

SOCRATES: But don't we still have to discuss whether or not writing is desirable—what makes it acceptable and what makes it undesirable?*

PHAEDRUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: So do you know the best way for either a theoretical or a practical approach to speech to please god?

PHAEDRUS: No, I don't. Do you?

c SOCRATES: Well, I can pass on something I've heard from our predecessors. Only they know the truth of the matter, but if we had made this discovery by ourselves, would we any longer have the slightest interest in mere human conjectures?

PHAEDRUS: What an absurd question! Please tell me what you say you've heard.

d SOCRATES: All right. The story I heard* is set in Naucratis in Egypt, where there was one of the ancient gods of Egypt—the one to whom the bird they call the 'ibis' is sacred, whose name is Theuth. This deity was the inventor of number, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, of games involving draughts and dice—and especially of writing. At the time, the king of the whole of Egypt around the capital city of the inland region (the city the Greeks call 'Egyptian Thebes'*), was Thamous, or Amon, as the Greeks call him.† Theuth came to Thamous and showed him the branches of expertise he had invented, and suggested that they should be spread throughout Egypt. Thamous asked him what good each one would do, and subjected Theuth's explanations to criticism if he thought he was going wrong and praise if e thought he was right. The story goes that Thamous expressed himself at length to Theuth about each of the branches of expertise, both for and against them. It would take a long time to go through all Thamous' views, but when it was the turn of writing, Theuth said, 'Your highness, this science will increase the intelligence of the people of Egypt and improve their memories. For this invention is a potion for memory and intelligence.' But Thamous replied, 'You

are most ingenious, Theuth. But one person has the ability to bring branches of expertise into existence, another to assess the extent to which they will harm or benefit those who use them. The loyalty you feel to writing, as its originator, has just led you to tell me the opposite of its true effect. 275a It will atrophy people's memories.* Trust in writing will make them remember things by relying on marks made by others, from outside themselves, not on their own inner resources,* and so writing will make the things they have learnt disappear from their minds. Your invention is a potion for jogging the memory, not for remembering. You provide your students with the appearance of intelligence, not real intelligence. Because your students will be widely read, though without any contact with a teacher, they will seem to be men of wide knowledge, when they will usually b be ignorant. And this spurious appearance of intelligence will make them difficult company.'

PHAEDRUS: Socrates, it doesn't take much for you to make up stories from Egypt and anywhere else in the world you feel like.

SOCRATES: Well, my friend, the people at the sanctuary of Zeus at Dodona say that the original prophecies there were spoken by an oak.* In those days people weren't as clever as you young ones nowadays, and they were so foolish that they happily listened to oak and rock,* as long as they told the truth. But perhaps it matters to you who the speaker is, c or what country he's from, because you are not concerned only with whether or not he is right.

PHAEDRUS: You're right to have told me off—and, yes, I think the Theban king was correct about writing.

SOCRATES: So anyone who thinks he can get a branch of expertise to survive by committing it to writing—and also anyone who inherits the work with the assumption that writing will give him something clear and reliable—would be behaving in a thoroughly foolish manner and really would be ignorant of Amon's prediction, if he supposed

- d that written words could do more than jog the memory of someone who already knows the topic that has been written about.

PHAEDRUS: Quite so.

- SOCRATES: Yes, because there's something odd about writing, Phaedrus, which makes it exactly like painting. The offspring of painting stand there as if alive, but if you ask them a question they maintain an aloof silence.* It's the same with written words: you might think they were speaking as if they had some intelligence, but if you want an explanation of any of the things they're saying and you ask them about it, they just go on and on for ever giving the same single piece of information. Once any account has been written down, you
e find it all over the place, hobnobbing with completely inappropriate people no less than with those who understand it, and completely failing to know who it should and shouldn't talk to. And faced with rudeness and unfair abuse it always needs its father to come to its assistance, since it is incapable of defending or helping itself.*

PHAEDRUS: Again, you're quite right.

- 276a SOCRATES: Well, is there any other way of using words? Does the written word have a legitimate brother? Can we see how it is born, and how much better and stronger it grows than its brother?

PHAEDRUS: What is this way of using words? How is it born, do you think?

SOCRATES: It is the kind that is written along with knowledge in the soul of a student. It is capable of defending itself, and it knows how to speak to those it should and keep silent in the company of those to whom it shouldn't speak.

PHAEDRUS: You're talking about the living, ensouled speech of a man of knowledge. We'd be right to describe the written word as a mere image of this.*

- b SOCRATES: Absolutely. So here's another question for you. Consider a sensible farmer who cares for his seeds and wants to see them come to fruition. Do you think he'd

happily spend time and effort planting them in the summer in gardens of Adonis,* and watch them grow up in eight days, or would he do this, if at all, as a diversion and for the sake of a festival? Don't you think that for seeds he was serious about he'd draw on his skill as a farmer, sow them in the appropriate soil, and be content if what he sowed reached maturity in the eighth month?

PHAEDRUS: Yes, that's what he'd do, Socrates. He'd take care of the one lot of seeds and treat the others differently, just as you said.

SOCRATES: So are we to say that someone who knows about right and fine and good activities* is less sensible than our farmer where his own seeds are concerned?

PHAEDRUS: Of course not.

SOCRATES: Then he won't spend time and effort writing what he knows in water—in black water*—and sowing them with his pen by means of words which can neither speak in their own defence nor come up with a satisfactory explanation of the truth.

PHAEDRUS: No, it's hardly likely that he will.

SOCRATES: No. He'll probably sow and write his gardens of letters for amusement, if at all, as a way of storing up things to jog his own memory when 'he reaches the age of forgetfulness',* and also the memory of anyone else who is pursuing the same course as him. He'll happily watch these delicate gardens growing, and he'll presumably spend his time diverting himself with them rather than the symposia and so on with which other people amuse themselves.

PHAEDRUS: What a wonderful kind of diversion you're describing, Socrates—that of a person who can amuse himself with words, as he tells stories about justice and the other things you mentioned—compared with the trivial pastimes of others!

SOCRATES: Yes, that's right, my dear Phaedrus. But it's far better, in my opinion, to treat justice and so on seriously, which is what happens when an expert dialectician takes

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hold of a suitable soul and uses his knowledge to plant and sow the kinds of words which are capable of defending both themselves and the one who planted them. So far from being barren, these words bear a seed from which other words grow in other environments. This makes them capable of giving everlasting life to the original seed, and of making the man who has them as happy as it is possible for a mortal man to be.

PHAEDRUS: Yes, this is certainly far better.

SOCRATES: With this conclusion in place, Phaedrus, we are at last in a position to reach a verdict about the other issue.

PHAEDRUS: What other issue?

SOCRATES: The one that brought us here. We wanted to investigate why Lysias was abused for writing speeches, and the expert or inexperienced composition of the actual speeches. Well, I think we've made it fairly clear what makes for expertise and its lack.

PHAEDRUS: I thought so, but could you remind me again?

SOCRATES: First, someone has to know the truth of every matter he's speaking or writing about, which is to say that he has to be capable of defining a whole as it is in itself and then know how to divide it up class by class until he reaches something indivisible. He also has to be able to distinguish souls in the same sort of way, discover the kind of speech which naturally fits each kind of soul, and organize and arrange his speeches accordingly—offering a complex soul a complex speech which covers the whole range of modes, and a simple soul a simple speech.* Until he can do all this he will be incapable of tackling speeches in as much of a professional manner as their nature allows, either for teaching or for persuasion. This is what the whole of our earlier discussion has shown us.

PHAEDRUS: Yes, absolutely. That's pretty much what we found.

d SOCRATES: So what about the question whether or not it is acceptable to deliver or write speeches, and under what