

ORALITY, LITERACY,  
AND COLONIALISM  
IN ANTIQUITY

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## WHY DID PLATO WRITE?

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For people today, philosophy is often represented by great works, voluminous books, such as those of Kant, Hegel, Descartes, and so on. It could even appear difficult to conceive of doing philosophy without writing, just as for mathematics or something like that.

However, everybody knows that the father of the Greek rational and critical thought, Socrates, never wrote a line of philosophy. Jesus and Socrates have often been compared. One of their common points is that we know only indirectly what they said. Others wrote their sayings down for them. Socrates preferred a "living" philosophy made of conversations with people he met in the street. He had no school and no books. For him, philosophy cannot be enclosed in formulas; it is a research made orally and in common.

Consequently, we must be aware that philosophy is not so evidently related to literacy. This is also the case for Socrates' best pupil, Plato.

### 1. THE CONDEMNATION OF WRITINGS

Plato has pointed out the dangers of written works. In his *Seventh Letter* he states that he never himself wrote in "the sublime questions of philosophy" (341B-D) and that no serious man will seriously write on serious problems, because he would so lay his thought open to the misunderstanding of the crowd (344B).

In the *Phaedrus* he tells a myth about the origin of writing. The Egyptian god Theuth is supposed to have discovered the art of fixing knowledge with signs, but the wise king Thamouos criticizes his invention (274C-275B). Men, he contends, will lose their faculty of memory, and, moreover, they will be full of various knowledges, without having received a true teaching. They will know some things, but they will not be learned.

Further, in the same dialogue Socrates himself remarks that a written work is a child without father—it cannot protect itself (275E)—and that

writing is deceptive like painting; the latter depicts beings that are falsely living and cannot answer questions; likewise, the former draws up books that can signify but one thing and are unable to provide explanations by themselves, shades of meaning, and so on (cf. *Protagoras* 329A). Moreover, the book escapes its creator's control; it soon becomes everybody's toy and is exposed to the danger of losing its true meaning.

Thus, for Plato, the oral discourse is better than the written one. It can be more accurately adapted to the person one talks to. One must not divulge anything to anyone (cf. *Tim.* 28C; *Theaet.* 180D). Plato had perhaps a personal reason to be suspicious about mass communication. Aristoxenes tells us that Plato once tried to hold a public conference on "the Good." People came to hear of wealth, health, happiness, and so on, but Plato spoke only of mathematical principles. His conference was a failure. From then on he decided to speak of those things with only a few select listeners.

Indeed, scholars have noticed that in Aristotle and some other works there are some indications of a teaching by Plato that does not look like the thoughts expressed in the written dialogues that we can read (see Robin). One believes, therefore, that in his school, the Academy, Plato taught the so-called *agrapha dogmata*, the nonwritten doctrines, to chosen pupils (this is the claim of the "school of Tübingen" [see Richard]). If this is true, they remained indeed only oral, and scholars today must try to reconstruct them from scattered allusions. The written dialogues are then presumed to be only a propedeutic, not Plato's real teaching.

It is not unlikely that Plato exposed his most important thoughts only *viva voce*. One must not forget, anyway, that in the ancient world written works were intended to be read aloud, for others or for oneself.<sup>1</sup> Saint Augustine was very surprised to see Saint Ambrosius reading "with the eyes only." The usual way of reading was to vocalize the text. This close relationship of literacy with orality can explain some peculiar characteristics of ancient works.

However, despite his condemnation of written works, Plato did write. Unless his dialogues are nothing more than advertising for his school, appetizers for the hidden doctrines, why did he do so? Is there another explanation, or is it a mere contradiction?

<sup>1</sup> See Hadot: 413: "la plupart des oeuvres, philosophiques, de l'Antiquité, étaient en étroite relation avec l'oralité, puisqu'elles étaient destinées à être lues à haute voix, souvent lors de séances de lecture publique. Cette étroite liaison de l'écrit et de la parole peut expliquer certaines particularités déroutantes des écrits philosophiques." Cf. Svenbrô 1988; 1991.

## 2. THE JUSTIFICATION OF WRITINGS

### 2.2. *The Principle of Imitation*

Ancient Platonic commentators, of course, thought about this fact of the existence of Plato's written dialogues. An anonymous handbook, at the end of antiquity, the *Prolegomena to Plato's Philosophy*, answered as follows (3.13; Westerink, Gerrit, Trouillard, and Segonds: 20). Plato's main ethical rule of life was to imitate the divinity. Now, God has produced an invisible, spiritual cosmos but also a visible, material one. Thus, Plato wanted to produce visible works as well as invisible ones, which are the high thoughts inscribed in his pupils' souls. The pupils are nicely called by the handbook "living writings" (4.15; *ibid.*: 222), but Plato also had to draw up material works.

The same principle of imitation explains why Plato chose the literary form of the dialogue. A dialogue, with its various interlocutors, is a universe; conversely, the universe, according to Plato, produced dialogues. The dialogue is the most "living" literary form and is therefore an image of the life of the universe.

### 2.2. *Palamedes and Orpheus*

These explanations seem quite eloquent; nevertheless, in order to bring some other justifications for Plato's written works, we can also reexamine the texts where he speaks of the very fact of writing. It will perhaps appear that Plato did not condemn all writings but only a certain sort of writing.

I will first rehearse the conclusions of the French scholar Marcel Détiénne, a specialist of ancient Greece, in his book on the origins of writing, which are, he says, twofold (Détiénne: 101-15, 119). Two relevant mythical characters represent those origins: Palamedes and Orpheus. They are, on the one hand, opposed, and, on the other hand, complementary.

Palamedes is the inventive hero of the *Iliad* who discovers arithmetic and other arts. Writing is here one discovery among others, but it soon becomes noteworthy because of the multiplicity of its appropriations. Moreover, writing is always a matter of *logos*, according to the various meanings of the term: reason, calculation, discourse, and so on. So, the "palamedean" writing is a pedagogical utility; by this means, all other inventions are transmittable (see Cambiano: 251-73).

As T. Morvan points out, in Plato's *Phaedrus* Theuth has partly the same features as Palamedes. Surely Plato knew that his contemporary readers would identify the Egyptian god and the well-known Greek hero (Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides each wrote a tragedy on Palamedes,

and Gorgias an apology of the same character). Plato himself makes previous mention of Palamedes as a nickname for Zeno of Elea (261D), master in a higher art of speeches than the judiciary and political speeches. Now, the discovery of letters (*grammata*) by Theuth comes in the last place; previous inventions have been presented to king Thamous and appeared to be very valuable. Thamous settles an opposition between "dead" memory, set in *grammata*, and living memory (the *amamnesis*, main spring of thought). However, this opposition is provoked by Theuth's erroneous presentation of writing apart from the other discoveries. Writing is in fact justified because the use of *grammata* was necessary for arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy (see Détienne and Camassa: 22-26; Cambiano)—and those arts belong to the cursus of studies proposed in the seventh book of Plato's *Republic*. One must also mention, with J. M. Bertrand, the political importance of literacy; nonwritten laws are not laws but only customs, which can afterwards produce juridical rules; then literacy is "the properly political modality of language" (Bertrand: 65). It is a technique that correlates the sacral reality of origins with profane history (52).

Now, as regards Phaidros (the person in the dialogue who bears this name), he is presented by Plato as an enthusiastic but ingenuous lover of nice speeches. When he meets Socrates, he is carrying a copy of a discourse of Lysias that he has just heard. As T. Morvan again points out, one will find in him the same nearly automatic process of transcription of words that characterizes Orpheus according to Marcel Détienne. With Orpheus, the voice changes itself into writing. With Phaidros, any oral opinion gains the authority of a written thing, and he receives sayings of others in his soul without critical examination, passively as a writing tablet.

Further in the dialogue, it is Theuth who has now some features of Orpheus. Justifying his *grammata*, he contends that they are a remedy (*pharmakon*) for memory and learning (*sophia*). As Marcel Détienne points out, with Orpheus the book is represented as the deposit of a worthy message, secured from forgetting. The "orphie" writing is related to the problem of memory and as such is criticized by Thamous.

So the technical or "palamedean" writing is not condemned by Plato, only the orphie one. Or rather, it is the dissociation between the two writings that is condemned, inasmuch as the orphie communication of knowledge by written works does not take into account the requirements of the true art of writing.

### 3. THE RIGHT ART OF WRITING

Let us see now what is the right art of writing according to Plato. In the *Gorgias* he says that a good discourse intends to pour justice into the

soul, just as a remedy intends to bring health to the body. The speech must have a wholesome effect on the listener's soul.

As the *Phaedrus* says, the good, philosophical rhetoric is a "psychagogy" (261A, 271 C; cf. Nancy). It must not only speak the truth but must be efficient; that is, it must be presented in such a way that the addressee can hear this truth. Then, the author has to know the addressees, that is, the different sorts of souls, and he must write accordingly to them (that is why the good rhetoric must be a philosophical one; it requires knowledge of the souls [271D]). Likewise, a good physician knows how to adapt his directions to the patient, and if he must leave on a journey he will give him a written prescription (*Pol.* 295C).

But how is this general principle consistent with the natural wandering of a text? Even if it is appropriate for a patient, it could be used by another, for whom it would be harmful. How can one avoid this danger? As Jacques Derrida (1972) reminds us, the Greek term *pharmakon* signifies both a remedy and a poison.

Plato's answer can be read in the *Seventh Letter*. He says that arguing on a serious topic is not a good thing, except for an elite who will find truth for themselves from "a few informations" (341E). Thus the written work must be conceived of as a test for the reader. The same text has to be silent for one reader and meaningful for another. It is selective; that is, it contains some indication that will be sufficient for its true addressees but meaningless for others. For a real understanding, one must pay close attention, and this is precisely the criterion that selects those who are able and worthy of understanding it. What is expressed in the surface is harmless. One must read between the lines, as Leo Strauss says in *The Persecution and the Art of Writing*. The quality of the reader makes the value of the text. Otherwise, writing is just a game, a hobby, like sowing "Adonis's gardens."

This could explain what Plato's real "esoteric teaching" is. It is not necessary to suppose an oral and secret doctrine. The "esoteric" is not outside the text, but inside it. The deep meaning remains hidden to those who do not know how to read with understanding, but all that is necessary is nevertheless said in the text (see Brague; Mattéi ).

#### 4. SOME RULES FOR WRITING

Plato left some indications about the rules of correct writing (see Solère-Queval 1988 and 1995). For instance, in the third book of his *Republic*, having exposed which poems must be read in the course of a proper education, after the *lekteon* (the contents) Socrates focuses on the *ô*s *lekteon*, how the contents must be expressed (392C). We can gather four rules.

#### 4.1. *The Rule of Organicity*

Plato says in the *Phaedrus* that a text must be organized like a living being; it must have a body, a head, and feet (or a tail) that are connected (264C). Thus one must suppose that in Plato's dialogues there is a correspondence between the body of the conversation and its extremities, the prologue and the epilogue. These two pieces are not meaningless as regards the whole of the dialogue. They are not mere theatrical necessities.

#### 4.2. *The Rule of Beginning*

The beginning has, according to Plato, a special importance. He says in the *Laws* that the beginning is more than the half of the action or that it is a god living among humans (6.753E, 775E). We can suppose, then, that there is something more here than the common-sense saying that one should begin at the beginning. The beginning is sacred because it is decisive for the growing of a living being. We must thus presume that the beginning of each Platonic dialogue offers precious indications of the meaning of the whole.

#### 4.3. *The Rule of Measure*

There is no mechanical proportion between the parts of a text (*Pol.* 283B-287B). It is a matter of circumstance.

#### 4.4. *The Rule of Imitation*

The form of the discourse must imitate the nature of its subject. "The demonstrations are akin, cognate [*sungeneis*], to what they prove," Plato says in the *Timaeus* (29B). For instance, strong, firm reasonings are required for firm and real beings (intelligible beings), while probable reasonings are appropriate to mutable beings (the sensible world).

As we have seen earlier, it is with this principle of imitation that the anonymous handbook, *Prolegomena to Plato's Philosophy*, justified the existence of Plato's dialogues. Strangely, however, it is with the same rule that Proclus legitimates a quite different form of writing.

### 5. ANOTHER MODEL: NEOPLATONIC ESOTERICISM

Proclus, the most important and influential pagan and Neoplatonic philosopher in late antiquity (fifth century), based the method he used in his *Elements of Theology* on the principle of imitation, that is, by an analogy with Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*, the mathematical way of reasoning

by deductions from axioms. This is rather surprising because this method seems to be contrary to the one that Plato recommended, a discussion with questions and answers (see Cambiano: 268-72).

Let us see first how Proclus justifies this new model. According to him, the main characteristic of mathematics is the perfect continuity between axioms and theorems. In this respect, the mathematical demonstration looks like the emanation of the universe from the supreme metaphysical principle, for Neoplatonists: the One. Further, in an axiom (or "element"), as in the One, all that will later be manifested is wrapped. Then, the axiomatic and deductive method is an exact image of the generation of things in reality itself. This is why, states Proclus, the mathematical order can be used in metaphysical works (Proclus, *Platonic Theology* 1.10 [1:46]).

However, as we noticed, this seems to be in opposition to Plato's preference for dialogue. Moreover, the axiomatic and deductive order is linear, so that it seems to be a perfect target for all the critiques that the *Phaedrus* levels against writing (275D), for it is unable to answer questions but will always repeat the same thing. It cannot adapt itself to the mind of the reader, so it is not relevant to a psychology and the like.

However, there could be an explanation for Proclus's choice. Perhaps he found in this mathematical method another means for preserving the platonic "esoterism," that is, not a secret teaching but a selective way of writing that can be understood only by those who are worthy of it. The mathematical order is selective because it was hermetic to the majority of readers in late antiquity, when the basis of the learned culture was exclusively rhetoric (cf. Mueller: 306-8). Saint Augustine is a good example of someone who had not the slightest mathematical formation.

This supposition receives a confirmation from Boethius, the last Roman Neoplatonist (in the early sixth century), who was also a Christian. When announcing the method of his treatise **OH** *the Hebdomads*, he is quite aware of the opposition between rhetoric and mathematics. He writes to the friend who submitted a metaphysical problem to him (How can creatures be good without being identical to the supreme Good, God himself?): "I have therefore followed the example of the mathematical and cognate sciences, and laid down bounds and rules according to which I shall develop all that follows" (Boethius, *On the Hebdomads*: 40 lines 14-17).

He will then write *more geometrico*. He says that his rules or principles are "common conceptions of the mind," what we call axioms (40 lines 18-27). He intends therefore to solve a difficult metaphysical problem with the help of a mathematical method of deduction. Boethius calls his axioms "hebdomads" (we are going to see why), and he adds this warning:

But I think over my hebdomads with myself, and I keep my speculations in my own memory rather than I share them with any of those pert and frivolous persons who will not tolerate an argument unless it is made amusing. Wherefore do not you take objection to obscurities consequent on brevity, which are the sure treasurehouse of secret doctrine and have the advantage that they speak only with those who are worthy. (38 lines 8-14)

I will make the following remarks: (1) Boethius says he prefers to keep his speculations in his memory and is very suspicious regarding their communication to all kinds of people. This is evidently an allusion to Plato's attitude concerning writing (*Phaedr.* 275A-B, D-E, *Ep.* 7.341D-342A, 344C).

(2) This method is a means for being understood only by those who are worthy; its obscurity is quite intentional.

(3) The characteristic of this method, and the reason for its obscurity, is its brevity. Boethius certainly knows very well that, on the contrary, rhetoric, as Cicero said, is fond of "abundance."<sup>2</sup>

(4) The unusual term of "hebdomads" is an allusion that is so opaque that it remained unexplained until our days. I have elsewhere proved, I think, that this is an allusion to the proclusian symbolic meaning of the number seven. According to Proclus, seven is the number of Athena and so the number of philosophy. A hebdomad, he says, is an emanation of the "intellective light" in us. When Boethius speaks of hebdomads, he is referring himself to a certain doctrine, and he will be understood only by some learned friends, in Rome, which is already remote from the Hellenic culture. In his theological treatise *On the Holy Trinity*, Boethius also appears to be mistrustful concerning the popularization of difficult ideas, and he writes then to his addressee and own father-in-law:

You can readily understand what I feel in this matter whenever I try to write down what I think, both from the actual difficulty of the topic and from the fact that I discuss it only with the few—I may say with no one but yourself\_\_\_So I purposely use brevity and wrap up the ideas I draw from the deep questionings of philosophy in new and unaccustomed words such as speak only to you and to myself\_\_\_The rest of the world I simply disregard since those who cannot understand seem unworthy even to read them. (Boethius, *On the Holy Trinity*: 2 lines 5-22)

Boethius clearly wants to write only for the happy few, and he belongs to the Platonic tradition, which compensates for the dangers of

<sup>2</sup> *Or. Brut.* 14.46: "non ad philosophorum morem tenuiter disserendi, sed ad copiam rhetorum." Cf. 32.113 and *De or.* 1.13.57.

writing with oral connivance and small indications in the texts. As Boethius himself says about his hebdomads:

These preliminaries are *enough* then for our purpose. The intelligent interpreter of the discussion will supply the arguments appropriate to each point. (*On the Hebdomads*: 42 lines 53-55)