected to appeal to the specific type of 'soul' that its hearers possess, so as to draw them on toward knowledge of the truth—or else to disguise it! A rhetorical composition does not actually convey the truth; the truth

is known only through philosophical study—of the sort whose results are presented in the second half of the dialogue. So Socrates himself warns us that the 'philosophical theories' embodied in his speech are resemblances only, motivated in fact by his desire to win Phaedrus away from an indiscriminate love of rhetoric to a controlled but elevated love of philosophical study.

Phaedrus is one of Plato's most admired literary masterpieces. Yet toward its end Socrates criticizes severely those who take their own writing seriously—any writing, not just orators' speeches. Writings cannot contain or constitute knowledge of any important matter. Knowledge can only be lodged in a mind, and its essential feature there is an endless capacity to express, interpret, and reinterpret itself suitably, in response to every challenge—something a written text once let go by its author plainly lacks: it can only keep on repeating the same words to whoever picks it up. But does not a Platonic dialogue, in engaging its reader in a creative, multilayered intellectual encounter, have a similar capacity for ever-deeper reading, for the discovery of underlying meaning beyond the simple presentation of its surface ideas? Knowledge is only in souls, but, despite the Phaedrus' own critique of writing, reading such a dialogue may be a good way of working to attain it.

J.M.C.

~~SOCRATES: Phaedrus, my friend! Where have you been? And where are you going?~~

~~PHAEDRUS: I was with Lysias, the son of Cephalus,¹ Socrates, and I am going for a walk outside the city walls because I was with him for a long time, sitting there the whole morning. You see, I'm keeping in mind the advice of our mutual friend Acumenus,² who says it's more refreshing to walk along country roads than city streets.~~

~~SOCRATES: He is quite right, too, my friend. So Lysias, I take it, is in the city?~~

~~PHAEDRUS: Yes, at the house of Epicrates, which used to belong to Morychus,³ near the temple of the Olympian Zeus.~~

~~SOCRATES: What were you doing there? Oh, I know: Lysias must have been entertaining you with a feast of eloquence.~~

~~PHAEDRUS: You'll hear about it, if you are free to come along and listen.~~

Translated by A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff.

1. Cephalus is prominent in the opening section of Plato's *Republic*, which is set in his home in Piraeus, the port of Athens. His sons Lysias, Polemarchus, and Euthydemus were known for their democratic sympathies.

2. Acumenus was a doctor and a relative of the doctor Eryximachus who speaks in the *Symposium*.

3. Morychus is mentioned for his luxurious ways in a number of Aristophanes' plays.

SOCRATES: Well, then, that's enough about artfulness and artlessness in connection with speaking.

PHAEDRUS: Quite.

SOCRATES: What's left, then, is aptness and ineptness in connection with writing: What feature makes writing good, and what inept? Right?

PHAEDRUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Well, do you know how best to please god when you either use words or discuss them in general?

PHAEDRUS: Not at all. Do you?

SOCRATES: I can tell you what I've heard the ancients said, though they alone know the truth. However, if we could discover that ourselves, would we still care about the speculations of other people? c

PHAEDRUS: That's a silly question. Still, tell me what you say you've heard.

SOCRATES: Well, this is what I've heard. Among the ancient gods of Naucratis⁶³ in Egypt there was one to whom the bird called the ibis is sacred. The name of that divinity was Theuth,⁶⁴ and it was he who first discovered number and calculation, geometry and astronomy, as well as the games of checkers and dice, and, above all else, writing. d

Now the king of all Egypt at that time was Thamus,⁶⁵ who lived in the great city in the upper region that the Greeks call Egyptian Thebes; Thamus they call Ammon.⁶⁶ Theuth came to exhibit his arts to him and urged him to disseminate them to all the Egyptians. Thamus asked him about the usefulness of each art, and while Theuth was explaining it, Thamus praised him for whatever he thought was right in his explanations and criticized him for whatever he thought was wrong. e

The story goes that Thamus said much to Theuth, both for and against each art, which it would take too long to repeat. But when they came to writing, Theuth said: "O King, here is something that, once learned, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memory; I have discovered a potion for memory and for wisdom." Thamus, however, replied: "O most expert Theuth, one man can give birth to the elements of an art, but only another can judge how they can benefit or harm those who will use them. And now, since you are the father of writing, your affection for it has made you describe its effects as the opposite of what they really are. In fact, it will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which 275

63. Naucratis was a Greek trading colony in Egypt. The story that follows is probably an invention of Plato's (see 275b3) in which he reworks elements from Egyptian and Greek mythology.

64. Theuth (or Thoth) is the Egyptian god of writing, measuring, and calculation. The Greeks identified Thoth with Hermes, perhaps because of his role in weighing the soul. Thoth figures in a related story about the alphabet at *Philebus* 18b.

65. As king of the Egyptian gods, Ammon (Thamus) was identified by Egyptians with the sun god Ra and by the Greeks with Zeus.

66. Accepting the emendation of *Thamoun* at d4.

is external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own. You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. Your invention will enable them to hear many things without being properly taught, and they will imagine that they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing. And they will be difficult to get along with, since they will merely appear to be wise instead of really being so."

PHAEDRUS: Socrates, you're very good at making up stories from Egypt or wherever else you want! c

SOCRATES: But, my friend, the priests of the temple of Zeus at Dodona say that the first prophecies were the words of an oak. Everyone who lived at that time, not being as wise as you young ones are today, found it rewarding enough in their simplicity to listen to an oak or even a stone, so long as it was telling the truth, while it seems to make a difference to you, Phaedrus, who is speaking and where he comes from. Why, though, don't you just consider whether what he says is right or wrong? c

PHAEDRUS: I deserved that, Socrates. And I agree that the Theban king was correct about writing.

SOCRATES: Well, then, those who think they can leave written instructions for an art, as well as those who accept them, thinking that writing can yield results that are clear or certain, must be quite naive and truly ignorant of Ammon's prophetic judgment: otherwise, how could they possibly think that words that have been written down can do more than remind those who already know what the writing is about? d

PHAEDRUS: Quite right.

SOCRATES: You know, Phaedrus, writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offsprings of painting stand there as if they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever. When it has once been written down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support. e

PHAEDRUS: You are absolutely right about that, too.

SOCRATES: Now tell me, can we discern another kind of discourse, a legitimate brother of this one? Can we say how it comes about, and how it is by nature better and more capable? 276

PHAEDRUS: Which one is that? How do you think it comes about?

SOCRATES: It is a discourse that is written down, with knowledge, in the soul of the listener; it can defend itself, and it knows for whom it should speak and for whom it should remain silent.

PHAEDRUS: You mean the living, breathing discourse of the man who knows, of which the written one can be fairly called an image.

SOCRATES: Absolutely right. And tell me this. Would a sensible farmer, who cared about his seeds and wanted them to yield fruit, plant them in all seriousness in the gardens of Adonis in the middle of the summer and enjoy watching them bear fruit within seven days? Or would he do this as an amusement and in honor of the holiday, if he did it at all?⁶⁷ Wouldn't he use his knowledge of farming to plant the seeds he cared for when it was appropriate and be content if they bore fruit seven months later?

PHAEDRUS: That's how he would handle those he was serious about, Socrates, quite differently from the others, as you say.

SOCRATES: Now what about the man who knows what is just, noble, and good? Shall we say that he is less sensible with his seeds than the farmer is with his?

PHAEDRUS: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: Therefore, he won't be serious about writing them in ink, sowing them, through a pen, with words that are as incapable of speaking in their own defense as they are of teaching the truth adequately.

PHAEDRUS: That wouldn't be likely.

SOCRATES: Certainly not. When he writes, it's likely he will sow gardens of letters for the sake of amusing himself, storing up reminders for himself "when he reaches forgetful old age" and for everyone who wants to follow in his footsteps, and will enjoy seeing them sweetly blooming. And when others turn to different amusements, watering themselves with drinking parties and everything else that goes along with them, he will rather spend his time amusing himself with the things I have just described.

PHAEDRUS: Socrates, you are contrasting a vulgar amusement with the very noblest—with the amusement of a man who can while away his time telling stories of justice and the other matters you mentioned.

SOCRATES: That's just how it is, Phaedrus. But it is much nobler to be serious about these matters, and use the art of dialectic. The dialectician chooses a proper soul and plants and sows within it discourse accompanied by knowledge—discourse capable of helping itself as well as the man who planted it, which is not barren but produces a seed from which more discourse grows in the character of others. Such discourse makes the seed forever immortal and renders the man who has it as happy as any human being can be.

PHAEDRUS: What you describe is really much nobler still.

~~SOCRATES: And now that we have agreed about this, Phaedrus, we are finally able to decide the issue.~~

~~PHAEDRUS: What issue is that?~~

~~SOCRATES: The issue which brought us to this point in the first place. We wanted to examine the attack made on Lysias on account of his writing~~

67. Gardens of Adonis were pots or window boxes used for forcing plants during the festival of Adonis.