

Writing and Pedagogy in Plato's *Phaedrus*

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Patrick McCarthy-Nielsen's "Education as *Pharmakon*: Plato and Derrida's Dialectic on Learning" is a rich work, one containing many provocative and insightful ideas. McCarthy-Nielsen encourages us to learn from Plato and Jacques Derrida that teachers should embrace that much of what we do in classrooms has ambivalent effects and that, as teachers, we are often ambivalent about what we do. He thus encourages us as teachers to become increasingly reflective about our pedagogy, thereby becoming better teachers. I do not dispute his logic. I agree that greater reflectivity can improve pedagogical practice. What I shall explore in my response is how we should interpret Plato's discussion of writing. I argue that if we recognize Plato's emphasis on pedagogy in Socrates' discussion of writing, we might arrive at a different conclusion from McCarthy-Nielsen's.

Throughout the Platonic corpus, Plato has Socrates suggest that learning best¹ proceeds through a dynamic, face-to-face engagement with others — Socrates engages and provokes as midwife, gadfly, and torpedo fish. In the Seventh Letter (which, even if not authored by Plato, is certainly in the Platonic spirit), Plato writes "after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like a light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, [philosophical knowledge] is born in the soul and straightaway nourishes itself."² In *Phaedrus*, the message is similar, as Socrates says, "the dialectician chooses a proper soul and plants and sows within it discourse accompanied by knowledge — discourse capable of helping itself as well as the man who planted it, which is not barren but produces a seed from which more discourse grows in the character of others" (276e–277a).³

So, if learning ought to proceed through conversation, why did Plato write? One answer is that, as a result of his life devoted to philosophy, he had many ideas that he wanted to articulate and share with others. He saw, however, what happened when a treatise is critiqued by others — "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" (275e). Thus, Plato writes ambivalently — hinting at what he knows, perhaps merely as a "playful amusement" (278b), "storing up reminders for himself 'when he reaches forgetful old age'" (276d). This is the way that many readers, including McCarthy-Nielsen, interpret the discussion of writing in *Phaedrus*.

The problem with this interpretation of Plato on writing is that it overlooks the fact that pedagogy is central to everything the Platonic Socrates says about both rhetoric and writing in *Phaedrus*; indeed, pedagogy is the key to recognizing the coherence of the dialogue. Writing and rhetoric both involve *psychagogy* — the leading, *agōgos*, of the soul, *psuchē*. Indeed, rhetoric is described precisely as *psychagogia tis dia logon* — "leading the soul by speeches, explanations, or accounts" (261a7–8).⁴ Thus the question of how one might best lead a soul is central to the discussion of the merit of rhetoric. Likewise, it is central to the discussion of writing.

In the myth about the invention of writing, Theuth says that writing is a *pharmakon* for wisdom. Thamus counters that “you provide your students [*mathētēs*] the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. Your invention will enable them to hear many things without being properly taught [*didachēs*], and they will imagine that they have to come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing” (275a6–b1). Even in the myth that marks the turn in *Phaedrus* to an explicit discussion of the value of writing, the ultimate issue is not how well it relates the author’s intent but rather its ability to teach. Socrates continuously asks how writing teaches and what can be learned from it. “Education” words like *hoi mathētoi* (students, learners), *mathein* (to learn), *didaskein* (to teach) recur throughout the discussion about writing.

Socrates argues that writing only teaches or reminds those who already have knowledge (275c–d). Why does writing fail to teach? It cannot respond to a pupil’s questions nor can it question its pupils. And if you are not engaged in dialogue, Socrates argues, the knowledge you acquire is superficial. Socrates says of written words that “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 [*mathein*] more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever” (275d). Even worse, by Socrates’ reasoning, a written discourse presents itself equally to all, “reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn’t know to which it should speak and to whom it should not” (275e). Across Plato’s Socratic dialogues, Socrates’ conversations are based on subjects particularly germane to his interlocutors: he speaks of courage with generals, friendship with young men, rhetoric with a teacher of oratory, and so on. A good teacher, Plato implies, tailors each investigation to those he attempts to enlighten.

But are written works therefore doomed as a means of pedagogy? Socrates says, “the man who knows what is just, noble, and good ... 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 [*didaksai*] the truth adequately” (276c). Yet, if a written treatise fails to teach well, might a better written document be possible? Given Socrates’ criteria, it would have to be a text that manages to provoke its readers, question them, and draw them into a conversation of sorts. It must not present itself as an authority but should rather contain problematic arguments and/or actions that invite readers to question its claims. And this exactly the sort of thing that a Platonic dialogue is — a written text with profound educational merit.

Certainly, for Plato, a written dialogue will still fall short of face-to-face conversation, in which the *logos* “is written down, with knowledge, in the soul of the listener,” a “living, breathing discourse of the man who knows” (276a). But just as such a conversation with the “man who knows” will teach better than the performed speech of an orator, the Platonic dialogue will teach better than the written speech alone.

Plato might have Socrates go too far in rejecting the pedagogical potential of written texts. But, on the other hand, Plato’s “amusements,” his dialogues, are very much a demonstration of what a written text might look like if it were going to

approach its pedagogical potential. My remarks on education as central to Plato's comments on writing do not necessarily challenge McCarthy-Nielsen's account. He might accept that education is indeed central to Socrates' analysis of writing. But, whereas he concludes that "Plato is much more like Lysias than he is like Socrates, more like Theuth than Thamus," I think that my reading leaves Plato closer to Socrates and Thamus. Plato, like, Socrates and Thamus, is principally concerned with genuine learning. Insofar as writing might contribute to genuine education, Plato recognizes its value.

1. Plato clearly recognizes that we learn by other means as well. Thus, the characters in his dialogues discuss how rulers must pay particular attention to children's stories and music, the kind of dancing in which the young partake, and so forth (subjects with which Plato deals extensively in *Laws* and *Republic*).

2. Plato, *Seventh Letter*, in *Complete works*, eds. J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, trans. Glenn R. Morrow (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 341c.

3. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995). Subsequent translations from *Phaedrus* are from this edition, except for the translation of 261a7–8, which is my own.

4. On psychagogy in *Phaedrus*, see Harvey Yunis, *Plato: Phaedrus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 10–14. The line references to the Greek text refer to Yunis's edition of the text.