

# The Writing of Dialogue

In the last chapter we looked at the role of the reader. To use Umberto Eco's term we looked at the model reader as he is manipulated by the text.<sup>1</sup> We now turn to the other stakeholder in the written dialogue, that is, the model author. This character has such a small part in philosophical dialogues we have to turn to the prefaces of reported dialogues for hints.<sup>2</sup> Recovery of the model author will lead to the central problem of the writing of philosophical dialogues which in turn will close the discussion on oral and written dialogue. In the last chapter we found that the model reader finds himself in a role similar to those who overhear oral dialogue; in this we found a point of continuity of oral and written dialogue. In this chapter we will look for further points of continuity.

## Hints to the character of the author

We should be specific about the author we are looking for. We do not want information about the empirical author who actually wrote the work. Rather we are looking for the model author - that character that emerges from the text itself as the creator of the text. The model author is a creation of the empirical author as much as any other character, though this does not mean that the model author is a conscious creation. The model author is the face or voice that emerges for the reader in the reading as the

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<sup>1</sup> Eco, "Between Author and Text," *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. See especially p. 69. The work nicely supplements his delightful novel on overinterpretation, *Foucault's Pendulum*. The overinterpretation of texts is especially a problem with dialogues where the intention of the author is obscured by their withdrawal leading to imaginative reconstructions of what "Plato must have meant."

<sup>2</sup> As I mentioned before, I am sticking to dialogues for evidence in this work. If one were to go further afield one could look at the correspondence of dialogue writers like Plato, Diderot, and Hume.

apparent author of the text.<sup>3</sup> It is the character of the writer presented in the writing for those who are interested. Here we use the concept of the model author, partly to avoid questions, impossible to answer in many cases, about the intentions of the "real" or empirical author. More importantly, I am interested in the model author because one should begin by respecting the way the text chooses to present itself. Often dialogues are prefaced by the words of a fictional reporter like Pamphilus, who is the model author of Hume's *Dialogues*; we should take seriously such characters set up by the empirical authors for us to read about. They are the hint left within the text as to the nature of the author.

### **Absence**

The first thing that stands out about written dialogue is the inaccessibility of the author. As Shaftesbury puts it, "For here (in dialogue) the author is annihilated, and the reader, being no way applied to, stands for nobody. The self-interested parties both vanish at once."<sup>4</sup> The author is annihilated as the various characters become accessible. In a dialogue they are allowed to speak for themselves and are not merely summarized by the author. There is no author telling us what the characters really thought. There is rarely the overt intrusion of the author as there is, for example, in the treatise or essay. The author, if he or she appears within a dialogue, is simply one more character; their special authority on the issue at hand is annihilated by the act of letting others through. Even reported dialogues, which are ostensibly in the voice of the first person, tend to devolve

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<sup>3</sup> Exactly what the text is in this context depends on the will of the readers. If they choose to treat three of Plato's dialogues and a letter as a whole text, that in effect becomes the single text through which to see the author.

<sup>4</sup> Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, p. 132.

into a direct report of what everyone said with the authorial voice left for the preface and epilogue (and a few moments in between).<sup>5</sup> It is in the nature of dialogue, where most of the words are those of characters, that the author retreats or becomes another character.

Why would authors surrender their authority? The cynical view is that they do so to better manipulate the reader while giving the impression of freedom of judgment.<sup>6</sup> This assumes that all acts of writing are acts of willful intellectual colonization. A simpler explanation for the silence is that the author does not want, in dialogue, to appear. When Shaftesbury points out that in the disappearance of the reader and author the self-interested parties vanish, he identifies what about the two is absent — their interests, or more precisely their self-interest. The authors' interest lies in submerging their other interests.<sup>7</sup> We can say only that they do not want the reader to know what they believe or what their intentions were. We do not know why they do not want to appear. The cynical view ascribes them an intention where there is no evidence. We can speculate about the reasons for this: Authors may not have a single opinion of which they are trying to convince the reader. The author may want us to pay attention, seriously, to the voices orchestrated, or to some other voice that comes through, as our reading of Heidegger's

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<sup>5</sup> Cicero in the preface of *Laelius, On Friendship* gives his reason for the shift from reported to direct dialogue, "I committed to memory the substance of the discussion, and I have set it out in this book after my own fashion: I have, as it were, brought the characters on stage to speak in person, avoiding the frequent insertion of 'I said' or 'he said', and giving the impression of a conversation between persons actually present." (I:3) The direct form is not only more efficient, saving the reader from the apparatus of reporting, it also brings the characters closer to the reader, obscuring the author.

<sup>6</sup> Diderot says as much about his dialogues.

<sup>7</sup> For some authors there might be a perfection to disappearing. The dialogue through which friends and exemplary characters speak could be for some the most creative way to express themselves.

dialogue suggested. In Cicero we find the suggestion that the author might actually be interested in what the characters he lets loose have to say, as if even he were surprised by their words!<sup>8</sup>

Why then are we still tempted to attribute to the missing author a hidden agenda? More generally, why are we so fascinated with authors? Could it be our self-interest? Are we so used to suspecting texts of having authors and authors of having an agenda (why else would they bother to write?) that we cannot imagine a philosophical work without some thesis belonging to someone it wishes to promote? Must all works have only one position embedded within? Must we be so suspicious? The cynical view is built on an unexamined politic of suspicion which is not the only possibility that fits the character.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "This type of dialogue, grounded in the authority of eminent men of past generations, seems somehow to carry more weight; and indeed, I sometimes get the feeling, when I read my own work, that it is Cato who is speaking, not myself." (*Laelius, On Friendship*, I:4) While this could be a vanity on Cicero's part, I suspect the dialogue form appeals to certain writers because it allows them to listen to voices that may be within, but are nevertheless better heard when characterized.

<sup>9</sup> The cynic would argue that the cynical view is manifested not in the accessibility of intentions but in their inaccessibility. One could not covertly manipulate readers if one said one was going to do so. Therefore we have to look elsewhere for evidence of manipulative intention. By confining myself to a respect of the text, I doom myself to a view that is sympathetic to the model author and ignorant of their "real" intentions as manifested elsewhere. By looking only at the model author we cannot see any incompatibilities between the character of the model author and the intentions of the empirical. My point, however, is that the empirical author's intentions are for the most part inaccessible and problematic for reasons beyond the scope of this paper. Given their inaccessibility we cannot really assume they set out to manipulate us in the face of evidence within the text (and our hearts). The cynics assume manipulation when the evidence gets dense as the cynical assumption is safe. I believe the simplest explanation is the best one — if authors disappear it is because they wanted to disappear. I would also argue that in the assumption of manipulation we tend to ignore the evidence in the text which is accessible and interesting. Some of this internal evidence even points at manipulation though not all of it. In the last chapter we

The earlier chapter on Heidegger's dialogue hinted that the author's vanishing is due to a redefinition of authority. Oral dialogue participates in and evolves from the authority of a community or tradition. Sayings of an oral community have no individual author. The authority of oral sayings lies not with their performer. Rather, an oral saying in an oral community would be perceived as being without authority if believed to have been invented by the performer. The authority of such oral sayings is the community and its perception of its history. The written dialogue emulates, in the vanishing of the author, this type of authority. The fact that most written dialogues have empirical authors, who put pen to paper, does not mean that the authority of these works has to be the empirical author. An interviewer is not treated as the sole source of the content of an interview, and likewise we recognize that the simple one-text=one-author formula does not describe all documents. The authority for Plato's dialogues lies partly with Socrates, whatever Plato's artistry. In sum, we should open our mind to the possibility that dialogues are paths through to sources of authority other than the empirical author.

### **Apology**

Given his or her absence, can we learn anything more about the model author? The intentions of the model author in most dialogues are inaccessible because there is no literal text by the author - everything is in another voice. In a few dialogues there are interventions by the model author which provide other hints as to his or her character. An easy way to categorize dialogues is to divide them into those that are reported by a narrator, and those that are direct transcripts of a conversation. While those that are reported eventually settle into something similar to direct dialogue, the reporting allows

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explored some of the manipulation of the reader. Here we are going to focus on the other evidence about the author.

the narrator an opportunity to comment on the dialogue outside the context of the conversation reported. Reported dialogues often have outer frames composed of prefaces and epilogues that give a broader context to the conversation, justify the work, and create an audience for it. Such dialogues are often epistolary; the letter encloses the direct dialogue with words addressed to another. The best examples of such prefaces are Cicero and his many imitators like Hume. We will use the Ciceronian tradition of epistolary dialogues to gather further hints.

A familiar dialogue to start with is Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* where the narrator Pamphilus prefaces the conversation he observed with comments about the virtues of the dialogue form and its particular suitability to the subject at hand. The preface and concluding remarks of Pamphilus frame the direct recital, making the whole appear to be a letter to Hermippus, a friend who is also interested in these subjects and personalities. Pamphilus begins the reporting with:

It has been remarked, my Hermippus, that, though the ancient philosophers conveyed most of their instruction in the form of dialogue, this method of composition has been little practiced in later ages, and has seldom succeeded in the hands of those who have attempted it. ... To deliver a system in conversation scarcely appears natural ... (The dialogue writer) is apt to run into a worse inconvenience and convey the image of *pedagogue* and *pupil*. Or if he carries on the dispute in the natural spirit of good company ... he often loses so much time in preparations and transitions that the reader will scarcely think himself compensated, by all the graces of dialogue, for the order, brevity, and precision, which are sacrificed to them. <sup>10</sup>

Let me begin by noting that Pamphilus, who is writing a letter, not a dialogue, is apologizing for the dialogue form of the work. Pamphilus, a clearly fictional character, as

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<sup>10</sup> Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, p. 3-4. I have clipped a longer passage to highlight the reasons for not writing a dialogue. Later, I will look at the reasons for such a move.

his Greek name suggests, defends the form when all he is doing is writing to a fictional friend Hermippus in which he reports a conversation of his elders. That should alert us that the model author is coming through. This opening from the author acknowledges that the dialogue form is rarely used in philosophy, has been frequently misused, and has certain disadvantages, like long preparatory passages, of which the preface might be an example. The opening is surprisingly apologetic, conscious of the difference in form of the work, and careful to justify it when it does not need justification (at least not to Hermippus). None of Hume's other works are as self-conscious. We will find that the model author, when he or she speaks through, is often uncertain about his or her choice of the dialogue form. They regularly apologize for their work. The author who wants to disappear often expresses uncertainty about the writing, an uncertainty that is often in contrast to the certainty of the characters.

This apologetic quality can be found in the very form itself. Dialogues in a curious way call into question all philosophical writing. They point in a unique way to an unwritten activity (oral dialogue) and, by representing it, dignify it over the written. Other written philosophical forms do not undermine themselves this way, or undermine their written quality. In the writing of dialogue one is not engaging in oral dialogue, which the written dialogue tends to glorify by imitation. Writing a dialogue is an admission of absence of oral dialogue in the act of representing it. The author of dialogue opens himself to the accusation of hypocrisy. (How could Plato write dialogues after what he reports in the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*? Why was Cicero writing dialogues when he should have been exercising his legendary rhetorical skills to save the Republic?) Even without an apologetic authorial intervention, the written dialogue has an apologetic character.

## Leisure

This preface of Hume's should remind us of the prefaces of Cicero's dialogues, such as *The Making of an Orator* or *The Nature of the Gods*. (For one thing, the work is obviously related in content and structure to *The Nature of the Gods*.) In *The Making of an Orator*, the work presents itself as a prolonged letter by Cicero to his brother Quintus in which he introduces and then recounts a conversation on oratory. Cicero the empirical author creates an authorial character, Cicero the narrator/author, who uses his brother to justify writing at such great length:

But none the less, though events are thus harassing and my time so restricted, I will hearken to the call of our studies, and every moment of leisure allowed me by the perfidy of my enemies, the advocacy of my friends and my political duties, I will dedicate first and foremost to writing. And when you, brother, exhort and request me, I will not fail you, for no man's authority or wish can have greater weight with me than yours.<sup>11</sup>

Cicero, the model author, places his writing in the context of a busy political life. He writes when he has the leisure — leisure which is at a premium for a busy man like Cicero. In *The Nature of the Gods* he returns to this lament, blaming that work in part on "The state of the nation (which) was such that the government had of necessity been confided to the care and wisdom of a single man."<sup>12</sup> In a dictatorship there is no place for orators like Cicero, forcing him to withdraw from politics and turn to writing. This writing, to which he turns in a moment of enforced leisure, is by his own admission less important an activity than his work as an orator-statesman. Only when circumstances force Cicero to abandon the oral dialogue of the courts and politics does he have leisure

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<sup>11</sup> Cicero, *The Making Of An Orator*, p. 5, (3-4)

<sup>12</sup> Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, p. 72, (6-9) The single man is the Emperor Augustus.

to pen a written dialogue. Enforced leisure is connected to the apologetic uncertainty of the author. When one is uncertain about writing one does not turn to it unless all other avenues of expression are restricted. Leisure is that time when one is not doing more important things. The produce of leisure is "just for fun," and therefore not to be judged as the real duty of a person. Leisure is when one can experiment and play; you will be excused if the result is frivolous as you have done your duty elsewhere. This is all the more true if one is writing dialogues. They represent the types of activity Cicero would be involved in rather than writing.

## **Culture**

Cicero's dialogues are not only the result of enforced leisure but a response to the state of the nation. The dialogue form by its nature presents material as the opinions of many in communion; in Cicero's case this is a response to a state of government by one. The form is justified by the political circumstances (dictatorship) and hark back to the day when the characters of the dialogue conducted politics as they did philosophy, at their leisure and in conversation. Cicero's dialogue is the product of the absence of oral dialogue and a response to the state of the culture. An author who values the existence of discussion over the outcome of any discourse would have reason to disappear before a lively set of characters. She or he would also have a reason for writing other than the putting forward of a particular opinion. Only in a culture where there is freedom of expression do we suspect all authors of opinions. Even where there is a certain freedom, model authors are concerned with the character of discourse in the culture at large. One reading of Hume's *Dialogues* is that his final concern is not with the nature of God so much as with the character of the discussion around religious issues which could, and still does, get heated.

The reallocation of authority from the model author back to the culture also illustrates the importance of culture to writers of dialogue. Authors like Heidegger want to let something common to us all speak through their language. Renaissance dialogue writers like Bruni wanted to glorify and encourage the emerging philosophical culture of Florence. Bruni was adapting the example of Cicero, whose dialogues were an attempt to model a native Latin philosophy. I use the word model in both the sculptural sense, that dialogues attempt to shape culture, and in the sense that they are modeled on what is already there. In effect, dialogue shapes by pretending that it is imitating what is already there; when in fact what is there is being reinterpreted in a utopian fashion. We might say that dialogue inaugurates culture, showing what could be.

### **Character**

Underneath all the previous characteristic concerns of the model is a general concern for character. Character can be provisionally defined as a unity of action and speech in a person. The way someone acts and speaks is their character. Important to character is the congruence between action and speech. One of the most obvious differences between dialogues and other philosophical works is the way ideas are presented in character. One does not have the cold itemization of positions in a dialogue; one has a dressing up of positions into characters whose actions can be compared to their words.

The model author is absent because the author, if he does speak, has been reduced to being another character who need not have more authority than other characters. The apologetic quality of the model author, where he appears, is part of his character, as are his claims about leisure. What the author does with his leisure is an issue for a character who wants their words and actions (like writing) to be congruent. The author who values oral dialogue has to explain why he would waste time writing. (Oh ... I had a few spare

hours, so I wrote a dialogue.) Finally showing how characters are cultivated and how they interact is the way dialogues model culture.

Central to Cicero's re-creation of a philosophical culture are the characters he fashions. Like Plato he chose people who existed, and like Plato he took liberties with their character in order to fit them into the culture he imagines. Cicero embarks on a conscious project to create a Latin philosophical tradition as capable as the Greek. To do this he needs to distort the character of famous predecessors in order to line them up as his worthy predecessors.

Cicero portrays these people as friends of his and learned teachers, thereby also fashioning his reputation. This is one of the vain aspects of Cicero. He praises his characters in a fashion designed to reflect glory back on himself, their worthy student. This vanity is peculiar to Cicero and is explained by the circumstances of political life in Rome. An orator's reputation, which was based on his family's reputation, was a major component of his authority and ability to convince. Logical arguments were less convincing to the Romans than the speaker's reputation, which was largely a matter of family lineage. Cicero did not have an illustrious family; he was a self-made man and his dialogues were part of this making. The reflected vanity of his dialogues was part of a strategy to give himself and Rome an illustrious philosophical past.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> J. M. May in *Trials of Character: The Eloquence of Ciceronian Ethos* discusses the way Cicero built his own character over time and the need for this self-inflation. He does not deal with Cicero's dialogues, but I think his discussion is relevant nonetheless. Cicero is not the only author to use the dialogue to reflect back on his philosophical career. There is an element of this in Heidegger's dialogue with a Japanese.

## Obscurity

In *The Nature of the Gods* Cicero elaborates on the surrounding critical context which would call for a justification of dialogue. This work followed the publication of other dialogues which irritated some of his contemporaries whose "malicious slanders" he reports:

I see that there has been a great deal of talk about the several philosophical works which I have recently published within a short period. Some have wondered how I have acquired this sudden enthusiasm for philosophy, while others have been curious to know what conclusions I have reached on the problems I have tackled. I have felt too that many have been surprised that I have shown myself most inclined towards a philosophy which seems to them to put out the light and plunge everything into darkness...<sup>14</sup>

Cicero feels he has to first justify his interest in philosophy when he has been busy so long with politics - again an apologetic face to dialogue. He also has to explain how he could have time to write and publish so much on philosophy in such a short period. He does not help matters by giving the impression that he composed his works rapidly in a few moments of enforced leisure. (To admit that he had a lot of leisure would suggest he was not wanted as an orator.)

More interesting is the way Cicero feels obliged to raise, and answer, the charge that his philosophical inclinations have brought more darkness than light to the questions raised. By that his critics were referring to his Academic skepticism and choice of the dialogue form which led him to give voice to more than one opinion on any subject. His Academic inclinations lead him to present issues in reported dialogues where no single opinion is clearly master; this in turn causes his critics to accuse him of obfuscation. *The Nature of the Gods* is written as a dialogue in the face of this criticism that his Academic

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<sup>14</sup> Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, p. 71.

dialogues obscure rather than clarify. To make things more interesting there is a resonance between the characterization of the subject of the dialogue and this question of obscurity. Cicero starts the dialogue by saying how, "the question of the nature of the gods is the darkest and most difficult of all."<sup>15</sup> The subject is dark and Cicero has been accused of obscuring with dialogue; one can't help but see a connection, an obscure form for dark questions. (Hume in his revisiting of the issue explicitly makes the connection between the obscure form and the dark subject.) Cicero, in effect, admits that his critics are right — he does not give simple answers to philosophical questions, but he considers this reluctance a virtue. Some issues are so difficult that there are no clear answers; therefore to deal honestly with the issue you should choose a form that captures the uncertainty and obscurity. For Cicero "philosophy is the child of ignorance."<sup>16</sup> His skeptical conclusions lead to his choice of philosophical form. When we can only be sure of our ignorance then we need a way of discoursing that respects the absence of conviction. The ignorant author absents himself, apologizes for the work (and form), confines his writing to moments of leisure, models a philosophical culture that can deal with obscurity, and imagines characters as he would meet them in such a culture.

### **Beyond the Ciceronian Dialogue**

This prefatory tendency found in Cicero and Hume to raise issues around the writing of a dialogue would be curious if it were an isolated phenomenon. However, digging deeper we can find many of the characteristics mentioned above in writers who do not write in a Ciceronian vein. Let us take the apologetic characteristic, because it is the least obvious: Lucian dedicated an entire dialogue to defending not only his choice of dialogue

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<sup>15</sup> Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, p. 69.

<sup>16</sup> Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, p. 69.

but his retooling of the form, as did his imitator Fontenelle. Valla in his characteristic fashion launches his dialogue on free-will with a criticism of the philosophy of Boethius followed by a snipe at Cicero's dialogical style. He doesn't apologize for anything but tells us he is improving on these two classic dialogue writers, drawing our attention to his reuse of the form. His polemical protestations are a sign that he has something others might think he should apologize for, namely his unorthodox anti-philosophical use of the form. It is not exactly an apology, but admission. Boethius himself starts his consolation with verses inspired by the "Muses of Poetry." The character Philosophy upon seeing Boethius "driven by grief to shelter in sad songs" <sup>17</sup> says, "Who ... has allowed these hysterical sluts to approach this sick man's bedside." <sup>18</sup> With these words the actual dialogue begins and Philosophy reconciles Boethius with his martyrdom displacing the initial sad verses with robust dialogue. The opening gives us a not-so-subtle indication that dialogue was chosen over poetry, which is the expected form for such moments of grief. It is a beautifully crafted apology for the form. We could go on with this list of opening justifications, but that would distract from our point that the hints that come through from authors of dialogue point to an apologetic self-consciousness in their use of the form that is different from the authors of essays, for example. We can tell that dialogue writers carefully choose their form because they go to the trouble to explain why.

It is not only at the edges of reported dialogues that one finds apologetic uncertainty about the appropriateness of dialogue. In direct dialogues like the *Phaedrus* the question of writing comes up, framing the second part of the dialogue. The discussion doesn't

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<sup>17</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, p. 36

preface the dialogue but arises within it. There is an explicit discussion of what constitutes good and bad writing and when writing is appropriate as an activity. The writing in question is the writing of speeches, but the critical results of the discussion call into question all writing including that of the dialogue itself. In a similar fashion the critique of imitation in the *Republic* raises the question of the suitability of an imitative work like the *Republic* in the ideal Republic. These two discussions of writing leave the impression that if the author does not have ambiguous feelings about the writing of the very works in which they appear he hasn't taken Socrates' arguments seriously. Only through elaborate rationalizations can one explain how Plato could have confidently written in the face of the Socratic voice he bears. There are also other points about writing in the *Phaedrus*, but that is what the next part of this chapter is about.

What then are the hints we have gathered about the identity of model authors?

**Absence:** Authors, in choosing to write a dialogue, have chosen to withdraw. This is the only solid clue to their character - they do not want readers to pay attention to them. Authors of dialogue are shy. When they appear, it is as a character with no special status compared to the other characters.

**Apology:** This withdrawal is connected to an unease with writing which manifests itself in an apologetic attitude towards the writing of the dialogue itself. Authors of dialogues often justify writing in general, and the choice of dialogue in particular. They are curiously self-conscious about a form that doesn't portray them, but others for us to overhear. The apologetic attitude towards writing is tied to a concern with the appropriateness of writing as a philosophical event.

**Leisure:** The authors of dialogues tell us they only write when they have the leisure to do so. Leisure is that time which cannot be used more usefully, for example, in real dialogue with others. It is the time left over for playful diversions that imagine a

better time. This leisure is not always welcome; it can be the enforced leisure of prison or exile.

**Culture:** The leisurely writing of dialogue is tied to the state of the political and philosophical culture. The author at his leisure responds to the state of the culture of discourse and imagines ideal possibilities. The author's unease with writing is tied to the oral culture of discourse he imagines.

**Character:** Creating the culture of discourse involves imagining ideal characters in interaction. Authors who withdraw want us to focus on other characters as the authorities of the work. The characters become the vehicles for content(s). In the disappearance of the author and the domination of characters there is a problematization of traditional notions of authority.

**Obscurity:** Finally the writing of dialogue can bring the darkness of difference forward. Dialogue is often chosen when what is at stake is not an answer but the preservation of the difference of discussion, something tied closely to the skeptical agenda.

## The Pastime of Dialogue

Cicero's dialogues used to be more influential than even Plato's. The dialogue writers of the Italian Renaissance turned to Cicero as their literary paradigm. But he in turn had read his Plato and the themes that we isolated in his prefaces find their first expression in Plato's dialogues and letters.<sup>19</sup> Plato, being the first writer of mature philosophical

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<sup>19</sup> Today Cicero is relegated to Classics departments. His dialogues are rarely taught in philosophy. Likewise ignored are the philosophical traditions that look back on Cicero for their inspiration like the Renaissance humanist philosophy of Italy. I suspect this is due to two things. 1) It is due to the frank

dialogues, and having left posterity with a large corpus of dialogues that were rediscovered in the Renaissance, has had a disproportionate effect on the written dialogue. Plato's discussion of writing has been influential despite the absence, except in his few letters, of his explicit thoughts. We have no prefaces, epilogues, or even Plato as a character; so where does Plato's influence come from? This influence comes primarily through the extended discussion of writing in the *Phaedrus* and thus "is grounded in the authority" of Socrates, to paraphrase Cicero. For this reason we will now turn to Plato's discussion of writing in the *Phaedrus*. The previous section catalogued the characteristics of the elusive author of dialogue; now I want to recapture the logic of the reluctant choice to write. By understanding why Socrates felt writing should be confined to moments of leisure, "when other men resort to other pastimes, regaling themselves with drinking parties and suchlike"<sup>20</sup>, we can understand those influenced by him.

The *Phaedrus* divides into two parts, the first composed of three speeches around the relationship between the lover and beloved, and the second a discussion of those speeches and the writing of speeches. The first speech of the *Phaedrus* is the only one that is written down, carried under the cloak of Phaedrus when he encounters Socrates. We are told this first speech took Lysias, who is not otherwise present, "weeks to compose at his

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connection between oratory and philosophy which is important to a statesman/philosopher engaged in politics but not to an academic philosopher who is presumably supposed to be removed from the hurly-burly of local politics. Cicero's works today seem tainted by his political agenda which in turn has a lot to do with glorifying his achievements, including his oratorical ability. There is also an unfashionable imperialist smell to Cicero, which may have made him popular in like-minded cultures but is not likely to today. 2) It is also due to the fact that Cicero himself seemed content to borrow much of what he put forward. He does not seem so original now that we have access to much of Plato's and Aristotle's thought.

<sup>20</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 276d.

leisure."<sup>21</sup> Phaedrus, as Socrates correctly surmises, is taken by the speech and has decided to take a walk in the countryside to practice declaiming it, presumably so that he can return to the city having learned the speech by heart, thereby making it his own. On his way out Phaedrus falls in with Socrates, who describes himself as a lover of discourses, and they set out together to find a quiet spot where they can go over the speech. The writing of Lysias is thus the occasion for the encounter of these two friends and their subsequent dialogue. Socrates on hearing the speech first betters it with one of his own on the same theme, then reverses his position arguing even more forcefully against the position of Lysias's speech and his second. The set of three speeches is then followed by a conversation on speech writing and rhetoric.

### **Love and Character**

The subject of the three speeches is the relationship between lover and beloved, nonlover and (non)beloved; I will digress for a moment to discuss the subject and its relevance to the relationships between the characters.

Lysias's speech is intended to convince the reader that the beloved should bestow his attentions on the nonlover instead of the lover. Socrates' speech, the second of the three, argues that the beloved should avoid the lover who is driven by lust and then in the final speech he argues that the beloved should respond to the authentic lover who has his good in mind. Much of the tension between lovers and nonlovers is found on a dramatic level between Socrates and Phaedrus, though it is not clear who is the lover, nonlover, or beloved. Like many of the best dialogues hints as to what is to follow can be found

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<sup>21</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 228a.

retrospectively in the prefatory exchanges. Here are Socrates' comments on Phaedrus' feigned unwillingness to recite Lysias' speech:

Then he (Phaedrus) fell in with one who has a passion for listening to discourses (Socrates), and when he saw him he was delighted to think he would have someone to share his frenzied enthusiasm; so he asked him to join him on his way. But when the lover of discourses begged him to discourse, he became difficult, pretending he didn't want to, though he meant to do so ultimately, even if he had to force himself on a reluctant listener.<sup>22</sup>

On the one hand Phaedrus would appear to be the beloved while Lysias and Socrates are competing for his attention with speeches. Phaedrus, attracted to the thesis of Lysias that he should avoid a passionate lover like Socrates, gets difficult. But there are other angles to the erotic tension. Phaedrus is not erotic the way Socrates is; he isn't as fond of people — witness his abandonment of Lysias, who is left in the city — as he is of discourses, particularly speeches. Socrates, on the other hand, though he claims to love discourses, has a way of always turning up after long speeches are finished (*Gorgias*) or postponing them in favor of dialogue (*Protagoras*). Phaedrus the lover of speeches who is uninterested in people is going to force his love on Socrates the lover of people who is uninterested in speeches. Socrates is going to use Phaedrus' passion for speeches, like Lysias' up his sleeve, to plant the seeds of philosophy, thereby showing that he is the sort of lover described in the third speech, who has the good of his beloved in mind. Socrates is going to show that the type of discourse one should love is that implanted in the soul that can answer questions, not that written down and delivered as a set speech.

The second part of the dialogue is a discussion of rhetoric, the "art" of speech-giving, framed within a discussion of the place of writing. The second part of the dialogue on the

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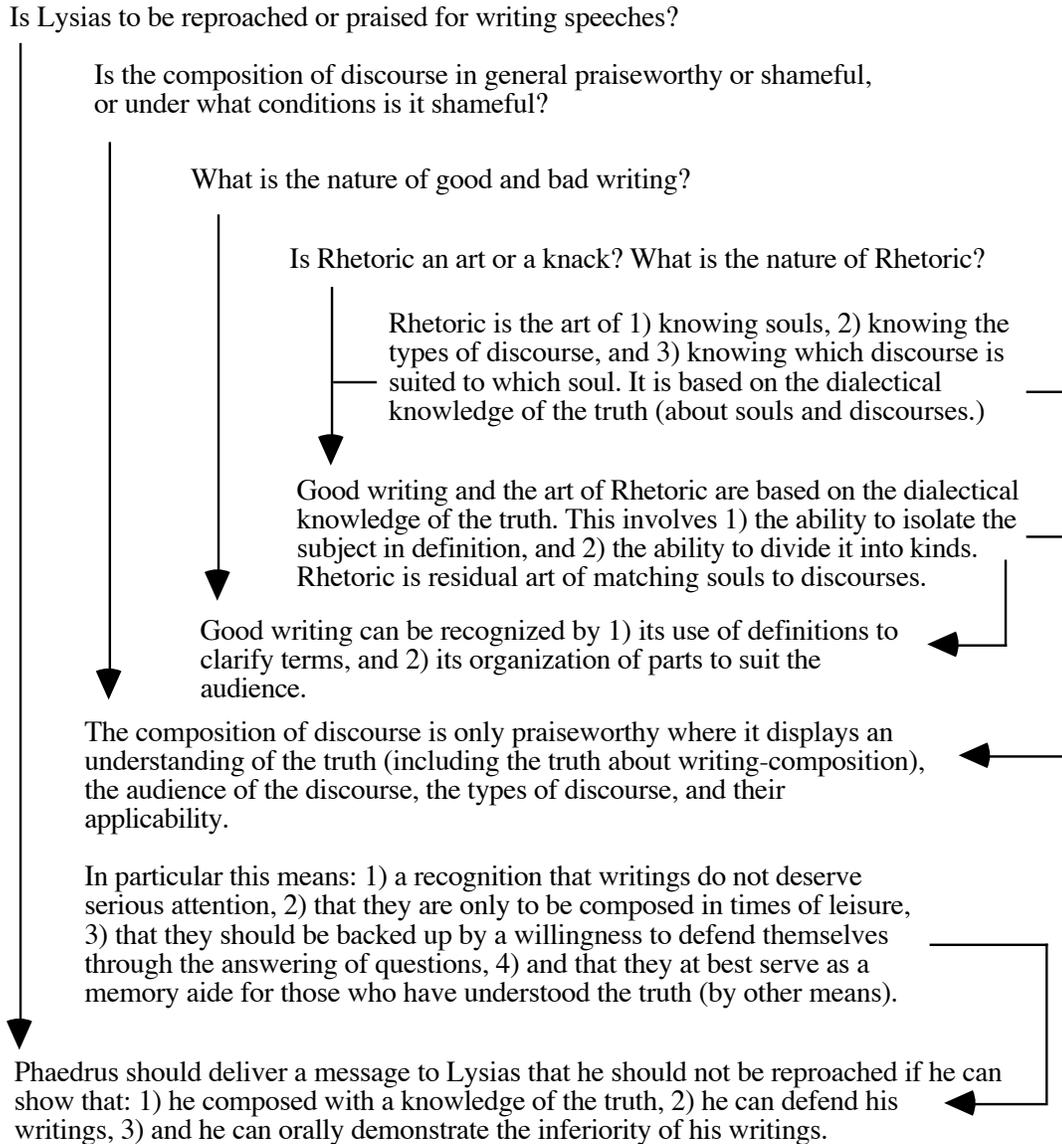
<sup>22</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 228b-c.

one hand serves as a commentary on the set of three speeches, identifying the flaws and qualities of the speeches. On the other hand the second part is itself a fourth discourse, this time a dialogical alternative to set speeches, but a discourse none the less. This fourth discourse follows from the third by being an example of the love of a wise man whose concern is the improvement of the beloved. Socrates doesn't just say what should be; he exemplifies it. Because the beloved is a lover of speeches the lover, who believes dialogue is better for the beloved than speeches, has to make speeches (and dialogue) an issue in his conversation. So much for our digression about lovers and love.

### **Talking about Writing**

In the first part we are shown the superiority of Socratic rhetoric, and in the second Socrates on the one hand, explains his art and the deficiencies of Lysias's, and on the other hand shows a higher form of rhetoric - loving dialogue. Phaedrus is convinced Socrates is a better orator after the speeches but he doesn't know why. The second part is a critical discussion that returns to the three speeches for evidence. On a simple level one can imagine the first three speeches to be the text which Socrates, now the teacher of a different rhetoric, uses to illustrate his points. For the moment we will focus on the second part not as a fourth type of discourse on love, which it is, but as a discussion of writing.

It is useful to summarize the organization of the fourth part. The following is a schematic outline of the nested questions that Phaedrus and Socrates raise and deal with. The scheme is a representation - a paraphrase - of the flow of questions that will guide a closer replay. It is designed to show the structure of the questions and answers not their literal sequence.



Phaedrus opens the discussion by commenting that Lysias should be reproached as a speechwriter for his work. The term "speechwriter" was considered an insult and Phaedrus, after the display of Socrates, is willing to use this insult for Lysias. A little-noticed, but revealing, feature of the dialogue is how Socrates turns Phaedrus around so that his final attitude to Lysias is one congruent with the Socratic definition (and example) of rhetoric. Phaedrus at the end is going to deliver an oral message designed not to insult Lysias but to educate him. Rather than insult him in public Phaedrus is

convinced to deliver a message directly. Phaedrus in delivering a message will put himself in a position so that Lysias can question him and he Lysias. The message, in effect, will be an opening for dialogue. Socrates turns Phaedrus around to love Lysias in the Socratic fashion where one gently corrects those one loves rather than insult them.

The way Socrates does this is to first place his discussion of Lysias' speech writing in a larger context. Phaedrus wants to tar Lysias with the brush of being a mere "speechwriter," an insult he has heard voiced by a politician. Socrates points out that the politician is also a speechwriter; his laws are speeches written for the people and approved by the people. His speeches even include the name of those addressed by the written work - the people. Socrates opens up the circle of people who could be mere speechwriters. He plans to leverage Phaedrus' new disrespect for speechwriting into a critique of all composers. The group that Socrates gathers for his larger critique is put succinctly when wrapping up at the end:

Do you now go and tell Lysias that we two went down to the stream where is the holy place of the nymphs, and there listened to words which charged us to deliver a message, first to Lysias and all other composers of discourses, secondly to Homer and all others who have written poetry whether to be read or sung, and thirdly to Solon and all such as are authors of political compositions under the name of laws... <sup>23</sup>

Gathered together are all composers of discourses, poetry, laws, or speeches. This collection will strike the modern reader as peculiar. The gathering principle for Socrates has to do with whether a discourse is composed or not, not whether it is delivered orally or not. Socrates is grouping together those who compose their works — speechwriters (whether they deliver their speeches or not), poets, and legislators — whereas we have grouped by method of delivery, distinguishing those who deliver their work orally from

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<sup>23</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 278b-c.

those who publish writings. Socrates' composers are to be distinguished from those who organize their thoughts spontaneously in response to their audience's needs and questions.<sup>24</sup>

To Socrates the dialectical understanding of something depends on knowing what to gather and where to divide the subject. To gather by method of delivery for Socrates would be inappropriate. We should gather composed works, oral or not. Oral and written dialogues which are scripted have in common something other than the fact that one is the representation of the other. This is a crucial point for us. Our distinction, based on the method of delivery, or the medium of the message, is inappropriate. It leads to the view that one type of dialogue is a representation of the other. Socrates' distinction places composed dialogues, be they oral or not, in the same camp. The difference is what the dialogue is composed on, paper or souls, as we shall see later.

We began this series of chapters asking what we should make of the oral/written ambiguity in dialogue and here is a hint that suggests the crucial distinction is another. To understand the written dialogue we are here beckoned in the direction of composition. In retrospect, an oral performance, including the sorts of oral dialogues described by Xenophon, could be scripted to be performed in a fashion similar to a written dialogue.

Once Phaedrus accepts the gathering of a larger context, that of composed discourse (be it spoken or written) the question becomes the "nature of good and bad speaking and

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<sup>24</sup> Socrates in 277e-278b compares compositions to "those lessons on justice and honor and goodness that are expounded and set forth for the sake of instruction, and are veritably written in the soul of the listener..." I suspect that this contrast is not meant to cover all the possibilities. Socrates would agree that not all lessons that are not composed are equally valuable. After all, Gorgias and Protagoras offered to teach by answering questions instead of lecturing. Thus I contrast the composition with improvised persuasion of which Socratic lessons on the soul are the paradigm.

writing."<sup>25</sup> In order to know what to say to the likes of Lysias they have to understand the nature of discourse; and to give an ethical spin to the discussion, they need to understand specifically what makes for good and bad discourse. Socrates and Phaedrus fortunately have the discourses of Socrates and Lysias from the first part of the dialogue to use as material for this examination, as do the readers. They work from the differences between Socrates' speeches and Lysias'. They discover that Socrates' speeches had two stylistic features that are indicative of their inner quality. First, Socrates' speeches worked from a definition (specifically a definition of love as madness). Second, they were organized into parts that fit the divisions of the subject matter — parts that could not be moved around. Lysias' contribution, by contrast, neither began with a definition that gathered the issue together, nor was it made up of parts that matched the division of the issue. Its parts were interchangeable; Lysias' speech was a collection of points, not an argument with organic unity.

The stylistic differences between Socrates' and Lysias' speeches reflect a deeper difference. Socrates early on asks: does a good and "successful discourse presuppose a knowledge in the mind of the speaker of the truth about his subject?"<sup>26</sup> The discussion returns repeatedly to this typically Socratic hypothesis. It turns out that knowledge of the truth involves knowing how to gather the subject into an appropriate definition and knowledge of its parts should one want to divide it. The use of appropriate definitions and divisions are a sign of the knowledge of the composer. An unwillingness to define the subject under discussion could mean that the composer knows not of what he speaks.

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<sup>25</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 259e.

<sup>26</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 259e.

Likewise a crude butchery of the subject, one that does not follow the nice dotted lines that one finds on those butchering diagrams, is also an indication of ignorance.

This dialectical knowledge is useful to the rhetorician, even when you want to mislead. If you know the truth you know which ambiguities to exploit when, like Socrates, you want to give a speech which is not the whole truth in order to captivate someone like Phaedrus. Socrates' first speech is an example of how knowledge, and its manifestation in definition and division, make for a more convincing argument when one wants to distort the truth. Knowing the truth makes it easier to make the distortion sound close to the truth; Plato not only has Socrates prove this, he also has material in the form of the early speeches which demonstrates this.

The discussion around the nature of good discourse runs hand in hand with a question about the existence and nature of the art of rhetoric. Socrates and Phaedrus do not simply want to know whether there are good and bad discourses and how to distinguish them by superficial traits; they want to know whether one can learn to compose good discourse. Hence the interest in the art of rhetoric. Socrates is not convinced there even is such a thing as an art of rhetoric, a position he also takes in the *Gorgias*. It turns out that the art of rhetoric is built on the dialectical knowledge of the truth. The dialectical art of the philosophers turns out to be the crucial art, and rhetoric the supplementary art of when to say what to whom once you know the truth.

The discussion of the art of rhetoric is the heart of the discussion between Socrates and Phaedrus. Socrates has led Phaedrus to the point where he has an idea of the path he would have to take if he really wanted to speak well, as opposed to the short cut he was taking when he ran into Socrates — that of memorizing a clever speech by Lysias. This path involves learning about the types of souls (psychology if you will), the types of discourses, and the correct application of discourse to soul. The dialogue does not

provide a manual on souls and discourses, though there are plenty of hints to remind someone who has learned this art, like the image of the soul as a chariot. At the end of the hour, the dialogue points in the direction of the questions that would have to be pursued to learn the art of rhetoric. Unlike in the *Gorgias*, Socrates does not seem to really care if there is one art - dialectic - or two - dialectic and rhetoric (as a supplementary art, perhaps). His point is that to speak well — even when one wants to distort the truth — one needs to be a dialectician with a dialectical knowledge of souls and discourses. This final extension of the dialectical art into souls and discourses can be called rhetoric.

It is worth pointing out that the discussion around the art of rhetoric is geared towards the ethical question of how one (specifically Phaedrus) can acquire the ability to speak and write well. Socrates is identifying a course of education, not a position. His message to Phaedrus and through him is that if one aspires to rhetorical excellence one needs to learn the truth and the philosopher's art.

### **The Story of Writing**

Once they have identified the heart of the matter they return to the question of writing: "there remains the question of propriety and impropriety in writing..."<sup>27</sup> The propriety of writing can be addressed now that they have understood the art of rhetoric or composed discourse in general. The general answer is that the good discourse is tailored specifically for the soul of the audience and hence is based on knowledge of souls and discourses. The question is now the use of written works as distinct from other compositions. There is an ethical dimension to the way the question is put. Socrates wants to know when and how it is proper (ethically acceptable) to write. To do that he

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<sup>27</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274b.

needs to know what the written character adds or detracts from discourses. Of the various types of discourses, what is the proper place of written ones? This is related to our original question: what is the difference between written and oral dialogue?

To start, Socrates offers a tale that has come down from their forefathers.<sup>28</sup> The tale is about the invention of writing: Theuth, an Egyptian god brought his inventions including writing before the king Thamus who made it his business to evaluate the inventions before passing them on to the Egyptians. Theuth is excited about writing; it "will make the people of Egypt wiser and improve their memories; my discovery provides a recipe for memory and wisdom."<sup>29</sup> Thamus like any good philosopher king is not so enthusiastic. He first distinguishes the role of the god as inventor from his role as legislator. Theuth is enamored with his offspring writing so he can't see whether it will really profit or harm the citizens. Looking at the larger picture, Thamus argues that writing,

will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they (citizens) will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance, for by telling them of many things without teaching them you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing, and as men filled, not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274c.

<sup>29</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274e.

<sup>30</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274a-b. I find it intriguing how Socrates' story shows a human, albeit a king, critiquing a god. A generous interpretation would be that gods are potentials which have to be properly exploited by people. Writing is a potential which is eternally there; we have to decide how to use it or not.

One of the first points to be made about the myth of writing presented by Socrates is that it is presented as a short dialogue between them. Socrates sets the scene and then reports a short exchange between Theuth and Thamus. The bulk of the tale is the response, quoted above, of Thamus to the claim that writing will provide a recipe for wisdom. It is interesting that Socrates at this juncture should introduce a myth to make his point, especially when at the beginning of the dialogue he tells us that he does not concern himself with such stories. To be more precise he says that he doesn't indulge in skeptical reinterpretations of myths preferring to "accept the current beliefs about them".<sup>31</sup> One would expect Socrates to avoid such stories entirely, but instead he peppers his discourse with them in an apparently uncritical manner. When Phaedrus accuses him of making this myth up, he responds by pointing out that their forefathers were "content in their simplicity to listen to trees or rocks, provided these told the truth." <sup>32</sup>

Socrates' position is that these stories should be taken at face value. Their authority should not depend on their provenance but on the truth of their lesson. It doesn't matter if Socrates made the story up or if it was uttered by a tree; the story either offers a truth or not and the listener is in a position to evaluate the value of the lesson. If the story is implausible one should not waste time trying to redeem it through clever reinterpretation. Given the number of traditional stories of dubious value, any attempt at a reform of the oral tradition through reinterpretation is doomed to failure.

Rather than try to redeem old stories through interpretation, Socrates offers new stories designed to replace the inherited ones. Socrates' position against overinterpretation is connected to his practice of introducing new stories, including snatches of dialogue

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<sup>31</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 230a.

<sup>32</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275b-c.

which, if they are to make their point, should also be taken at surface value.<sup>33</sup> It is worth noting that it is not just in the *Phaedrus* that he introduces such stories; this is a characteristic Socratic tactic. He frequently uses stories (which include dialogical passages) to introduce positive content; one good example is the exchange with the priestess Diotima in the *Symposium*, another is the discussion with the laws of Athens in the *Crito*. In the *Charmides* Socrates describes how he was told of a charm for curing headaches that naturally involves curing the soul with "fair words."<sup>34</sup> When Socrates presents his cave analogy he asks his interlocutors to imagine what the freed prisoners would say to being told everything they thought they knew was an illusion. These stories are part of the cure along with the purgative questioning.

Using stories to introduce ideas also fits nicely with Socrates' claim to ignorance. Given that he has publicly stated that he knows nothing, and that such a stance is often central to his conversational tactics, the only way he can introduce ideas is to report them as belonging to someone else or as stories in circulation that do not belong to anyone.<sup>35</sup> It is not hard to imagine how Plato might take this example a step further and compose stories about Socrates to replace the compositions of oral epics that were being gathered

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<sup>33</sup> One can find the same connection in the work of Umberto Eco. On the one hand, in his academic work he has argued against overinterpretation; on the other hand, he has acted by creating new stories that are plausibly about overinterpretation, notably *Foucault's Pendulum*.

<sup>34</sup> Plato, *Charmides*, 157a. In the *Phaedo* Socrates also talks about the use of spells and charms to relieve the anxieties that his followers have about his death. (77d-78a) The extended story of the soul after death that starts at 107d could be the final charming story.

<sup>35</sup> A more cynical explanation is that Socrates like Protagoras used stories to talk down to his juniors who could not understand ideas otherwise. As Protagoras puts it to Socrates, "Now shall I, as an old man speaking to his juniors, put my explanation in the form of a story, or give it as a reasoned argument?" (320c) In this case the stories are not the sign of ignorance but one of patronizing vanity.

and archived around that time.<sup>36</sup> Socrates fought oral stories with new oral stories; Plato was displacing archived epics with new composed stories.

So let us take the story of writing at face value. In it are presented two opinions about the value of writing. That of Theuth is that writing will a) improve the memory of Egyptians and b) make them wiser. It is not clear if he felt the two virtues of writing were connected by a causal link. His argument, as Thamus takes it, is that by improving memory, writing will make people wiser. Thamus counters this by arguing that far from improving memory, users of writings will no longer have to internalize what they have learned, trusting it to external marks. Writing will replace careful memorizing while giving the illusion that one still possesses that which has been written. The result will be people who remember less but think they are wiser. People will also avoid having to internalize what they memorize; in other words, they will not have to think about what they memorize; they can possess it without understanding it. Those who trust their memorandum will not only be less wise but will be deceived as to their wisdom. Wisdom will be replaced by its semblance - a pale imitation.

The connection between memory and wisdom that is taken for granted in this story is no longer obvious. We tend to think of memory as a knack of little value except when shopping without a list, but that is only due to the wealth of information tools we have access to. It was not so long ago that even books were luxury items that few could afford. Memory has been devalued in our culture partly due to this proliferation of memory aids. We all can now afford to carry phone books, appointment books, and notebooks. Now there are even electronic memory aids the size of pocket calculators that are replacing the traditional paper tools. The average household has an unprecedented number of storage

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<sup>36</sup> The Athenian archives were established in 400 BC.

systems: books, tape decks, CD players, record players, VCRs, and refrigerators. At the institutional level there are archives, and libraries which are the center of today's University (along with Computing Services). The computer promises even more efficient storage and retrieval with software agents that can remind you of information before you even see it, making decisions about what you want to be reminded of and when. In the Socratic world, however, memory was an important ability as few of these aids existed. As I pointed out in the chapter on oral dialogue, in an oral culture the ability to remember is necessary to most occupations, including philosophy. The structure of oral discourse reflects the need to be able to remember it. One cannot gather a complex argument without the ability to remember the parts so the parts have to be arranged in a memorable fashion. One can understand how a god like Theuth could argue that writing would contribute to wisdom. But that doesn't change the fact that memory is not all. What Thamus points out, in response to Theuth, is something that is obvious to us today, that possession of information is not knowledge or wisdom. It does not matter how many books you have, or even how much you have memorized. To understand something you have to internalize it in some fashion, and only then can a written work remind you of what you know.<sup>37</sup>

Socrates' critique of writing does not stop with the story of Theuth and Thamus. In typical Socratic fashion, the story is the occasion for further discussion. Just as the speeches of the *Phaedrus* are followed by dialogue, so the story of writing is followed by

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<sup>37</sup> The problem of memory and its relationship to wisdom is a theme that runs through a number of dialogues. In the *Meno* there is the suggestion that we know everything, but have forgotten it. Learning is a matter of recollecting what we know. This can be done through questioning of the sort that Socrates shows Meno when he elicits mathematical knowledge from the slave boy (82-85). In the *Phaedo* the theory of recollection is recovered explicitly as proof of the immortality of the soul (73-76).

discussion. Socrates compares the written discourse to one of "unquestioned legitimacy,"<sup>38</sup> that discourse which is "written" in the soul and goes with knowledge. The written discourse is a representation of the living discourse in the soul, and should not, like an optical illusion, be confused for the original. From this it follows that the most appropriate type of composition would be the planting of a discourse in another soul, not on paper. The writer plants his discourse in a dead medium, while the lover plants his discourse in a soul where it can live and grow.

The sign of life is the ability to answer questions. The discourse planted in writing cannot adapt to answer questions. This is illustrated by the fate of Lysias' thought: written down his discourse on the lover cannot answer Socrates. At best a written work can remind us of what we know so that we can answer the questions we bring to the text. The discourse planted in the soul of the beloved is alive in a way that a text will never be. It can give birth to other discourses, and most importantly it can ask and answer questions. We should remember that all the stories in Plato's dialogues about achieving knowledge involve the asking of questions. In the cave story in the *Republic* it is by asking questions that the philosopher constrains people to identify the illusions projected for them.<sup>39</sup>

The ability to answer questions of a discourse and its authority are connected. When Socrates introduces stories and snatches of dialogue, he deliberately avoids introducing content that can be ascribed to anyone. The discourses are either stories attributable to

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<sup>38</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 276a.

<sup>39</sup> Plato, *Republic*, VII, 515d. It is interesting that the process of philosophical liberation, in this story, is viewed as a painful one for the student. Questions are used to force the student out into the open and away from the shadows. This fits with the descriptions we have of the Socratic method of questioning, which as I pointed out earlier, was usually a humiliating experience.

some magical source or dialogues that do not belong to anyone. His truths have to stand on their own, whoever was responsible for them (though they have the advantage of being defended by Socrates). Socrates introduces a new way of evaluating the value of a discourse. Rather than looking at the authority of a discourse's author, one should question it. If it cannot even begin to answer appropriately, it condemns itself. The authority of living discourse is not only its ability to answer questions, but also its ability to adapt itself to different ethical situations. A living discourse can modify itself to different characters and situations. In an earlier chapter I pointed out how in the *Gorgias* Socrates insisted that he had to be personally convinced and that every argument had to be tailored to him rather than simply guaranteed by another. All that listening to a report of conviction can do is purify one of opinions so that one is ready for a living discourse. In the *Phaedrus* he shows how the art of rhetoric is the adaptation of discourses (including written ones) to individual characters. Questionability and adaptability go hand in hand. Because the living discourse is not simply a memorized or written work, but is knowledge recollected by the soul of a person, it can adapt itself to new situations and deliver messages that can ask and answer questions. The living discourse can deliver messages faithfully and answer for them just as Phaedrus can, by the end of the dialogue, deliver a message suited to Lysias, unlike the composition Lysias left in the hands of Phaedrus.

For Socrates the difference between a written work and the living discourse of conviction is the difference between the truth and its imitation.<sup>40</sup> The truth is not a set of propositions that are true for eternity, but a person capable of speaking and acting

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<sup>40</sup> Socrates compares writings to the works of painters, whose "products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence." Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275d.

truthfully in any situation. The truth is not passive, but an active response to the world. A written work is obviously incapable of acting (though readers might act as a result of their reading), therefore it is not truth. It follows that those who write and believe their writings are the truth, are mistaken about writing in general, and their writing in particular. For this reason Socrates repeatedly says that the only writers who are not to be reproached for writing are those who make it clear that their writings do not contain permanent truths.<sup>41</sup> Writers have a responsibility to apologize for their writing and point out its limitations. Writers have a responsibility to undermine their writing in favor of the living discourse. Writers, in effect, have to be willing to question their writings, and be questioned about them — and in that questioning be prepared to abandon the imitations of truths therein.

For Socrates composition, be it in writing or teaching, is an ethical act. You are responsible not only for what you compose and for whom, but for the very decision to compose and the choice of compositional practice. To choose to write is to choose to compose in one fashion over another, to plant ideas in one place over another. Socrates suggests in his life and in his stories that the best composition is that on the soul of a living person — teaching, if you will. A written composition is written for more than one person; it cannot be adapted to a particular soul, and therefore can never convince in the way that dialectical rhetoric can, which by his definition is designed for individual souls. Writing can only work in a dispersed fashion, being adapted for a wide variety of people — the lowest common denominator. It is a blunt hermeneutic instrument that more often

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<sup>41</sup> He that believes "writing will provide something reliable and permanent, must be exceedingly simple-minded; he must really be ignorant of Ammon's utterance, if he imagines that written words can do anything more than remind one who knows that which the writing is concerned with." Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275c-d.

goes wrong, getting misinterpreted or overinterpreted.<sup>42</sup> Plato would have us compare the composition of Lysias and its history to the message Socrates sows in the soul of Phaedrus for Lysias.

### **What is left to writing**

What role then is left for writing? If writing is an ethical choice of activity, there might be situations for which it is the right choice. Socrates in the final summary of the message for Lysias identifies some situations where writing is an acceptable alternative:

- Compositions like writings can serve to remind those who have already been dialectically convinced of what they know, especially the truth about writing - i.e., that it is no substitute for teaching. Socrates opens room for a discipline where students are taught the living truths and writings serve to remind the academy of what it knows. One wonders what he would say about a discipline that only promotes teachers who write.
- Composition is an acceptable activity only at times of leisure. It is an activity that should have a low priority, lower than teaching the living discourse, but nonetheless acceptable during times of leisure when others are drinking.<sup>43</sup> Even Socrates is willing to leave Athens and compose speeches when others are napping or drinking.

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<sup>42</sup> Grote, in *Plato, and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (volume I, p. 134,) suggests that one of the reasons Plato set up a school was to ensure the correct interpretation of his dialogues after he was dead. This might have been one of his answers to the problems raised by Socrates in his own dialogue.

<sup>43</sup> What to do during the long drinking binges that were common practice seems to have been a preoccupation of Plato's. In the *Symposium* he tries to show how such parties could be redirected to entertaining philosophical discourse. In the *Laws* he suggests that the parties could be used as an occasion to test the young. Here he suggests that one should just leave and go write.

- Compositions are acceptable if they are delivered in a larger context where questioning can undermine and replace them. For example Socrates delivers two composed speeches, but follows them with a living dialogue.

## Conclusions on Writing and Orality

It remains to show that the character of the model author that we summarized by looking at the prefaces of Ciceronian dialogues fits with the Socratic position on writing as presented in the *Phaedrus*. I cannot prove that all authors of dialogue held something like the Socratic position, though I believe one can show that many were aware of it and one could trace it through the history of dialogue. Here I am trying to show that the Socratic position is consistent with the character traits outlined in the first part of this chapter. Moreover, though I will not demonstrate it here, the Socratic position is the best available explanation for these character traits. Due to the absence of the empirical authors, we will never know with certainty who they are and, specifically, why they wrote dialogues. We have, however, provided a model that fits the evidence found in Ciceronian prefaces. The model gives a credible explanation for the behavior of the author, drawn from one of the most significant dialogues ever written. The concerns of Socrates could lead to dialogues written like those of Cicero and Hume.

### *Absence*

The model author is best characterized by his absence. This absence can now be fleshed out. The author is absent when, like Socrates, he does not care to share his convictions in written form. The author professes ignorance in his absence as Socrates did with his words. It is the authorial equivalent to Socratic ignorance. He does not claim to know anything but stories that he can pass on, the truth of which we have to judge for ourselves.

The absence of the author makes sense for those who believe written compositions cannot replace living ones. The author who is absent may, like Socrates, teach in other ways. Writings would serve certain functions but not all. They might be designed to remind students of what they have been taught in other ways, or, more importantly, they may be designed to be overheard. Just as Socrates staged some dialogues for his audience (and not the interlocutor) so a written dialogue could serve as bait for further dialogue. In the chapter on oral dialogue we saw a progress of dialogue from conversations designed to be overheard to those directly with the interlocutor. The first type were not designed to teach content, but to intrigue and humble the target. They are composed in the sense of prepared for an audience. The written dialogue is really no different if we believe Socrates. It is prepared to be overheard (or read). It cannot replace the second type of living dialogue, but it can serve instead of the first where there is a community of philosophy that can question itself.

### *Authority and Character*

This absence has an effect on the authority of the text. The absence of the author makes it difficult to identify the text with a single position belonging to a single authority. There are instead competing positions linked with different characters. None of these characters have all the authority, though some like Socrates are subtly positioned to be more attractive by the end. The author, if he does appear in a dialogue, is a character with no more authority than the protagonist. The authority of the work is ultimately like that of Socrates' story of writing — it could have come from a tree or a god and we have to judge it by itself (by questioning it).

For Socrates misinterpretation and overinterpretation are major problems that writing exacerbates. Writing dialogue reduces misinterpretation through the absence of the author. The author of a dialogue cannot be accused of presenting opinions that he cannot

defend from misunderstanding when he does not present anything except other characters, who again do not speak to the reader but to each other. Authors like Cicero take great pride in surveying all the important positions of philosophers, so that the reader can hardly take the work as uncontroversial support for one or another position. The written dialogue is peculiarly suited to authors who do not want to trust their beliefs to writing.

The absence of the author is mirrored in the absence of the reader. The reader is not addressed in the dialogue; no one says "believe this..." Thus the reader cannot misunderstand in the sense of believing he was told something. The reader, because he is an eavesdropper, does not have the same authority to report what he was told. No one has told the reader of a dialogue anything, hence he cannot, strictly speaking, have misunderstood anything. With his authority as reader ignored, the reader cannot misinterpret or overinterpret with the same confidence. The reader is forced into circumlocutions or humility.

This sounds like sophistry, but it is borne out in the history of the interpretation of Platonic dialogues. Plato's dialogues are remarkably resistant to the type of interpretation that goes, "Plato says such-and-such." Any reporting of Plato's words tends to be couched today in frames of humiliating interpretative heuristics. If one wants to speak boldly one has to speak of what Socrates said. This resistance to interpretation, which can be interpreted as an invitation to thought, but does not always play out as such, is testimony to the effect of the withdrawal of the author. No author has been interpreted in such a variety of ways and with such interpretative uncertainty. I am arguing that this is the direct result of an attempt to compose works that were consistent with the Socratic discussion of writing. Plato is absent because he takes his beliefs seriously enough to not want to commit them to a medium that is so susceptible to misinterpretation. The irony is

that he puts Socrates, who did not write, in the position that he cannot defend what he is portrayed as saying.

### *Apology*

The apologetic character of the author is understandable given the way the Socratic writer is supposed to undermine his own work with his own words. The Socratic writer, who believes that writing is dangerous and less likely than other types of focused composition to inspire others, cannot be reproached if he shows his uncertainty about writing in his own words. Socrates makes it quite clear that anyone who writes should be the first to critique it.

The apologetic prefaces of authors of dialogue are their way of showing the problems of writing when compared to other ways of acting. Apology is consistent with an ethic that takes seriously the choice to write. It considers the choice to write as one of many possible ways of composing messages to the other in an imperfect world where willful misunderstanding is often the case. It chooses to write in the context of other possible activities to which writing is a reluctant alternative. Moreover, it draws our attention to those other activities, specifically the living dialogue where one can focus one's message to the individual. It is a written gesture in the direction of something other than writing, and thus must always appear apologetic or withdrawing.

### *Leisure*

Given the limitations of writing, it is an activity best pursued at times of leisure, when you aren't called to other forms of action. It is interesting that Socrates himself did not start composing written works until in prison - enforced leisure of the sort that Boethius

and Cicero also experienced.<sup>44</sup> The author who, like Socrates, believes that writing is likely to do little good compared to dialectical questioning, is likely only to allow himself to write when everyone else is off drinking or asleep. Writing is for when you cannot engage others in more effective ways.

Not only should we write when we have the leisure, but we should write for times of leisure. You write for yourself when you are older, when you will want to be reminded of what you knew. You write for the leisure of old age or for the leisure of others who are properly taught. You write for those who have the leisure to pursue philosophy once an interest is aroused. The written work of leisure should be appreciated at comparable times of leisure by those who also have other ways of learning. Writing fits when there is a culture of philosophy that can undermine the writings with living dialogue. The written dialogue works like the oral dialogue that was designed to be overheard; it is designed to precede a culture of questioning that can overtake it.

### *Culture*

For this reason there is central to dialogue a concern for the culture of philosophy. At the end of the day Socrates cares about how the love of wisdom is cultured in others and the culture that promotes (or not) the love of wisdom. Writing is one of many activities

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<sup>44</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 60c-61b. Cebes and others note the turn to writing that Socrates takes in his last days. Cebes relays the question for them all, "Evenus asked me a day or two ago, as others have done before, about the lyrics which you have been composing lately by adapting Aesop's Fables and 'The Prelude' to Apollo. He wanted to know what induced you to write them now after you had gone to prison, when you had never done anything of the kind before." Socrates' answer is that he is writing verses in response to a recurring dream that encouraged him to practice the arts. Until then he had thought that doing philosophy was practicing the highest art, but in his final days he decided to try other arts just in case.

that promote philosophical culture, though a relatively ineffective component. Without a culture of philosophy written works are as wasted as seeds on barren rock.

That does not mean that all dialogues are written in the context of perfect dialogical cultures. Many dialogues show us philosophical cultures as they should be. They specifically imagine the oral and dialogical aspects of the culture. They depend on a culture that they are trying to imagine. They are, in modern terms, creating the need for the culture that would satisfy the questions they raise. Like an advertisement they show something that may not be the case, but should be so, in the mind of the author.

### *The Story of Dialogue*

There is in the *Phaedrus* a story that provides a conclusion to this chapter, and that is the story of the message from the gods to Lysias. The end result of the excursion Socrates and Phaedrus take is a message from the gods of the spot to Lysias and Isocrates. This message is conceived through dialogue; it does not come whole from either Socrates or Phaedrus. It is a composition that is designed to beckon toward the path of dialectical rhetoric rather than present a polished position. It should unsettle Lysias and encourage him to set aside vain writing for philosophy. It is a gesture that replaces the insult Phaedrus was planning for Lysias.

The source of this message needs to be clearly identified, not because it is important in terms of the dialogue, but because we are so concerned these days with sources and resources. The source of the message is the divine love that Socrates has for Phaedrus, and hence it is fair to say that the message was inspired by the gods. Socrates is an example of the sort of love that he describes in his second speech that sees his god in the beauty of the other and makes love to the other by bringing out the divine in them. Socrates is not responsible alone for the message; he is assisted by Phaedrus. They are the

two steeds that pull the chariot. The message that lies in the nature of divine love is delivered by the characters, pulled by a team in dialogue. To search for an author for such a message makes a mockery of our fascination with authors and sources. The model author is a messenger, absenting himself so that we do not confuse him with the source of the message or attribute the authority of the message to him.

This message is composed at a time of leisure when most others are resting for later moments of leisure. Socrates allows himself to be led outside the city walls when nothing much is happening in the city to prepare messages for later such moments when people will have the leisure to recall such stories. The message is a composition in response to a previous composition by Lysias, also composed at his leisure. Leisure needs to be understood as a time of retreat or play, when one goes outside the walls. It is the time perfectly suited to composition as it is the time when public life does not call. Such leisure can be enforced and unwelcome as it was for Cicero and Boethius. It is, in sum, the time when one is removed from public life — there is no one you must talk to, no one to answer to.

We can see in the story of the message a positive side to leisurely composition. During times of leisure, messages can emerge that are addressed to those who are absent. The message that emerges in public need not be delivered to anyone, because they are all present. The message born in leisure needs to be delivered. The delivery is a reluctant responsibility for one sensitive to the opportunities for misinterpretation, which explains the apologetic character of writers of dialogue. One delivers it in a way that indicates this reluctance and points to that from which it was a message. One delivers it with apologies and then one absents oneself so as not to distract the reader.

Writers of dialogue are the deliverers of such a message. They compose a written work much as Socrates scripted events to be overheard by others. They compose the

work to be witnessed. The work bears a message that points, not at the work, nor at the message-bearer, nor at their intentions, but in the direction of thinking. A message like a hint points beyond it, to a god or a tree. It is a gesture that beckons in one direction over another, often down a path, giving directions for those who want to follow that path. (The message for Lysias should point him down the path of dialectical rhetoric, as should the message to us.) Both the written dialogue, and oral dialogue that is arranged to be overheard, point to the possibility for living questions sown in a culture of philosophy.

The written dialogue is a story that should be taken at face value. It can remind us of what we know, but it cannot teach us as direct questions can. It is written in acknowledgment of this fact and deliberately distances itself from claims to conviction. It points instead to a focused oral dialogue which is capable of turning our head so that instead of the phantom images we see the forms that generate those images.

Being questioned in a Socratic fashion can be uncomfortable. Questioning can be a violent act when it is designed to constrain us to look at the blindingly bright truth. Written dialogue is written to prepare us for such questioning, or to remind us that we should be questioning. In this way, the written dialogue parallels the overheard oral dialogue. It is not a representation of such oral dialogue. Both the scripted oral dialogue and the written dialogue deliver similar messages. They both point to living and questioning dialogue. Perhaps the story of the message is what Heidegger and others mean when they talk about dialogue being that through which meaning comes.

We have looked at the stakeholders of the written dialogue, the reader and author. The reader of dialogues has a role remarkably similar to the role of the audience of oral dialogue. The reader overhears the dialogue much as an eavesdropper. The text of the dialogue does not attempt to convince the reader so much as show characters interacting

in a way that can lead the reader to reject the character that is unprepared for philosophy.

In certain cases the rejection can be a traumatic experience similar to a religious conversion where one is emptied of one's previous beliefs in order to be redefined.

Written dialogue tends to be less effective, but we can't all listen in to Socrates. Rather we can say that dialogue prepares philosophical character by holding some traits up as acceptable and showing how others are distasteful under stress. Both written and arranged oral dialogue can be crafted to prepare us for philosophy; they are not positive philosophy itself, and hence their uncertainty. Their preparation is to point us in the right direction. Both oral and written dialogue are really the same genre of persuasion where the composer does not directly address the audience, but arranges a conversation that the audience overhears. As they both work the same way, the oral and written dialogue deserve the same name, dialogue. Let us now see if we can define this dialogue.