"Not by Reason Alone:" Plato's *Phaedrus* and Fictionality

> *The walled-in voice strikes against the rafters, the words come apart, bits and pieces of sentences are separated, disarticulated parts begin to circulate through the corridors, become fixed for a round or two, translate each other, become rejoined, bounce off each other, contradict each other, make trouble, tell on each other, come back like answers, organize their exchanges, protect each other, institute an internal commerce, take themselves for a dialogue. –* Jacques Derrida*, Plato's Pharmacy,*

To read Plato is to be seduced by him, to find oneself agreeing in the heady warmth of a symposium to propositions and definitions that, come sober daylight, have lost their luster. It is only in the *Phaedrus* that we begin to see what exactly Plato intends by this seduction and what it means for his philosophical project. The *Phaedrus* is, at first, a dialogue about love, about who to love and how, about why we love and when we ought to let the one we love go. It becomes a dialogue about writing. As it turns out, it is also a dialogue about a long walk on a hot summer afternoon on the banks of the river Ilisus. That all three of these subjects are of nearly equal importance and interest to Plato has posed difficulties for both ancient and modern interpreters. This unlikely equality is at the heart of Plato's argument in this dialogue, which ushers in a new phase of Platonic thought. To understand what Martha Nussbaum calls the "mature Plato" of the *Phaedrus*, we must understand why love matters just as much as cicadas.[1] Love, literature, and shrubbery do not coexist peacefully in the *Phaedrus*, however. Their equality is the result of an uneasy equilibrium in which each component vies for primacy, only to be defeated by one of its rivals.

The *Phaedrus* seems to be at war with itself. The dialogue is characterized by a series of contradictions, the most difficult of which is its treatment of writing. Socrates seems to condemn the written word for good, and his author, Plato, is powerless to stop him. Socrates, a character,

[1] Nussbaum 1982: 83.

rises up against not just his author but the substrate of his own existence to proclaim that written philosophy is dead. But Plato manages, eventually, to take back control of the *Phaedrus*. Our task will be to understand how he wrests control back from his character and manages to resurrect written philosophy. The key to this resurrection is what I will call *rehabilitative irony*, which loosely is the label for the set of literary mechanisms by which the author excites the irrational elements of the human soul in his dialogues and directs his reader towards a kind of truth beyond what the text can directly communicate. This irony is what allows the rational and irrational elements of the *Phaedrus* to coexist in a deeply uneasy harmony. It pervades the dialogue on the level of both form and content and, finally, renders Plato's philosophical project viable.

First, I will trace how Plato systematically disassembles the kind of objectivism that modern readers expect from his dialogues. This disassembly is what leads to the oft-leveled accusation of discontinuity or incoherence in the composition of the *Phaedrus*.[2] I will offer a schema for the three kinds of positive claims put forth in the *Phaedrus* and examine how each kind of claim is undercut by a counterclaim. Second, I will examine how the particularly fictional character of this dialogue rehabilitates Plato's philosophical project. I will introduce a new kind of truth-claim, one which survives the attacks that toppled his first set of propositions. Thirdly, I will explain precisely what this new kind of truth claim has to do with Platonic irony

[2] See the extended discussion between Heath 1989 and Rowe 1986 on unity in the *Phaedrus*; see also Derrida 1981: 67, "Nothing here is of a single piece and the Phaedrus also, in its own writing, plays at saving writing—which also means causing it to be lost—as the best, the noblest game. As for the stunning hand Plato has thus dealt himself, we will be able to follow its incidence and its payoff later on. In 1905, the tradition of Diogenes Laertius was reversed, not in order to bring about a recognition of the excellent composition of the Phaedrus but in order to attribute its faults this time to the senile impotence of the author: 'The Phaedrus is badly composed. This defect is all the more surprising since it is precisely there that Socrates defines the work of art as a living being. But the inability to accomplish what has been well conceived is precisely a proof of old age.'"

and propose a new definition of irony that unifies the two major schools of thought, namely the Vlastosian and Learian approaches.

I. "A Disorderly Story Concerned with Particulars"[3]

One would be forgiven for thinking that the Phaedrus is the last of the dialogues. How could Plato bring himself to write again after hearing from his friend and mentor, Socrates, say that ὁ τέχνην οἰόμενος ἐν γράμμασι καταλιπεῖν… ἂν εὐηθείας γέμοι καὶ τῷ ὄντι τὴν Ἄμμωνος μαντείαν ἀγνοοῖ ("anyone who thinks that he has left behind something artful in writing would be utterly simple and ignorant of the prophecy of Ammon" Plato *Phdr*. 275d).[4] In one breath, Plato's oeuvre is reduced to an elaborate mnemonic. The story goes that the young Plato, having heard Socrates speak, "burned the tragedies he had written."[5] Is he now obligated to burn his life's work a second time? It would seem so. Socrates is dismantling the text from within.

The *Phaedrus* is remarkable for undermining almost every positive claim it puts forward. Each time a new strategy for making positive philosophical progress is employed, it seems to be dismantled immediately. We'll trace the three kinds of truth-claims put forward by Plato and examine how Socrates undermines each one. There are three levels at which a text can make positive claims about truth. First, the text can make claims about the kind of relationships between ideas established within the text. We will call this "intra-textual" truth. Given that it is a sunny summer day outside of Athens, did Socrates lie his head down on the left or right bank of the river Ilisus? Does the claim obey the laws of physics (that is, the conventions, expectations, and agreements between author and reader about how the reality of the text should operate) that the text has established for itself? These can be evaluated via arguments about self-consistency.

---

[3] Nussbaum 1982; 93.
[4] All translations mine unless noted otherwise.
[5] Annas 1982; 17.

The second kind of truth claim is one about genericity. Does the work obey the conventions of the genre to which it belongs? Given that Plato writes dialogues, does a discussion of the myth of the cicadas belong in the *Phaedrus*? The final type of claim that a text can make is one about the relation between true statements in the text and true statements in the world in which it is read. In other words, does the text claim that truths that obey its laws of physics can be accurately translated into the world of the reader? In the Phaedrus, all three kinds of truth claims are deeply unstable. First, The text is full of contradictions, so it cannot put forward any unassailable claims on the level of intra-textual truth, since those are evaluated by consistency arguments. Second, the *Phaedrus* lives very uneasily in the genre of "dialogue," a genre which at the time of the text's composition, was still very much in flux. Finally, a discussion of the nature of writing itself mounts a serious attack on the possibility of any transmission between text and reader. Each time Plato proposes a way forward, Socrates has a new question, a new story that renders this progress pointless.

I.1 Intra-textual Claims

There have been many attempts to reconcile the claims of the *Phaedrus* on a purely logical level.[6] These attempts, as we will later see, run into a series of difficulties, because the *Phaedrus* (like its readers) does not operate via purely rational means. However, it is worth seeing for ourselves why this project is doomed from the start.

[6] The best of these, I believe, is Ronna Burger's 1980 book, *Plato's Phaedrus: A Defense of a Philosophic Art of Writing*. Burger presents one of the first and most spirited defenses of an ironic interpretation of Socrates' condemnation of writing in the Phaedrus. She first corrects the older view that the Phaedrus is an ungainly collection of arguments about unrelated subjects: the nature of love, the soul, and truth. She argues that the meandering conversation belies a deep unity: writing becomes the dialogue's central subject, and Plato's views on writing are to be found in subtle intratextual connections, which, when taken together as a whole, undermine Socrates' myth of Theuth and affirm Plato's literary project. The Phaedrus is then a text arguing against its main speaker. For a variety of reasons, discussed later in the body of the essay, this is an untenable conclusion.

The *Phaedrus* begins with a triptych of speeches on love. These provide the best examples of what I've called intra-textual claims, and by carefully tracing the arguments provided, we can understand why these kinds of truth claims are not viable in the context of the dialogue as a whole.

The occasion for the dialogue is a speech by Lysias that Phaedrus has gotten a copy of, in which Lysias claims that a boy should only take lovers who do not love him. Socrates agrees wholeheartedly, and here we find our first major contradiction: the relationship that the *Phaedrus* posits between an attentive listener and a speech prohibits the kind of careful evaluation on the level of content that Socrates will later champion. In particular, Socrates' relationship to Lysias' speech is more like the relationship of a lover to his beloved than anything else. He practically drools over the speech, saying, Δαιμονίως μὲν οὖν, ὦ ἑταῖρε, ὥστε με ἐκπλαγῆναι. καὶ τοῦτο ἐγὼ ἔπαθον διὰ σέ, ὦ Φαῖδρε, πρὸς σὲ ἀποβλέπων, ὅτι ἐμοὶ ἐδόκεις γάνυσθαι ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου μεταξὺ ἀναγιγνώσκων· ἡγούμενος γὰρ σὲ μᾶλλον ἢ ἐμὲ ἐπαΐειν περὶ τῶν τοιούτων σοὶ εἰπόμην, καὶ ἑπόμενος συνεβάκχευσα μετὰ σοῦ τῆς θείας κεφαλῆς ("so divinely done, my friend, that you've gotten me love-struck! I feel like this because of you, Phaedrus, for while looking at you, it seemed to me that while you were reading aloud, you were brightened by the speech. Since I think that you are more an expert in these matters than I am, I followed you and in so doing, joined in your *Bacchic frenzy*, my god-headed friend" Plato *Phdr*. 234d). The language here is over the top. Socrates, who could resist the naked Alcibiades, is moved to real love (ἐκπλαγῆναι!) by a few clever turns of phrase (ibid).

Even Phaedrus is suspicious of the effect the speech has produced on Socrates, asking whether he's merely παίζειν ("joking" Plato *Phdr*. 234d). Perhaps more strangely, this ecstasy has been induced only by the speech's style since Socrates freely admits that τῷ γὰρ ῥητορικῷ

αὐτοῦ μόνῳ τὸν νοῦν προσεῖχον (“I turned my mind only towards the rhetorical in the speech” Plato *Phdr*. 235a). Like the someone who sees a beautiful body and finds themselves utterly unable to examine the character housed within it, Socrates can only offer praise on the grounds ὅτι σαφῆ καὶ στρογγύλα, καὶ ἀκριβῶς ἕκαστα τῶν ὀνομάτων ἀποτετόρνευται (“that it was clear and concisely spoken, and each of the words was precisely polished” *Phdr*. 234e). He is obsessed with mere appearances and verbal niceties, a position very much at odds with the standards that will later be offered for good writing and speaking (and utterly incongruous with the gadfly of the earlier dialogues). According to Socrates, Ἆρ’ οὖν οὐχ ὑπάρχειν δεῖ τοῖς εὖ γε καὶ καλῶς ῥηθησομένοις τὴν τοῦ λέγοντος διάνοιαν εἰδυῖαν τὸ ἀληθὲς ὧν ἂν ἐρεῖν πέρι μέλλῃ; (“It is very necessary in order for something to be spoken well and beautifully that the speaker has knowledge of the truth of what he proposes to discuss in his mind,” Plato *Phdr*. 259e). Clearly evaluations on the level of style are not sufficient to meet this standard. Style does not convey real knowledge.

After a few moments to collect himself, a more sober Socrates attempts to play off his earlier infatuation with Lysias’ speech and take back his promise to give his own speech. But Plato emphasizes the addictive quality of the *pharmakon* that is writing via Phaedrus’ clever ultimatum. He threatens to cut off his supply of words, saying, ἐάν μοι μὴ εἴπῃς τὸν λόγον ἐναντίον αὐτῆς ταύτης, μηδέποτέ σοι ἕτερον λόγον μηδένα μηδενὸς μήτε ἐπιδείξειν μήτε ἐξαγγελεῖν (“if you do not deliver this speech to me right here, I will never ever again recite for you or bring you back another word” Plato *Phdr*. 236e). And Socrates relents, admitting the force of his addiction, saying Βαβαῖ, ὦ μιαρέ, ὡς εὖ ἀνηῦρες τὴν ἀνάγκην ἀνδρὶ φιλολόγῳ ποιεῖν ὃ ἂν κελεύῃς (“damn it! you rouge! You’ve invented a good way to torture a man who loves words into doing whatever you order” *Phdr*. 236e). And with that provocation, Socrates proceeds

to give a quite ordinary account of a position he will later abhor. Plato has gone to great (and very funny) lengths in order to persuade us that Socrates is really a φιλολόγος, one who loves words so much that he is blind to the meaning they contain.

In Socrates's speech, reprising Lysias' discussion, we find a second intra-textual lapse: first, Socrates gives a speech, which he announces has the same thesis as Lysias, but which, at the end he argues has argued both Lysias' point and its opposite. His disregard for content proceeds in both directions as it were: first, content matters so little that a speech with the same thesis can be materially improved simply by changing its form and, second, that a thesis and its antithesis can be communicated simultaneously. Socrates cares so little for content that he can offer a speech on exactly the same subject as Lysias' with the same thesis, but argue that he is improving it, simply by virtue of its altered organization. He believes that he can improve on the style of the speech since he's sure that he's heard a better one, ἤ που Σαπφοῦς τῆς καλῆς ἢ Ἀνακρέοντος τοῦ σοφοῦ ἢ καὶ συγγραφέων τινῶν ("either maybe from the beautiful Sappho or the wise Anacreon or maybe even from frome some prose writer," Plato *Phdr*. 235c) But even stranger, at the end of this reprisal of Lysias's speech, he goes on to say that he has, in fact, said precisely the opposite. In his perfectly ordinary speech on the virtues of the non-lover, somehow, his words have doubled back on themselves to create in the mind of his audience a picture of the virtues of the lover for the boy seeking his *erastes*.

> Οὐκ ἤσθου, ὦ μακάριε, ὅτι ἤδη ἔπη φθέγγομαι ἀλλ' οὐκέτι διθυράμβους, καὶ ταῦτα ψέγων; ἐὰν δ' ἐπαινεῖν τὸν ἕτερον ἄρξωμαι, τί με οἴει ποιήσειν; …λέγω οὖν ἑνὶ λόγῳ ὅτι ὅσα τὸν ἕτερον λελοιδορήκαμεν, τῷ ἑτέρῳ τἀναντία τούτων ἀγαθὰ πρόσεστιν. καὶ τί δεῖ μακροῦ λόγου; περὶ γὰρ ἀμφοῖν ἱκανῶς εἴρηται.
>
> Plato *Phdr.* 241e
>
> Did you catch, friend, that I'm now singing an epic, instead of a dithyramb, even though I'm criticizing these things. And if I start to praise the lover, what do you think I'll be doing? … So in a word, I say that however much we have rebuked the one, equally, the other has equal positive qualities. We don't need a long speech, I've spoken sufficiently about both.

It is certainly tempting to take this speech as a mere farce, a joke meant to tease Phaedrus for his devotion to Lysias. And yet, we cannot dismiss the speech out of hand. As Martha Nussbaum writes, "Socrates' first speech is said to be inspired by certain Muses – not to be sure, the Pan, Nymphs, and gods of wild nature who inspire his later discourse (cf. 279bc, 262d, 263de), but certain muses of the 'clear-voiced' Lingurian variety. We might call them Muses of rationalism, or the Museus of the middle dialogues. As Hackforth points out, the presence of Muses here 'creates a real difficulty' for those who are inclined to be abruptly dismissive of the first speech."[7] The ground beneath our feet grows unsteady. Lysias is both right and wrong. Wrong for the right reasons and right for the wrong ones. Socrates agrees with him and, in the same breath, denies him. The boy should take as his lover only the one who both loves and does not love him.

Our final contradiction comes on the subject of love itself. All the work Socrates has done to defend the non-lover as the preferred choice for the boy seeing companionship is now undone, and the lover is praised instead. Socrates is compelled by his daimon to recant, this time, head uncovered, apparently proud of his new perspective. He accuses Phaedrus of speaking διὰ τοῦ ἐμοῦ στόματος καταφαρμακευθέντος ("through my mouth, having enchanted me with potions" Plato *Phdr*. 242e). Socrates now must purify himself of this offense against Eros. ἔστιν δὲ τοῖς ἁμαρτάνουσι περὶ μυθολογίαν καθαρμὸς ἀρχαῖος, ὃν Ὅμηρος μὲν οὐκ ᾔσθετο, Στησίχορος δέ. τῶν γὰρ ὀμμάτων στερηθεὶς διὰ τὴν Ἑλένης κακηγορίαν οὐκ ἠγνόησεν ὥσπερ Ὅμηρος, ἀλλ' ἅτε μουσικὸς ὢν ἔγνω τὴν αἰτίαν, καὶ ποιεῖ εὐθὺς ("There is an old rite of purification for those who have sinned with stories, which Homer did not know, but Stesichorus

[7] Nussbaum 1982; 82.

did. When he was deprived of his eyes for slandering Helen, he wasn't unaware, but since he was with the Muses, knew the cause and participated in the rite at once" Plato *Phdr*. 243b). This line is remarkable not just for demonstrating the depth of Socrates' literary engagements but also for demonstrating his dexterity with language. His pun (Homer remained blind, and thus literally in the dark) has lasted for nearly 3000 years. Crucially, the rite of purification is literary. In order to regain sight, you must write. And admit, Οὐκ ἔστ' ἔτυμος λόγος οὗτος, ("this story isn't true" Plato *Phdr*. 243b). This is perhaps the central sentence of the dialogue. What story isn't true? Is it just Stiesichorous' lie that was remedied in the palinode? Is it Socrates' lie, his slander of Eros? Is it this speech too? We will later learn no text is to be trusted, so is this Socrates accusing his author, Plato, of a lie or Plato admitting the shortcomings of his own work? This quote is a knife through the delicate fabric of fictionality. The layers of character and quotation that once kept us at a safe distance from the text no longer seem so impermeable. This recantation is apparently utterly genuine, but soon, we encounter difficulties even with this second revision. "This pious speech is, at the same time, the work of a poet, "Stesichorus," and a man from Himera—from a place that we may call Longington or Passionville. Socrates tells us, by the use of a poetic figure of speech, that the reverent and healthy speech is the speech of a poet and a needy lover; and furthermore, that he is that poet."[8]

But the poet lies. He cannot live up to his own standards and defend his own arguments. Nor does he seem to even remember them. As he comes to the close of his speech on love, he writes,

> καὶ τὸ τῆς παρανοίας ὡς ἓν ἐν ἡμῖν πεφυκὸς εἶδος ἡγησαμένω τὼ λόγω, ὁ μὲν τὸ ἐπ' ἀριστερὰ τεμνόμενος μέρος, πάλιν τοῦτο τέμνων οὐκ ἐπανῆκεν πρὶν ἐν αὐτοῖς ἐφευρὼν ὀνομαζόμενον σκαιόν τινα ἔρωτα ἐλοιδόρησεν μάλ' ἐν δίκῃ, ὁ δ' εἰς τὰ ἐν δεξιᾷ τῆς

[8] Nussbaum 1982; 87.

> μανίας ἀγαγὼν ἡμᾶς, ὁμώνυμον μὲν ἐκείνῳ, θεῖον δ’ αὖ τινα ἔρωτα ἐφευρὼν καὶ προτεινάμενος ἐπήνεσεν ὡς μεγίστων αἴτιον ἡμῖν ἀγαθῶν.
>
> Plato *Phdr.* 266ab

> The two speeches regarded madness as being only of one kind inside us, and the first speech, on the one hand, was cut into a left hand part (and did not cease from cutting until it found in it a left-handed sort of love which it reviled) and the second speech, on the other hand, lead us to the right-handed sort of madness, “discovering and proposing a kind of love with the same time as the other, although divine, praised it for being the cause of the greatest goods for us.”[9]

Even our memory is an unreliable narrator. Socrates is reinterpreting the past hour before our very eyes. These two speeches, which we just saw to be directly opposed, one is in fact framed as a dissection of the other, are in fact one and the same. Socrates is arguing that two directly contradictory claims (namely that it is better at once to love the lover than the non-lover and the non-lover than the lover) constitute two halves of the same argument! He has now contradicted himself three times on the same subject. Even his most faithful devotees might suspect the summer heat has gotten to him. We see then that the dialogue is riddled with contradictions – no positive claim is presented without its counterclaim and Socrates, the trickster rather than the gadfly, now outside of Athens, is not to be trusted. We have utterly failed on the level of self-consistency and, thus, inter-textual claims.

I.2 Inter-Textual Claims

The next level of truth claims to investigate are “inter-textual” ones. We begin with an extended description of the setting of the dialogue. We hear about the summer heat and soft grass, the rushing of the river. The implicit claim of the opening of the dialogue is that it takes place outside of Athens, on the banks of the Ilissus, between Phaedrus, a historical person, and

[9] Translation partially taken from Emlyn-Jones and Preddy 2022; 482.

Socrates, a historical person, on a warm summer afternoon. This amounts to an attempt to situate the dialogue form in a particular genre, with particular agreements between author and reader about how the reality of the text should operate. And immediately, we are at a loss. If this is Plato's honest recollection of a conversation that actually happened, if he is playing reporter or amateur historian for his great mentor, he has embellished far too much. The setting is too lush and suggestive of potential subjects of conversation. τὸ εὔπνουν τοῦ τόπου ὡς ἀγαπητὸν καὶ σφόδρα ἡδύ· θερινόν τε καὶ λιγυρὸν ὑπηχεῖ τῷ τῶν τεττίγων χορῷ ("the sweet scent of the place, how pleasant and sweet! It echoes the clear summer song of the cicadas" Plato *Phdr.* 230b) These cicadas return as the subject of conversation and the occasion for a clever myth. As Ferrari writes, "what is particularly striking about this dialogue is that the background will not stay where it belongs. It becomes a prominent topic of discussion and a direct cause of the conversational action, rather than, as one would expect at most, an indirect influence on its course."[10] The pathetic fallacy is a fallacy for a reason.

Perhaps Plato writes fiction. This would at least explain the unusually active role of the greenery and help to smooth some of the more obvious historical inaccuracies, not the least of which is that during the period in which the dialogue must be set (roughly between 411 and 404 BCE) Phaedrus was almost certainly in exile.[11] Indeed among ancient commentators, this perspective seems to be relatively common. Of course what constitutes fiction has changed enormously over the intervening centuries, but when Longinus calls Plato "most Homeric of all," he is clearly pointing to a complicated relationship to historicity and a command of language that

[10] Ferrari 1987; 4.

[11] See Nussbaum 1982; 96. As she notes, "It has long been observed that a number of internal indications require us to place the dialogue at a dramatic date between 411 and 404. But an inscription discovered in this century now shows us that there is a problem about doing this. Phaedrus Murriniosios, this very Phaedrus who was implicated along with Alcibiades, in the impious mutilation of the Herms and was forced to go into exile from the city between 415 and 414, and it is thus historically impossible that Phaedrus should really have been in Athens during this time."

is generative of its own reality.[12] As Blondell writes "Plato's dialogues share much in common not only with drama, but with epic poetry, whether from the point of view of literary form, performance, or presumed educational function. The ancient commentators were well aware of Plato's resemblance to Homer in this and other ways … In Aelian's account of Plato's literary beginnings, the youthful Plato tries his hand at epic as well as drama, but gives it up in the face of Homer's superiority."[13] But, to state the obvious, Plato is writing about his contemporaries, not long dead heroes and he is writing in prose, not meter. If he intends his work to be a kind of "contemporary epic" he is inventing a genre, one without established models and precedents. Part of the challenge of this novel genre is situating it somewhere along the spectrum between truth and fiction. As Blondell writes, "This liminal literary status is perfectly fitted to the Platonic enterprise of appropriating and reinterpreting tradition."[14] We find ourselves, in short, outside of the familiar city walls, in a generic wilderness. We cannot evaluate any claims within the dialogue on the level of "inter-textual truth" because no laws of physics have been provided. Even our simplest questions about "what actually happened" are caught up in the interpretive web that Plato weaves. We are not in Athens anymore. The city walls are far away by now. The heat is stifling.

I.3 Transmissibility

The final indignity Socrates subjects his author to is the myth of Theuth. This is in some sense the centerpiece of the dialogue, where all this talk of love and literature has been leading to. Plato, as author, appears to have regained some ground. So far, clever speaking has been under inspection together with clever writing, but in just a few lines, Socrates turns the question

[12] Longinus in Blondell 2002; 29.
[13] Blondell 2002; 29.
[14] Blondell 2002; 32.

back to Plato, so to speak. Speech is exonerated, and writing is interrogated: Οὐκοῦν τὸ μὲν τέχνης τε καὶ ἀτεχνίας λόγων πέρι ἱκανῶς ἐχέτω… τὸ δ' εὐπρεπείας δὴ γραφῆς πέρι καὶ ἀπρεπείας, πῇ γιγνόμενον καλῶς ἂν ἔχοι καὶ ὅπῃ ἀπρεπῶς, λοιπόν ("We've talked enough about art and artlessness in connection with speaking… it remains to discuss propriety and impropriety when it comes to writing, namely in what way does writing become good and in what way does it become indecent?" Plato *Phdr.* 274cb) Socrates answers his own question with the myth of Theuth, which he appears to have invented wholesale:

> Ἤκουσα τοίνυν περὶ Ναύκρατιν τῆς Αἰγύπτου γενέσθαι τῶν ἐκεῖ παλαιῶν τινα θεῶν, οὗ καὶ τὸ ὄρνεον ἱερὸν ὃ δὴ καλοῦσιν Ἶβιν· αὐτῷ δὲ ὄνομα τῷ δαίμονι εἶναι Θεύθ. τοῦτον δὴ πρῶτον ἀριθμόν τε καὶ λογισμὸν εὑρεῖν καὶ γεωμετρίαν καὶ ἀστρονομίαν, ἔτι δὲ πεττείας τε καὶ κυβείας, καὶ δὴ καὶ γράμματα. … Τοῦτο δέ, ὦ βασιλεῦ, τὸ μάθημα, ἔφη ὁ Θεύθ, σοφωτέρους Αἰγυπτίους καὶ μνημονικωτέρους παρέξει·… ὁ δ' εἶπεν· Ὦ τεχνικώτατε Θεύθ … οὔκουν μνήμης ἀλλὰ ὑπομνήσεως φάρμακον ηὗρες. σοφίας δὲ τοῖς μαθηταῖς δόξαν, οὐκ ἀλήθειαν πορίζεις· πολυήκοοι γάρ σοι γενόμενοι ἄνευ διδαχῆς πολυγνώμονες εἶναι δόξουσιν, ἀγνώμονες ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πλῆθος ὄντες, καὶ χαλεποὶ συνεῖναι, δοξόσοφοι γεγονότες ἀντὶ σοφῶν.
>
> Plato *Phdr.* 274d-275b

> I have heard this, that there is a certain one of the ancient gods of Egypt nearby Naucratis to whom the bird called the Ibis is sacred. And the name of this god is Theuth. They say that he was the first to invent arithmetic and counting and geometry and astronomy, and even backgammon and dice, and most importantly, writing….And this invention [writing], O king, said Theuth, will make the Egyptians wiser and better at remembering things. And the king said in reply, "Oh, most crafty Theuth, you have found a potion not for remembering but for re-remembering. You've provided the semblance of wisdom to your students, not its truth. For they will seem to be very wise, having heard much without learning anything, and they will be extremely annoying, and difficult to be with, since they have all the trappings of wisdom without its reality.

We will return to this lovely passage later, but at the current juncture, there seems to be very little point. If Socrates is right, there isn't anything left to write. All of our inter- and intra-textual fiddling is washed away. We've lost the possibility of transmission. Every text is inaccessible to us. Writing can only lie. To take Plato at face value is thus to be left with an irreconcilable contradiction: he has composed an entire dialogue dedicated to saying absolutely nothing for

certain. If we believe the myth of Theuth, then not even the myth of Theuth can be believed. No interpretive strategy is viable, and we are left irritated, having found that Plato is a postmodernist, χαλεποὶ συνεῖναι indeed (Plato *Phdr.* 274d - 275b).

And yet, against all odds and good sense, Plato continues. Having quite thoroughly destroyed all hope of lasting philosophical progress, Socrates defines the philosopher. He suggests the following:

> εἰ μὲν εἰδὼς ᾗ τὸ ἀληθὲς ἔχει συνέθηκε ταῦτα, καὶ ἔχων βοηθεῖν, εἰς ἔλεγχον ἰὼν περὶ ὧν ἔγραψε, καὶ λέγων αὐτὸς δυνατὸς τὰ γεγραμμένα φαῦλα ἀποδεῖξαι ... τὸ μὲν σοφόν, ὦ Φαῖδρε, καλεῖν ἔμοιγε μέγα εἶναι δοκεῖ καὶ θεῷ μόνῳ πρέπειν· τὸ δὲ ἢ φιλόσοφον ἢ τοιοῦτόν τι μᾶλλόν τε ἂν αὐτῷ καὶ ἁρμόττοι καὶ ἐμμελεστέρως ἔχοι.
>
> Plato, *Phdr*. 278d

> If someone, knowing how the truth stands, has composed these things [namely the speeches, epics, verse, or political speeches mentioned above], and is able to support them when going against the elenchus, and when speaking, is able to point out that they are paltry… to call him wise seems to be to be an overstatement, wisdom is fitting only for a god, but to call him a philosopher or some such thing would be appropriate and altogether suitable.

Philosophy then comes out of an uneasy relationship to writing, a capacity to wield the *pharmakon*, to defend its application as venom-cum-anti-venom, and finally, when appropriate, to discard it. In fact, we have managed to end up somewhere. Plato is not a postmodernist. He has not written a dialogue dedicated to the proposition that there can be no such thing as a dialogue. The solution lies in the correct relationship of a reader to Plato's text. The source of our error, as Martha Nussbaum identifies, is an almost belligerent preference for content over form. "Philosophy has developed a style for itself that powerfully expresses its claim to have separated the rational from the irrational, to have purified itself of the confusions of emotion and sense, which are the stuff of poetic discourse. The deductive argument keeps these messy, irrational elements at bay, protecting reason's structures against them."[15] This distinction is not

[15] Nussbaum 1982; 91.

inevitable. Nor is it helpful in the context of Plato. It is precisely the messy, irrational elements that the *Phaedrus* is dedicated to. To truly love wisdom is to be mad in the best possible way. And this is where Plato's wicked sense of humor comes in.

II. Rehabilitative Irony

If we can read the myth of Theuth correctly, all these contradictions can be assimilated into a coherent reading of the dialogue. With the right collection of love potions, we can see that the *Phaedrus* is not at all a "badly composed" testament to Plato's "senile impotence," but as a good walk on a hot summer day.[16] To read philosophy correctly is to fall in love with wisdom, not as a critic, but as a joyful participant in its creation, to give yourself over to the kind of mania that struck Socrates on the banks of the Ilissus. It is this mania that is at the heart of our project of rehabilitation. As Martha Nusbaum writes, "The madman is, then, a person who is in the sway of inner forces that, at least temporarily, eclipse or transform the calculations and the valuations of pure reason."[17] This is precisely the defamiliarization that is at the heart of ironic existence as Johnathan Lear interpreted it. Irony is the rational label we assign to the effect of the irrational, the name we give to the elements of Socratic dialogue that move us in ways we cannot explain. We are separated from our social and practical identities for just long enough to inhabit the madness that urges us forward toward the truth. This erotic longing that Lear sees as Socratic irony is the spell under which the myth of Theuth is composed. This ironic project is not cheap. It costs dearly in the form of our admission that reason will never suffice to give a complete description of the human experience, that such a description is perhaps permanently out of reach, and that the best we can do is employ our merely human voices. But Plato is neither a defeatist nor a postmodernist, and this irony is the only viable path forward.

---

[16] Derrida 1981: 67.
[17] Nussbaum 1982; 92.

If we return to the problematic portions of the dialogue with this in mind, we find a far more coherent picture. With the right set of definitions and interlocutors, the *Phaedrus* will yield a coherent story. What Ruby Blondell calls "the dazzling interplay of unity and multiplicity… generated in part by a series of interlocking and overlapping dualities" begins to come into focus.[18] When Socrates announces at the start of his second speech,

> ἐγὼ οὖν σοφώτερος ἐκείνων γενήσομαι κατ᾽ αὐτό γε τοῦτο· πρὶν γάρ τι παθεῖν διὰ τὴν τοῦ Ἔρωτος κακηγορίαν πειράσομαι αὐτῷ ἀποδοῦναι τὴν παλινῳδίαν, γυμνῇ τῇ κεφαλῇ καὶ οὐχ ὥσπερ τότε ὑπ᾽ αἰσχύνης ἐγκεκαλυμμένος … Οὑτωσὶ τοίνυν, ὦ παῖ καλέ, ἐννόησον, ὡς ὁ μὲν πρότερος ἦν λόγος Φαίδρου τοῦ Πυθοκλέους Μυρρινουσίου ἀνδρός· ὃν δὲ μέλλω λέγειν, Στησιχόρου τοῦ Εὐφήμου, Ἱμεραίου. λεκτέος δὲ ὧδε, ὅτι Οὐκ ἔστ᾽ ἔτυμος λόγος
>
> Plato, *Phdr*. 243b, 244a

> I will be wiser than them [Homer and Stesichorus] only in this way, that before I suffer something for my slander of Eros, I will try to offer up my Palinode to him, with my head bear, no longer covered up with shame… "Hear this, beautiful boy, that while the previous speech was by Phaedrus, the son of Pythocles a man from Myrrhinus, this one, which I am just about to give you is by Stesichorus, son of Goodspeaker from Passionville. It must go like this, 'that story isn't true.'"

We can finally understand what he means by this strange attempt at seduction. First, Socrates is explicitly and accurately characterizing himself as a poet, a peer of Homer and Stesichorus. We should thus understand that the goal of the speech is to create an impression on Phaedrus, rather than to communicate a contention to him.. But, crucially, this is still philosophy, just a kind that is "inspired, manic, Muse-loving," as Nusbaum notes.[19] "[Philosophy] is much more intimately related to poetry than Plato has hitherto led us to think. It might, for example, make use of 'literary' devices such as mythic narrative and metaphor; and it might, like poetry, contain material expressive of, and arousing in turn, a passional excitation."[20] These are the components of rehabilitative irony that I've been alluding to and all of them are on display here: the clever

[18] Blondell 2002; 1.
[19] Nussbaum 1982; 89.
[20] ibid.

wordplay, the theatrical covering and uncovering of his head, the simultaneous avowals and disavowals of truth. It is precisely in this way that this rehabilitative irony renders the intra-textual claims viable. It turns them into claims that transcend the neat schema I have laid out above. When Socrates says, "here is how the speech should go," we can see that this is simultaneously a claim within the dialogue about what he'll say next, a claim that Plato is making about the kinds of speeches such a character is likely to make, and an appeal to his reader to question whether or not such a speech in defense of love really ought to begin with a quote from Steisichorus. What rehabilitative irony does is collapse these into a question to the reader: how should a speech about love begin? Should we defend Eros? By calling into question the very nature of the project of writing, Plato demands that his reader take an active role in constructing the action of the dialogue. But the extent of his innovation is not just a relocation of the work of philosophy from author to reader. (This would not be a new observation: as Ruby Blondell notes, "two of the most conspicuous and inarguable functions of [the dialogic] form, …are to avoid Platonic dogmatism and to treat the form as the absence of an authorial or narrative voice."[21]) Instead, the form of this irony first draws us into the act of philosophizing and second equips us with new tools for answering the questions Plato puts to us. Socrates begins with Pindar's words (Plato *Phdr*. 227c). We are encouraged to make our philosophy a kind of collage, one composed of the rational and irrational, our words and poet's verses, sincere proposals, and clever winks. Socrates will always have a question we can't answer, but Plato will always have a story to move the dialogue along.

Now, with this in mind, we can finally understand what Socrates means when he quotes Stesichorus: "There's no truth to that story," but that doesn't mean it isn't worth telling. That

[21] Blondell 2002; 39.

writing can only lie is no longer a problem, it is a provocation. What Plato has accomplished is as Derrida says, to "play at taking play seriously."[22] Irony is woven into the very form of the dialogues. The whole project of Plato's is at once an elaborate practical joke, a demand that we engage in philosophy without the stubborn insistence on practical identity that many of his interlocutors are stuck with. Writing is the richest site for this kind of irony because it is the essential, unanswerable question at the heart of Plato: "it can be said that philosophy is played out in the play between two kinds of writing. Whereas all it wanted to do was to distinguish between writing and speech."[23] The myth of Theuth tells us that all writing reduces to an elaborate lie. The rest of the *Phaedrus* explains why that lie is not just beautiful but productive. We would be in far more serious trouble if Socrates began his speech by saying, "there's no story to that truth." This is precisely the order-reversing character of this "rehabilitative irony." Irony, in other words, is the translator between the literary and philosophical elements of the text, the wink that lets us appreciate the Cicadas, the nymphs, the muses, and even the poets who come to visit our unlikely couple by the river. It is the set of tools that allow Plato to "play at taking play seriously" and write the first instance of"philosophical poetry" as Martha Nussbaum calls it. [24] It is then clear in what sense this "irony" allows us to make positive philosophical progress and how it rescues Plato from the precarious position Socrates has put him in. However, it remains to justify its status as irony per se.

There are two major schools of thought when it comes to Socratic irony and I will argue that this Platonic irony is compatible with both, though in slightly different ways. These two schools were fathered by Gregory Vlastos and Johnathan Lear, respectively. Vlastos argues that

[22] Derrida 1981; 157.
[23] Derrida 1981; 149.
[24] Derrida 1981; 157; Nussbaum 1982; 90.

Socratic irony is a kind of "complex irony," in which Socrates communicates two seemingly contradictory positions and, in so doing, opens a question left to the reader to answer via their own moral lights.[25] “What irony means is simply expressing what we mean by saying something contrary to it. This is something we do all the time -- even children do it -- and if we choose to do it we forfeit in that very choice the option of speaking deceitfully.”[26] This kind of communicative irony is magnified by its reassignment to Plato. Each intra-textual contradiction we noted above was, in fact, an example of Plato's skill with this “complex irony,” in which he communicates two seemingly contradictory positions. Sometimes, both of these contradictory positions are attributed to Socrates; sometimes, one emerges from Socrates, and the other from Plato. The scope of this Vlastonian irony is widened when it is assigned to both the author and his character. His insistence on Socrates’ sincerity is crucial, too. Plato, our author, is not playing literary tricks to be clever but rather in service of loving wisdom earnestly. Clearly, then, our irony is Vlastonian in the sense that it expresses an earnest desire by subverting the claims that it appears to make.

Learian irony is a slippery concept. Irony, in this conception, consists of the opening and experiencing of two gaps in sequence. The first is the gap between “a pretense as it is made available in a social practice and an aspiration or ideal which, on the one hand, is embedded in the pretense, indeed, which expresses what the pretense is all about.”[27] Once that initial gap has opened up, the experience of irony manifests as an acute disruption of practical knowledge which results in a breakdown of practical intelligibility. Lear writes, “I can no longer make sense of myself (to myself, and thus can no longer put myself forward to others) in terms of my

[25] Vlastos 1987; 93.
[26] Vlastos 1987; 94.
[27] Lear 2014; 11.

practical identity ... The experience of ironic uncanniness is the form that pretense-transcending aspiring takes. Because there is embodied in this experience an itch for direction—an experience of uncanny, enigmatic longing—it is appropriate to conceive the experience of irony as an experience of erotic uncanniness."[28] For Lear, Socratic irony has invaded everyday life, but for my purposes, this rehabilitative irony is safely confined to the page (and in this sense it has more in common with its Vlastonian cousin). It remains a kind of "communicative irony" but our notion of communication has extended to all speech and writing. If writing itself is suspect, a medium that can only deceive, then we are struck as readers with the perfect occasion for irony, a gap that gives way to a question and a longing. Our irony is then a restriction of Lear's irony to the page. While Lear may be right about irony writ large, Plato's irony operates on his reader at a smaller scale. We are led to beliefs that defy closed-form rational expression by his clever literary manipulations. Through his cicadas and plane trees, daimons and winged souls, and most of all by his Egyptian gods, we are confused and confounded into a belief in truths beyond our grasp. We confess our undying love for wisdom we cannot reach. This erotic longing that Lear sees as Socratic "irony" is precisely the fictionality of the dialogues. For the price of writing, this is what the *Phaedrus* gets us: a mode of living and storytelling that can withstand the hot summer sun.

The ultimate triumph of this irony occurs in the unassuming final lines of the dialogue. We return, finally, to Plato's preamble to his definition of the philosopher.

> Ὁ δέ γε ἐν μὲν τῷ γεγραμμένῳ λόγῳ περὶ ἑκάστου παιδιάν τε ἡγούμενος πολλὴν ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι, καὶ οὐδένα πώποτε λόγον ἐν μέτρῳ οὐδ' ἄνευ μέτρου μεγάλης ἄξιον σπουδῆς γραφῆναι, οὐδὲ λεχθῆναι ὡς οἱ ῥαψῳδούμενοι ἄνευ ἀνακρίσεως καὶ διδαχῆς πειθοῦς ἕνεκα ἐλέχθησαν, ἀλλὰ τῷ ὄντι αὐτῶν τοὺς βελτίστους εἰδότων ὑπόμνησιν γεγονέναι, ἐν δὲ τοῖς διδασκομένοις καὶ μαθήσεως χάριν λεγομένοις καὶ τῷ ὄντι γραφομένοις ἐν ψυχῇ περὶ δικαίων τε καὶ καλῶν καὶ ἀγαθῶν [ἐν] μόνοις ἡγούμενος τό τε ἐναργὲς εἶναι καὶ τέλεον καὶ ἄξιον σπουδῆς· δεῖν δὲ τοὺς τοιούτους λόγους αὐτοῦ

[28] Lear 2014; 18, 20.

> λέγεσθαι οἷον ὑεῖς γνησίους εἶναι, πρῶτον μὲν τὸν ἐν αὑτῷ, ἐὰν εὑρεθεὶς ἐνῇ, bἔπειτα εἴ τινες τούτου ἔκγονοί τε καὶ ἀδελφοὶ ἅμα ἐν ἄλλαισιν ἄλλων ψυχαῖς κατ' ἀξίαν ἐνέφυσαν· τοὺς δὲ ἄλλους χαίρειν ἐῶν—οὗτος δὲ ὁ τοιοῦτος ἀνὴρ κινδυνεύει, ὦ Φαῖδρε, εἶναι οἷον ἐγώ τε καὶ σὺ εὐξαίμεθ' ἂν σέ τε καὶ ἐμὲ γενέσθαι.
>
> Plato *Phdr.* 278ab

> "Take a man who thinks that a written discourse on any subject can only be a great amusement, that no discourse worth serious attention has ever been written in verse or prose, and that those that are recited in public without questioning and explanation, in the manner of the rhapsodes, are given only in order to produce conviction. He believes that at their very best these can only serve as reminders to those who already know. And he also thinks that only what is said for the sake of understanding and learning—what is truly written in the soul concerning what is just, noble, and good—can be clear, perfect, and worth serious attention. Such discourses should be called his own legitimate children: first, the discourse he may have discovered already within himself, and then its sons and brothers who may have grown naturally in other souls insofar as these are worthy; to the rest, he turns his back. Such a man, Phaedrus, would be just what you and I both would pray to become."[29]

The *Phaedrus* itself is exactly such an "amusement." From the moment Socrates pulls the speech from Phaedrus' sleeve, we feel that we are in a comedy. And that instinct is correct, as Plato makes clear over and over again; we are meant to giggle at the puns, laugh at Socrates as he delivers an utterly earnest speech with his cloak over his head, quotes poetry, and baffles Phaedrus. And if this dialogue is a plaything, then Plato is exactly the sort of man Socrates and Phaedrus pray to be, one who recognizes, as Derrida says, that "human affairs in general do not… need to be taken seriously."[30] Plato is rechristened a philosopher, but a new kind of philosopher, one who earnestly professes that his craft is pointless, who dedicates himself to the pursuit of a truth he knows he will never reach. As Nussbaum argues, "The *Phaedrus* denies that the whole and unconditioned truth is available, as such, to any human being. It introduces, as fundamental to dialectic, a method of analysis that seems to direct us towards the more exact elucidation of the 'appearances' – what we as humans and language users, say and believe."[31]

---

[29] Translation taken from Emlyn-Jones and Preddy 2022; 482.
[30] Derrida 1981; 157.
[31] Nussbaum 1982; 80.

But crucially, it does not denigrate these "mere" appearances. Instead, via its fictionality, it claims that appearances are sufficient for progress. One doesn't need to know the truth to tell a worthwhile story about it.

While Derrida takes this exchange of philosophy for fiction to be one that submits to absolute relativism, I do not think it must go that way. At the close of his essay, P*lato's Pharmacy,* he writes, "After closing the pharmacy, Plato went to retire, to get out of the sun. He took a few steps in the darkness toward the back of his reserves, found himself leaning over the pharmakon, decided to analyze…. He would like to isolate the good from the bad, the true from the false. He leans over further: they repeat each other."[32] I do not think the situation is nearly so dire. Anne Carson writes that we become philosophers "in order to furnish [ourselves] with pretexts for running after [spinning] tops."[33] We have an instinct for the good, even if we cannot define it. We feel it thrumming in Plato's writing. Like Lear, in the grips of an ironic fit, we feel called towards the good even as we are more and more unsure of what the good is. "We do not move on from poetry to philosophy, from bodies to souls to sciences. We never even consider any of these small things, or despise them. We remain makers of images, and 'boy-lovers with philosophy.' The good life is grasped not by transcending erotic madness, but inside a mad life."[34] And this is what all of our ironizing comes to. We cultivate an ironic existence in order to achieve madness. When irony pervades our life properly, it turns all our truths into fictions, all our grand speeches into myths, all our avowals into questions. We fall in love with wisdom, the kind that makes us itchy, crazy, and wonderfully irrational.

---

[32] Derrida 1981; 169.
[33] Carson 1998; ix.
[34] Nussbaum 1982; 104.

Works Cited

Annas, J. 1982. “Plato on the Triviality of Literature,” in *Plato on Beauty, Wisdom, and the Arts,* ed. J. Moravcsik and P. Temko (Totowa, NJ), 1–28.

Asmis, E. 1986. “Psychagôgia in Plato’s Phaedrus.” *Illinois Classical Studies* 11:153–72.

Barney, R. 2006. “The Sophistic Movement,” in M. L. Gill and P. Pellegrin (eds.), *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy.* Oxford.

Blondell, R. 2002. *The Play of Character in Plato’s Dialogues.* Cambridge.

Carson, A. 1998. *Eros the Bittersweet.* 1st Dalkey Archive ed. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press.

Derrida, J. 1981. “Plato’s Pharmacy,” in *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson (Chicago), 61–171.

Ferrari, G. 1987. *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato’s Phaedrus.* Cambridge.

Hackforth, R. 1952. *Plato’s Phaedrus*. Cambridge.

Heath, M. 1987. “The Unity of Plato’s Phaedrus.” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 7:150–73.

Heath, M. 1989. “The Unity of the Phaedrus: A Postscript.” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 7:189–91.

Howland, R. L. 1937. “The Attack on Isocrates in the Phaedrus.” *Classical Quarterly* 31:551–59.

Kraut, R., and D. Ebrey. 2022. “Plato’s Socrates and His Conception of Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge), 117–45.

Lear, J. 2014. *A Case for Irony*. Cambridge, MA.

McCabe, M. M. 2019. “Plato’s Ways of Writing,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, 2nd edn, ed.
G. Fine (Oxford).

Nightingale, A. W. 1995. *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy*. Cambridge.

Nussbaum, M. 1982. “This Story Isn’t True: Poetry, Goodness, and Understanding in Plato’s Phaedrus,” in *Plato on Beauty, Wisdom, and the Arts*, ed. J. Moravcsik and P. Temko (Totowa, NJ), 79–124.

Partenie, C. (ed.) 2009. *Plato's Myths*. Cambridge.

Plato. 2022. *Lysis. Symposium. Phaedrus*. Edited and translated by Christopher Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy. Loeb Classical Library 166. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Rowe, C. 2007. *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing*. Cambridge.

Rowe, C. J. 1989. "The Unity of Plato's Phaedrus: A Reply to Heath." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 7:175–88.

Rowe, C. J. 1986. "The Argument and Structure of Plato's Phaedrus." *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 32:106.

Pfeiffer, R. 1968. *History of Classical Scholarship from the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age*. Oxford.

Senn, S. J. 2013. "Ignorance or Irony in Plato's Socrates?: A Look Beyond Avowals and Disavowals of Knowledge." *Plato Journal* 13:77–108.

Schenker, D. J. 2006. "The Strangeness of the Phaedrus." *American Journal of Philology* 127:67–87.

Thakkar, J. 2018. *Plato as Critical Theorist*. Cambridge, MA.

Vlastos, G. 1991. *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Ithaca, NY.

Vlastos, G. 1987. "Socratic Irony." *Classical Quarterly* 37:79–96.