



## Plato the Writer

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper attempts to explore the criticism brought forth against the art of writing by Plato via the use of Socrates in Phaedrus, acting as a mouthpiece, in order to better understand Plato's philosophical discourses through the lens of a reader trying to question, understand, critique or agree with him in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this essay, I shall be attempting to use a modified version of the dialectical method itself to arrive at a conclusion.*

**KEYWORDS:** criticism, imagination, literature, speech, writing

### INTRODUCTION

With the advent of instruments such as ink and paper being a couple of a hundred centuries old now, the notion of writing is not a foreign concept to the 21<sup>st</sup> century reader or student of the literary arts, which is something that cannot be explicitly stated for the workings of the 5<sup>th</sup> CE Athenian philosopher-dramatist, Plato, the disciple of the great philosopher Socrates, a man who "devoted his life to the pursuit of philosophy and to composing memoirs of Socratic enquiry cast in dialogue form."<sup>i</sup>

I would like to proceed in answering how Socrates in *Phaedrus* (Plato) criticized the act of writing, by employing the dialectical method used by Plato himself, and how as a student reading him in the 21<sup>st</sup> century I would disagree or agree with the statements he has made regarding the same.

#### *What is meant by writing exactly?*

I would like to begin this essay firstly, by defining what the term *writing* refers to; quoting the OED, writing is "the activity or skill of writing" or, "the activity or occupation of *composing text* for publication (italics by me)". These are the definitions of writing that the 21<sup>st</sup> CE reader of Plato shall be familiar with, but in *Phaedrus* we see Socrates(Plato) attempt to delve deeper into the entire concept of writing as a tool, as an activity; he breaks it down to an atomic level, plodding at the most basic blocks of the act. One cannot fail to notice that Plato in his *composed* dialogue states both sides of the coin with regards to writing, by using the figure of Theuth as an instrument to begin the conversation on the desirability of using writing as a "branch of expertise" for, "...this science will increase the intelligence of the people of Egypt and improve their memories. For this invention is a potion for memory and intelligence"(Waterfield 68), contrary to the belief

Thamous simply rebuttals with, "It will atrophy people's memories" (Waterfield 69). Both these instances are quite interesting, we can already see Plato building a foundation to argue against the idea of writing, funnily enough, in an article using his own skills of composition.

Therefore, the next question that we shall now attempt to answer is what makes writing desirable or unacceptable in nature, in accordance with Plato?

One of the most important ideas to note, especially when one is reading Plato, is that we all are products of our time. Plato as a philosopher gives importance to reason and rationalization over imagination. During the 5<sup>th</sup> BCE, Plato was looking for universal truths. In this impermanent world everything is changing, everything is in flux, that is, change is the only constant, so, Plato wished to concretize something universal. He was developing his philosophy while simultaneously rejecting Homeric values, for Homer as a poet, a Bard, glorified the impermanence of the world, and Plato wished to replace the impermanence and chaos of morality, politics, and religion with permanence and universal truths independent of human cognition. So, what exactly was Plato rejecting in Homer? Plato rejected what poetry stood for, a world of absolute chaos.

#### *What was Socrates' (Plato's) criticism of writing in Phaedrus?*

I would like to begin this section by firstly discussing the ephemerality of memory. Memory is something that ages, memory is impermanent, a very human faculty, it is subject to time, it weakens. One forgets things and at one point, one will forget a thing forever. Therefore, memory is fickle, at the beck and call of the ravages of time and most importantly, it can be distorted, it can fade. If the oral tradition is based on



such a disadvantageous foundation, why is Plato promoting speech over writing; why is he criticizing writing? What exactly is his criticism of writing?

Writing consists of shapes and symbols, that is, writing is the physical manifestation and visual representation of an idea. Using this theory, Plato (through Socrates in *Phaedrus*) draws a comparison between the written word and a painting; one of his first criticisms of writing. The written word appears to be telling the truth but it is not, a painting appears to be alive but it is not, no matter how real the latter looks. Thus, they are both simply lines, for no matter how complex or how easy a shape is, it all begins with a line. Socrates has stripped down writing and laid it bare, the image of a letter has a sound to it; it is we who denote an image with the idea of an abstract thing. Therefore, we have assigned meaning to shapes as humans: "... written words could do more than jog the memory of someone who already knows the topic that has been written about."(Waterfield 70)

Amon states that writing would lead to the degeneration of memory, claiming that writing is just a string of symbols, on a written surface, just shapes, and these shapes have come from *outside* of the self, it is not written on the *soul*<sup>1</sup>, they are without, not within. Thamous disagrees with Theuth for he believes all that writing is, is a collection of shapes and symbols, which only helps in jogging the memory, helps in remembering the innate knowledge one already possesses. This corroborates with Plato's theory of knowledge<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, writing will "atrophy people's memories", make them dependent upon another's words/ideas.

The other example Plato gives in order to criticize the art of writing is that of the farmer. Plato gives importance to the usefulness, functionality, the utility of something over its aesthetic. A farmer is essential, useful to a society, one cannot remove the farmer, as it threatens one's source of food. An artist is not as useful as a farmer, an artist does not create something for our basic needs, our lives. A person who is seeking knowledge is also like a sensible farmer, not like an artist, "Don't you think that for seeds he was serious about he'd draw on his skill as a farmer, sow them in the appropriate soil, and be content if what he sowed reached maturity in the eighth month?"(Waterfield 71); Plato draws dissimilarities between a farmer and an artist, following it up with similarities between a farmer and a person seeking knowledge: "So are we to say that someone who knows about right and fine and good activities is less sensible than our farmer where his own seeds are concerned? ...he won't spend time and effort writing what he knows in water—in black water—and sowing them with his pen by means of words which can neither speak in their own defence nor come

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1 Plato divides the soul into 3, hierarchical faculties – reason, spirit and appetite, in descending order

2 Plato had said all human knowledge arises from a prior knowledge of some form or rule or standard

up with a satisfactory explanation of the truth."(Waterfield 71)

This brings me to the next criticism Plato gives of writing, and I believe the most important one;

### ***"WRITING IS LIMITED BY ITS FIXITY"*<sup>iii</sup>**

"...the offspring of painting stand there as if alive, but if you ask them a question, they maintain an aloof silence. It's the same with written words: you might think they were speaking as if they had some intelligence, but if you want an explanation of any of the things they're saying and you ask them about it, they just go on and on for ever giving the same single piece of information."(Waterfield 70)

The written word is a static phenomenon, in the sense, it is something which does not possess the capability to defend itself. On the contrary, one must sow their knowledge into the human soul, for the body is capable of defending the knowledge; a dialectician should plant their ideas in a "suitable soul", which is capable of defending both itself and the one who planted the ideas in it, a notion further discussed in the section on speech versus writing.

### ***So, if Plato is rejecting writing, what is he in turn promoting?***

To put it quite simply, Plato has chosen to highlight the negative aspects of writing and in turn wishes to promote his own ideas as a philosopher that in the portion of *Phaedrus* referred to here, are the positives of speech, over writing. Therefore, we then come to the next question,

### ***Is speech better than writing?***

One of the main arguments that we deal with in *Phaedrus* is that of speech versus writing.

Plato was a believer in the capabilities of the dialectical method<sup>3</sup>, in transmitting knowledge to the soul of the student via the mentor. Dialogue is the preferred literary form Plato uses as he trusts the dialectical method, the method of inter-communication to be the most suitable method for learning. The process of asking questions and breaking down a topic into its constituents in this fashion is termed as the most appropriate mode of learning in accordance with the ancient philosopher. With something like poetry as a genre for learning being incredibly popular in 5<sup>th</sup> CE Greece, Plato rejects it on the basis that poetry is all about the imagination; therefore, his main conflict, grievance with poetry is, it is imaginative, it gets lost in itself, the main ideas get eclipsed, overshadowed by other literary devices. When one reads another's work, they are the other's ideas. Ideally, knowledge is gained by asking and clarifying from your mentor, and you develop the ideas by cross-questioning and understanding. Our life's total endeavor is to acquire knowledge, (to *remember* the innate knowledge within us) and Plato has stated that the best way to acquire knowledge

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3 relating to the logical discussion of ideas and opinions

is via the dialectical mode (which interestingly reminds one of Freud's psychoanalytical method of questioning patients in order to arrive at the truth).

Plato's definition of true knowledge, stated in *Phaedrus*, through the "character" of Socrates is: "It is the kind that is written along with knowledge in the soul of a student. It is capable of defending itself, and it knows how to speak to those it should and keep silent in the company of those to whom it shouldn't speak...the living, ensouled speech of a man of knowledge. We'd be right to describe the written word as a mere image of this." (Waterfield 70) True knowledge does not depend upon memory, it is acquired by the soul of the student. Writing is like an image; it cannot defend itself.

#### **Thus, what is the 21<sup>st</sup> century reader's rebuttal to Plato?**

Authors, best portrayed in the likes of the nineteenth century European realists, serve us the idea of *preservation* of history in writing, this sense of having a historical, legitimate account of the times gone and more importantly, the times present. Therefore, the most important aspect of having a written account is that it counters the ephemerality of speech and leads to the preservation of ideas in intact form.

Thus, situating the concept of writing in Plato's own times, as a 21<sup>st</sup> CE reader of his work, one of the main arguments that I would like to place forth is that of the mortality of the spoken word. With the spoken word, the instrument which "writes" the knowledge is articulated sound, and the paper is the human "soul" (in accordance with Plato, who states that true knowledge resides in the soul), or the human mind (in accordance with me). Yet, one must surely accept that the spoken word bears various limitations as compared to that of the written? In fact, even Plato's own treatise may not have survived had he not penned it down, turned it into a document. Each text is a product of its time, not only is it (in some cases) a literary piece, it is also a piece of history, a *preserved* historical account; that is, the exactness of what the author meant is accurately frozen in time, the latter possessing no bearing in misconstruing the meaning or words through decades or centuries of passing down the knowledge via spoken word.

I would also like to introduce the concept of language death<sup>4</sup> or language extinction<sup>5</sup>. Language changes over time, there is change of meaning associated with the words, if one were to hark onto the preservation of a composed literary piece only via the passing down of it through the oral tradition, there will be changes, there will be loss, there will be incongruencies. Interestingly, the entire piece could also be lost forever, with language deaths and language extinction being a common phenomenon. Therefore, this leads me to pose an interesting

4 language death occurs when a language loses its last native speaker

5 language extinction is when the language is no longer known, including by second-language speakers

question, shall you not agree that if spoken communication had no lack, we would not have invented the written word?

Therefore, there was a need for writing, and this need is something which perhaps threatened Plato's own philosophies that he was working on, for did not Plato *write* his *composition* in *Phaedrus*? How really is Plato's dialogues different from poetry? If he rejects poetry because of the various aspects of imaginative devices used, doesn't his dialogue contain any imagination?

The dialectical method employed by Plato still does include some level of imaginative capabilities; with the "characters" of Socrates and *Phaedrus*, *Phaedrus* can be classified as a play, a didactic one with various conventional Greek aspects missing, but a play, nonetheless, especially if one looks at it from the 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective.

We must understand that Plato might be criticizing writing and promoting the dialectical method, but that does not nullify the positives that writing possesses. Karen A. Baikie and Kay Wilhelm's essay titled, "Emotional and physical health benefits of expressive writing", published by the Cambridge University Press, states, "Writing about traumatic, stressful or emotional events has been found to result in improvements in both physical and psychological health, in non-clinical and clinical populations... Although the cognitive processing hypothesis has been difficult to evaluate empirically owing to the difficulty of measuring cognitive changes, there is evidence that narrative formation and coherence are necessary for expressive writing to be and that expressive writing increases working memory capacity, which may reflect improved cognitive." Therefore, in the 21<sup>st</sup> CE, one may state with scientific backing that writing does not indeed, "atrophy people's memory", on the contrary, it benefits one's cognition and emotional as well as psychological health.

Writing is such an important tool, would you not agree that if we were to remove the art of writing from the world, the likes of Shakespeare, Milton, Austen and even Plato himself would have been lost forever?

Students of literature can see how literature is the mimesis of life as well as the preservation of history. Plato pushing for the superiority of speech and the dialectical method, placing non-fictional, didactic discourses on a higher pedestal, though they fit in with his philosophy of finding the permanent, isn't possible to follow in the 21<sup>st</sup> CE, where we as readers are concerned with the condition of human life alongside the search for answers to angst-riddled, existential questions and thoughts.

Writing does teach, books educate and writing only to "remember" when one reaches the age of forgetfulness what one already knew (as Plato has stated), seems to be a very narrow, limiting way to look at the world. There are a multitude of genres in writing now as well, whether it's fiction, fantasy,

drama, poetry, proems, plays, blackout poetry, a new genre seems to be born every day, and following Plato's doctrine in not exploring and consuming *writing* seems to be a blow to the possibilities of the human creative mind. Ironically, even *Phaedrus* is in fact, a document of the same. Truth does lie in fiction; it lies in all the different modes of writing. Plato himself knew that in order for his work to survive, or to be clearly understood, it must be written down.

## CONCLUSION

As stated in the introduction of this essay, "Plato devoted his life to the pursuit of philosophy and to *composing memoirs* of Socratic enquiry cast in dialogue form (italics by me)."<sup>iii</sup> Even though Plato criticized the art of writing, he still employed the same in preserving his own ideas, immortalizing them for generations and centuries, perhaps possible only through the fact that he was able to document them clearly. Misconstructions and misconstrued meanings are a possibility when one attempts to gatekeep knowledge only in speech format. I believe, instead of choosing speech over writing, or writing over speech, we as 21<sup>st</sup> century readers must understand the importance of both. It is an unequal battle, for both speech and writing serve their own specific purposes.

Socrates in *Phaedrus*, placed in the context of 5<sup>th</sup> CE Greece seems right in posing his arguments against writing, and we as 21<sup>st</sup> CE readers are correct in our own criticisms and interpretations of the same. It all is a matter of perspective. We are all products of our times.

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ii From Meinwald, Constance C.. "Plato". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 22 May. 2020,

iii From *Phaedrus* (Oxford World's Classics), ed. Robin Waterfield (12 August 2010)

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