

PLATO PHAEDRUS (NOTES)

The hostility of philosophy to writing is perhaps best articulated in Plato's Phaedrus. Here, Socrates condemns the figurative excesses of writing even as he is blind to those which inhere in his own speech. Writing is described, firstly, as an *aide-mémoire* that substitutes itself for 'innate' or directly apprehended knowledge. Writing is external to and parasitic upon inner truth, the directly perceivable knowledge that constitutes the wisdom which is (note the unfortunate choice of metaphor) "*inscribed* with genuine knowledge in the soul of the learner" (my emphasis; 70). Writing, secondly, most often confuses rather than clarifies like direct oral communication can. Socrates' (Plato's?) vehement opposition to the way in which writing passes out of the control of the writer is especially clear in the following extract:

written words: you might think as though they spoke as if they made sense, but if you ask them anything about what they are saying, if you wish an explanation, they go on telling you the same thing, over and over forever. Once a thing is put in writing, it rolls about all over the place, falling into the hands of those who have no concern with it just as easily as under the notice of those who comprehend; it has no notion of whom to address or whom to avoid. (69)

Writing is the "bastard" (70) brother to that other true "discourse that can defend itself and knows to whom it should speak and before whom to remain silent" (70). There is a very strong fear scarcely concealed here lest knowledge should fall into the 'wrong' hands, hence the necessity of rigorously policing the borders of meaning. Hence, too, the somewhat condescending paternalistic tone which Socrates adopts towards writing: when writing is "ill-treated or abused as illegitimate, it always needs its father to help it, being quite unable to help or protect itself" (70).

Knowledge itself, it seems, cannot be rationalised except in evidently figural terms. True knowledge, for Socrates, is something inscribed upon the soul. Speech is personified and said to be possessed of the power of speech and of discernment. It is, to boot, something alive, the "living, animate discourse of a man who really knows"(70). Speech is interior, the immediate, living fabric of one's thought, of which written discourse is "only a kind of ghost"(70). Writing is thought's shadow, its reflection, its re-presentation; it is knowledge twice removed. Speech is inner, writing outer; speech speaks itself, writing is mute; speech is honest, writing deceitful; speech loyal, writing promiscuous; the one legitimate, the other a bastard and so on. Even the cultivation and dissemination of knowledge is elaborated via an agricultural metaphor that paints the process as a wholly masculine procreative exercise from which the feminine is completely elided: One proceeds with true knowledge to plant and sow in it words which are able to help themselves and help him who planted them; words which will not be unproductive, for they can transmit their seed to other natures and cause the growth of fresh words in them, providing an eternal existence for their seed. (71)

The Phaedrus is shot through and through with such figures of speech that blur the very margins between philosophy and literature which Plato sought so hard to reinforce.