Bringing a Text to Life: The Role of the Reader in Plato’s *Phaedrus*

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Abstract: In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates criticizes writing as non-living and deceptive. He later also claims that a good writer will write only for the sake of self-amusement. These apparent indictments of the written word seem to be at odds with the fact that the *Phaedrus* is itself a written text, to which Plato has presumably devoted some care and effort. I will show, however, that Plato uses these claims ultimately to suggest that the reader is responsible for transforming a written text into a dialogue with the text’s author. I argue that Plato gets this message across via deliberate but not unsubtle flaws in Socrates’ arguments and by highlighting the frivolity of written words, thereby directing the careful reader to recognize the significance of what Socrates leaves unsaid. For Plato, what is left unsaid is a more reliable vehicle for conveying some understanding of reality and truth than mere written words.

Near the end of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates criticizes writing for three main flaws. First, writing makes its users rely on something external. Second, it can at best convey only an appearance or image of reality. Third, it cannot answer questions, defend itself, or choose its audience. In his discussion of these three main flaws, Socrates implies that the reader is merely a passive recipient of the negative effects of writing. He does not explicitly offer any suggestions for what the reader could do to guard against or negate the effects of reading a written work. Socrates’ failure to say much, if anything, about the role and responsibilities of the reader may lead to the appearance that Plato is less concerned with the reader than he is with the writer of a text.

However, I will argue in this essay that, through this conspicuous lack of discussion of the role of the reader, Plato communicates that it is the reader who is responsible for breathing life into an apparently non-living text. Specifically, the reader has the ability and responsibility to convert an apparently one-way speech, e.g. a printed essay, into a two-way dialogue. Moreover, the reader’s response to a text is crucial in determining whether the text becomes a dialogue. I
will show that even though Socrates is explicitly criticizing the deficiencies and negative effects of writing, the careful reader is meant to perceive that Plato is using conspicuous deficiencies in Socrates’ criticisms to point us to his actual concern: the reader’s response to the text. I propose that Plato does not explicitly state his intended message because he wants us to realize that we need to spend time and effort reading the Phaedrus in order to be rewarded with understanding – this is Plato’s way of amusing himself and at the same time enabling his written text to effectively weed out the parts of its audience that Plato would consider unsuitable.

Before I go on to my argument, I will first explain the three main flaws that Socrates attributes to writing, and then demonstrate that Plato is actually concerned with the reader’s response to the text and not just with the text’s effect on the reader. The first flaw Socrates points out is that a reader will start to rely on something outside himself in order to remember information and will thus become forgetful. To demonstrate this point, Socrates uses the story of the god Theuth presenting writing to Thamus, the king of Egypt, who tells Theuth that writing “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... instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own” (Plato, Phaedrus 275b). I assume that by “those who learn it”, Socrates is referring not only to the writer but to the reader as well, who has to learn to interpret the symbols used by the writer. In other words, users of writing – both writers and readers – will no longer devote time and effort to learning something properly but instead rely completely on written texts to store their knowledge. Although Socrates does not explicitly elaborate, I infer that Socrates would say that the user’s “trust in writing” is detrimental because writers and readers will grow lazy and dependent on perishable objects that are “external” to the body and soul (Phdr. 275b). They will not work to cultivate knowledge that is “truly written in the soul”, i.e. ingrained upon the user’s soul and based on a true understanding of reality (Phdr. 278a).

Here, I want to clarify that when Socrates uses the phrase “remember from the inside”, he is not talking about simply being able to recite information from memory (Phdr. 275b). Instead, to be able to “remember from the inside”, the learner has to gain an understanding about truth and reality. After gaining such an understanding, the learner would presumably not need to memorize any more data. To illustrate this point: If I were trying to learn chemistry, memorizing the results of all the chemical reactions I could think of would not help me truly understand how chemistry works. I would know that A and B
together make C, but I would not know how or why. However, if I truly understood the principles underlying chemistry, it is likely that its fundamental principles would start to seem so natural to me that my knowledge of chemistry would no longer depend on how well I have memorized chemical facts. Without being told beforehand what A plus B would make, for instance, I could infer the result based on the principles that I have internalized.1

The second main flaw of writing, according to Socrates, is that it can only be an image of reality. Because writing can convey only a semblance of reality but not reality itself, Socrates says, the words of a written text cannot give readers any understanding of truth or reality. He says that readers mistakenly believe that a text can tell or has told them something true about reality, when in fact it cannot. To illustrate this point with an analogy: We look at pinned butterflies in museums and think that we have somehow become more knowledgeable about different butterflies, but a pinned butterfly does not allow us to find out significant things about the true nature of the butterfly, e.g. how this particular species flies. Socrates goes on to say (in the guise of Thamus) that because writing cannot ensure that its audience is suitable – an issue I will discuss further when I reach Socrates’ third criticism – readers can “hear many things without being properly taught, and they will imagine that they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing” (Phdr. 275b). They will then “merely appear to be wise instead of really being so” (Phdr. 275b). In other words, we can read many texts without properly understanding them, and then believe that we have understood the texts and are therefore wise with respect to them when we actually have not understood them at all. Also, since written texts are just representations of reality, even if we do understand a text, the most we can actually grasp is the image that the text presents to us, which is not reality itself.

Furthermore, Socrates then notes that, since written texts can only convey images of reality, anyone who thinks that knowledge of an art can be clearly conveyed through “written instructions” is wrong (Phdr. 275c). “Words

1 To internalize something, I suggest, is not merely to commit it to memory but to know it so well that it becomes almost second nature to view the world using that principle. For example, we learn in school that positive and negative electric charges attract each other. Before we are given this fact, it is not something natural to us; however, this knowledge is now ingrained within us (hopefully) such that if we knew A was positively charged and B was negatively charged, we would automatically think that there was an attractive electromagnetic force between them. Internalization of knowledge bears further discussion in a separate essay.
that have been written down”, he says, cannot “do more than remind those who already know what the writing is about” (Phdr. 275c). In other words, if I were reading a text that described an art with which I had no experience whatsoever, I would not be able to truly understand the art. One example that illustrates this point is instruction manuals. A written instruction manual for operating a camera, for instance, tells me how to change shutter speeds. However, although the manual teaches me this piece of knowledge that is necessary for me to take photographs, the manual is insufficient because the knowledge that it offers me cannot capture the reality of using a camera. When I am confronted with a situation that the manual fails to describe I will be at a loss for what to do. I would have to acquire more firsthand experience using the camera before I could know how to use the camera in non-textbook situations. Once I have acquired this experience, the instruction manual becomes a memory refresher. Socrates claims that since writing can never teach readers about truth or reality, a writer who “knows what is just, noble, and good” (Phdr. 276c) should write things down only “for the sake of amusing himself” and “storing up reminders for himself ‘when he reaches forgetful old age’” (Phdr. 276d). I will discuss this in more detail later.

The third main flaw Socrates points out is that a written text is inert and non-living: It cannot answer questions, discriminate between audiences, or defend itself against criticism. He compares a piece of writing to a painting, saying that “the offsprings [sic] 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” (Phdr. 275d). Here, Socrates is saying that although I can ask a living person a question and receive her answer through some medium – voice, text, gesture, etc. – the same does not hold for a piece of writing. I cannot ask a written text a question and get an answer in return. He also notes that “if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it [the writing] continues to signify just that very same thing forever” (Phdr. 275d). In other words, Socrates suggests that because a written text is fixed and static, the reader cannot access any more information than what is already conveyed by the unchanging words of the text. The text can only repeat itself over and over again, and cannot offer anything additional.

Moreover, Socrates notes that a written text cannot choose its audience, whereas a living speaker can. A written text “rolls 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”, according to Socrates (Phdr. 275d). In other words, once an idea has
been written down on a moveable object, it can be transported to various places and be read by many different people who may or may not understand it. While a living speaker can restrict conversations to people he thinks will understand him and employ different arguments to suit specific listeners, the writer of a text is unable to choose his audience. The most the writer can do is try to limit his text’s circulation to a select few, but such an endeavor may not succeed. Socrates implicitly suggests that a text should not be read by people who do not understand it, because such people would possibly misread it and end up “unfairly” attacking the text (Phdr. 275d). In such a situation, Socrates notes, the text cannot defend itself against its detractors’ allegations since it has no audible voice. The text will “always needs its father’s support” – e.g. further explanation or refutation by its author – which may not be immediately available if the text has circulated beyond the physical reach of its creator (Phdr. 275d). Citing the above reasons, Socrates says that writing is not “legitimate”: “Legitimate” speech would be “written . . . in the soul of the listener”, be able to “defend itself”, and “[know] for whom it should speak and for whom it should remain silent” (Phdr. 276a).

At this juncture, I want to clarify the distinction between living speech and non-living speech. I suggest that what makes speech living, for Socrates, is the direction of flow of information: Living speech is effectively a dialogue, or a two-way exchange of content, whereas non-living speech involves only a one-way transmission of material. Although it may appear at first glance that Socrates would categorically consider a spoken speech to be living and a written text to be non-living, based on his second criticism of writing, I propose that this is not the case. For instance, it is likely that Socrates would say that a lecture would be effectively non-living if the audience is forbidden from asking questions and responding to the lecturer. It is clear, then, that Plato thinks that the difference between living speech and non-living speech does not lie in the physical location of the speech, be it inscribed on parchment or within the soul of the audience. Thus, the possibility for written speech to be living is not ruled out. I will go on to claim that Plato actually wants us to realize that the livingness of speech depends on the reader’s response to it. Specifically, although written speech may seem to be merely a non-living, one-way transmission, the reader has the power and the responsibility to convert it into a two-way dialogue, and in this way breathe life into the speech.

The first indication that Plato wants us to realize that the reader’s response is crucial is that even though Socrates explicitly talks about the negative effects that writing has on the reader, we can see that all his criticisms are also
concerned with how the reader responds to the text. To repeat, Socrates’ three main criticisms are: first, writing causes forgetfulness in its users; second, writing can only convey an image of reality and not reality itself; and third, writing is inert and effectively non-living. I suggest that Plato uses deficiencies in Socrates’ three criticisms to show us that the way the reader responds to the text is important.

Socrates’ first criticism fails to consider that writers and readers will grow dependent on a text only if they choose to let themselves do so. I acknowledge that there is a temptation to slothfully rely on texts to store knowledge. I do not have to learn chemistry’s fundamental principles if I can get all the information I want from a textbook. However, this temptation can be resisted if the writer or reader responds to the text in a certain way. For instance, the author of a textbook presumably retains all her knowledge of fundamental principles even after she has written the textbook; a reader of that book could, with enough effort and experience, come to an understanding of those principles such that the book is no longer needed. From Socrates’ conspicuous failure to mention the active role that the reader can play, I propose that Plato wants us to see that the negative effect of forgetfulness actually arises from the way the reader chooses to respond to the text, and thereby realize that the reader is not merely a passive recipient of the effects that writing produces.

Turning to Socrates’ second criticism, I do not disagree that writing can convey only an image of reality to readers. In making this criticism, Socrates is concerned with the negative effect that a written text has on its readers: They will be misled into thinking that they understand something about reality when they in fact do not. However, we see from other Platonic dialogues that even a dialogue with Socrates can fail to produce understanding about reality. For instance, at the end of the *Ion*, Ion is just as clueless as he was at the beginning.² I suggest that

² Throughout his dialogue with Socrates, Ion appears to come to no real understanding of or conclusion about whether his skill as a rhapsode is due to his technical mastery or some divine inspiration. Ion holds in the beginning that he does have some technical knowledge, but easily wavers and continually allows Socrates to poke fun at him right up to the end. He allows Socrates to say that “the god deliberately sang the most beautiful lyric poem through the most worthless poet” (Plato, *Ion* 534e); and that “you [Ion] make many lovely speeches about the poet without knowing anything” (*Ion* 542a). At the end of the dialogue, it seems that Ion happily agrees that he is ignorant only because Socrates frames it as a choice between being ignorant and “divine”, versus being technically knowledgeable and non-divine. Ion picks the easier former position, and the reader is
Plato intends us to realize from this that the way the reader chooses to respond to a speech is much more important than its physical format, i.e. whether it is spoken or written. Not everyone who converses with Socrates and participates in a two-way dialogue will gain understanding. At the same time, not all readers will read a text and mistakenly believe that they have then understood something true about reality. If I approach a text with the knowledge that words can only capture one slice of reality and not the whole of it, I can avoid falling into the trap of believing that after reading the text I will understand something true about reality and become wise.

The above implies that as a reader, I have the power to choose whether a text affects me in a living or non-living way, which brings me to Socrates’ third criticism: that written texts are inert and non-living. Socrates claims that a written text is non-living in the sense that it cannot answer questions, defend itself against criticism, or discriminate between audiences – it is merely a one-way transmission of information and cannot provide a two-way dialogue between author and audience. Socrates says that if anyone asks written words anything, the words "remain most solemnly silent" (275d). However, I suggest Plato intends the reader to see that it is not impossible to ask questions of a text and reasonably predict its answers, as long as these questions are relevant to the text. In this way, the text will not "signify just that very same thing forever", since I can learn more about the subject of the text by careful inference (Phdr. 275d).

For example, if I were to ask Socrates what he would say about academic lectures, I could predict that he would consider lectures to be non-living speech if the lecturer ignores any audience reaction and does not allow the audience to speak. Caveats apply: If the text were nonsensical or badly written, I would not be able to reasonably infer the answer to any question I posed (Mosher).

Additionally, it is not true that a text cannot defend itself against detractors without the help of living supporters such as its author. I suggest that a text can defend itself in the sense that we, as readers, can rationally infer the ways in which the author of an essay should respond to objections brought against it, slightly disappointed that Ion does not make any sort of effective stand or try to directly engage Socrates (Ion 542b).

3 I acknowledge that a text technically cannot audibly defend itself since it is not a biologically living thing with agency, but I will continue to use the verb ‘defend’ for the sake of convenience.

4 Footnoted because a discussion of the following is beyond the scope of the surrounding paragraph: What the author should say given what we can rationally infer from the text might differ from what the author would actually say (Lear). For instance, Aristotle says
given the ideas that he has already expressed in the text. Again, the same caveats apply. If a text were so badly written that even an astute and careful reader could not make out the structure or content of any sort of argument, it is safe to say that it would be quite difficult to find defenses within the text. Finally, even though a written text can be read by anyone with physical access to it, I argue that the author of a text does not completely cede control over the selection of his audience. The author does have ways of choosing his readers, and I suggest that Plato makes use of some of these in the *Phaedrus*.

I suggest that Plato uses two methods to control his audience, such that the *Phaedrus* as a text will “[know] for whom it should speak and for whom it should remain silent” (*Phdr.* 276a). The first method is to have Socrates fail to explicitly discuss the reader’s role in responding to a text. I have already discussed this above. Socrates’ neglect is not immediately obvious, which means that the reader has to pay close attention to what Socrates says and, more significantly, does not say. This weeds out readers who are not paying close attention.

The second method Plato uses is to claim that a writer who knows what is “just, noble, and good” (*Phdr.* 276c) will only write “for the sake of amusing himself, storing up reminders for himself” (*Phdr.* 276d), and thereby to imply that the *Phaedrus* was written frivolously, i.e. not seriously. Superficially, this seems to the reader as though Plato is effectively inserting an escape clause in the text that will allow him to get away with saying anything he wants. This is because we usually assume that if someone tells us that he is not being serious about X, he is saying that he may lie, joke, embellish, and so on with respect to X, and does not want us to believe him completely. The reader also assumes that Plato would probably consider himself to be a writer who is aiming at what is “just, noble, and good” (*Phdr.* 276c). Thus, hearing Plato say that such a writer

that “the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098a6). We can rationally infer from this that Aristotle should say that all human beings are equal. However, Aristotle actually says that some people are naturally slaves (Aristotle, *Politics* 1254a22). I agree that when we, as readers, come up with ways in which authors are likely to respond to objections, we are rationally inferring what the author should say. This suggests that the only dialogue that matters when we question a text and engage with it is what is rationally consistent with the author’s writing. In making rational inferences from a text, the reader is taking responsibility for determining what is rationally consistent and then providing a rationally consistent inference – which implies that the reader has the ability and responsibility to respond to a text rationally.
will not “be serious about writing” makes us think that Plato could be, for example, covering up his real opinions *(Phdr. 276c)*. The reader is then led to doubt whether anything Plato says in the *Phaedrus* is truly what he thinks, or is trustworthy.

However, with more thought, the reader may then realize that Plato is pointing out the frivolity and inadequacy of written words because he wants us to discover that it is what he leaves unsaid that is crucial to the message of the *Phaedrus*. To reach that realization, we have to first see that a text can be non-seriously written but have a serious intent or message. I suggest that Plato has written the *Phaedrus* in such a way that only the part of the audience that understands that Plato actually has a serious message will receive the message—namely, that the reader’s response is a more significant factor in determining whether a text is living or not. In order to comprehend this in the first place, the reader must engage in a philosophical question-and-answer with the *Phaedrus*, effectively turning it into a living text. Plato does not explicitly broadcast his message through Socrates because he wants readers to go through this philosophical process. In this way, Plato does not have to use explicit written words—which are inadequate for conveying reality—to lead his readers to truth. Instead, he can point us in a direction such that we can discover it by ourselves. Through the process of responding to a text, we learn that we have the ability and responsibility to bring a text to life, and then realize that we have already been doing so.

In conclusion, although Socrates neglects to note that the reader can play an active role in turning a text into a two-way dialogue instead of being merely the passive recipient of a one-way transmission of knowledge, I suggest that this is the actual message of the *Phaedrus*. I argue that Socrates’ neglect is a deliberate move on Plato’s part, as is Plato’s apparent indirect claim that the *Phaedrus* is not to be taken seriously by readers: Plato wants to limit his audience to those who are willing to devote time and effort to figuring out the actual intent of the *Phaedrus*. After figuring out Plato’s message that readers are responsible for breathing life into a text, these readers will then realize that to obtain this message in the first place, they have actually been breathing life into the *Phaedrus* all along. In this way, Plato does not have to use explicit written words, which are necessarily inadequate and imperfect for capturing reality, to give people some understanding about reality.
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