

Plato: *Phaedrus*

The speakers are Socrates (So) and Phaedrus (Ph):

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

PH. Yes.

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

PH. Not at all. Do you?

So. I can tell you what I've heard the ancients said, though they [274C] alone know the truth. However, if we could discover that ourselves, would we still care about the speculations of other people?¹⁷⁶

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

So. Well, this is what I've heard. Among the ancient gods of Naucratis¹⁷⁷ in Egypt there was one to whom the bird called the ibis is sacred. The name of that divinity was Theuth,¹⁷⁸ [274D] and it was he who first discovered number and calculation, geometry and astronomy, as well as the games of draughts and dice, and, above all else, writing.

Now the king of all Egypt at that time was Thamus,¹⁷⁹ who lived in the great city in the upper region that the Greeks call Egyptian Thebes; Thamus they call Ammon.¹⁸⁰ Theuth came to exhibit his arts to him and urged him to disseminate them to all the Egyptians. Thamus asked him about the usefulness of each art, and while Theuth was explaining it, [274E] Thamus praised him for whatever he thought was right in his explanations and criticized him for whatever he thought was wrong.

The story goes that Thamus said much to Theuth, both for and against each art,

which it would take too long to repeat. But when they came to writing, Theuth said: "O King, here is something that, once learned, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memory; I have discovered a potion for memory and for wisdom."¹⁸¹ Thamus, however, replied: "O most expert Theuth, one man can give birth to the elements of an art, but only another can judge how they can benefit or harm those who will use them. And [275A] now, since you are the father of writing, your affection for it has made you describe its effects as the opposite of what they really are. In fact, it will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own. You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. Your invention will enable them to hear many things without being [275B] properly taught, and they will imagine that they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing. And they will be difficult to get along with, since they will merely appear to be wise instead of really being so."

PH. Socrates, you're very good at making up stories from Egypt or wherever else you want!

SO. But, my friend, the priests of the temple of Zeus at Dodona say that the first prophecies were the words of an oak.¹⁸² Everyone who lived at that time, not being as wise as you young ones are today, found it rewarding enough in their simplicity to listen to an oak or even a stone, so long as it [275C] was telling the truth, while it seems to make a difference to you, Phaedrus, who is speaking and where he comes from.

Why, though, don't you just consider whether what he says is right or wrong?

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

SO. Well, then, those who think they can leave written instructions for an art, as well as those who accept them, thinking that writing can yield results that are clear or certain, must be quite naive and truly ignorant of Ammon's prophetic judgment: otherwise, how could they possibly think that [275D] words that have been written down can do more than remind those who already know what the writing is about?

PH. Quite right.

So. You know, Phaedrus, writing shares a strange feature with painting. The off-springs of painting stand there as if they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever. When it has once been written [275E] down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support.¹⁸³

PH. You are absolutely right about that, too.

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

PH. Which one is that? How do you think it comes about?

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

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

SO. Absolutely right. And tell me this. Would a sensible farmer, [276B] who cared about his seeds and wanted them to yield fruit, plant them in all seriousness in the gardens of Adonis in the middle of the summer and enjoy watching them bear fruit within seven days? Or would he do this as an amusement and in honor of the holiday, if he did it at all?¹⁸⁴ Wouldn't he use his knowledge of farming to plant the seeds he cared for when it was appropriate and be content it they bore fruit seven months later?

PH. That's how he would handle those he was serious about, [276C] Socrates, quite differently from the others, as you say.

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

PH. Certainly not.

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

PH. That wouldn't be likely.

So. Certainly not. When he writes, it's likely he will sow gardens [276D] of letters for the sake of amusing himself, storing up reminders for himself "when he reaches forgetful old age"¹⁸⁵ and for everyone who wants to follow in his footsteps, and will enjoy seeing them sweetly blooming. And when others turn to different amusements, watering themselves with drinking parties and everything else that goes along with them, he will rather spend his time amusing himself with the things I have just described.

PH. Socrates, you are contrasting a vulgar amusement [276E] with the very noblest—with the amusement of a man who can while away his time telling stories of justice and the other matters you mentioned.¹⁸⁶

So. That's just how it is, Phaedrus. But it is much nobler to be serious about these matters, and use the art of dialectic. The dialectician chooses a proper soul and plants and sows within it discourse accompanied by knowledge—discourse capable of helping itself as well as the man who planted it, [277A] which is not barren but produces a seed from which more discourse grows in the character of others. Such discourse makes the seed forever immortal and renders the man who has it as happy as any human being can be.

PH. What you describe is really much nobler still.

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

PH. What issue is that?

So. The issue which brought us to this point in the first place: We wanted to examine the attack made on Lysias on account of his writing speeches, and to ask which speeches are written [277B] artfully and which not. Now, I think that we have answered that question clearly enough.