

Plato, Memory, and Performance

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It is now widely recognized among classicists that in the culture of classical Greece, that is, in the fifth to fourth century B.C.E., the element of “performance” played a prominent role in various aspects of daily life. The term “performance culture” is often applied to classical Greece, especially to Athens, in reference to many areas where the citizens conducted their activities in public, such as dramatic and poetic competitions, athletic competitions, and debates in the democratic assembly and in the law court. All these activities that took place in public were highly competitive, though in different contexts, and demonstration of one’s excellence in performance mattered a great deal in them.¹

Connected to this is another distinctive characteristic of life in classical Athens: that is, the still predominantly oral presentation of poetic works and political and philosophical ideas. Despite the gradual spread of alphabetic writing,² the importance of oral communication in the intellectual life of Athens persisted well into the classical period.³ However, this was also undoubtedly a period of transition when the increasing importance of

¹ For classical Greece as a performance culture, see Hall 1998. The term “performance culture” to cover various public activities appears to be further justified by the similarity of “audience” reaction in different categories of performance, as documented in Wallace 1997.

² The earliest evidence for the Greek alphabet dates from the eighth century B.C.E. For a brief history of the Greek alphabet, see “Alphabet, Greek” in Hornblower and Spawforth 1996:66.

³ Cf. Havelock 1963 for the most influential expression of this observation. See also Harris 1989: ch. 4, espec. 72-73.

writing had begun to affect the way people published or otherwise disseminated their works and ideas.⁴

In this paper I am going to take Plato's writings, especially his philosophical dialogues *Ion* and *Phaedrus*, as a snapshot of this transitional period to examine in some detail what was happening to the hitherto mostly oral culture. I have chosen these two dialogues in order to see how Plato represented the performance of poetry and of rhetorical speeches, respectively. By doing so I hope to gather some evidence for how performance was recorded, memorized, and retrieved, and how such retrieval or representation was regarded by the Greeks in the late fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. at the time of Socrates and Plato. What forms did those representations take and how did they compare with the "real thing," that is, the live performances?

Plato's dialogue *Ion* provides the best evidence for how Homer's poetry was performed in Plato's day because of its subject matter: Socrates' conversation with Ion, a leading rhapsode of Homeric poems. Socrates' tone is ironic throughout, friendly but often teasing, as he plays along with Ion's overconfidence in his ability and value as a rhapsode.⁵ Ion, on the other hand, does not seem aware of Socrates' irony, taking his double-edged compliments at their face value. The gap of awareness between the two interlocutors gives this dialogue a humorous touch, which veils Plato's attack on the claim of poetry as a vehicle of truth.

Almost as soon as the dialogue opens, Socrates challenges Ion in a most courteous and ironic way (530b-c). He says that he is envious of the rhapsodes like Ion for their art (*tekhnê*), which allows them to dress up and look glamorous,⁶ and to have intimate knowledge of many fine poets,

⁴ Cf. Thomas 2003. For detailed examinations of the issues relating to literacy and orality in classical Greece, see Thomas 1989 and 1992.

⁵ Rhapsodes (*rhapsôidoi*) in Plato's time were performers who recited epic poetry, especially that of Homer; unlike poets (*poiêtai*), they did not compose poems by themselves. However, the term was applied to poet-performers in earlier periods. Cf. Gentili 1988:6-7.

⁶ This is an indirect reference to one of the performance aspects of the rhapsode's art, costume. Costume as a significant element in the performance of poetry and even oratory can also be glimpsed in Plato, *Hippias Minor* 368b-d, where the sophist Hippias' works on display include not only poetry and prose speeches, but also self-made jewelry, clothes, and the shoes he is wearing. See also Plato, *Hippias Major* 291a for the mention of Hippias' fine clothes and shoes. All this is in stark contrast with Socrates' well-known neglect of his appearance and comfort, especially with his barefootedness (see, e.g., Plato, *Symposium* 220b).

especially Homer. He goes on to say that a good rhapsode would necessarily have proper understanding of the poet's words because he has to interpret the poet's thought for the audience. That, he says, is worthy of envy.

In these words, Socrates is setting out his program of discrediting the rhapsodes, and through them Homer himself, as educators of Greece.⁷ In the course of the dialogue, Ion is reduced to admitting that, although rhapsodes have some knowledge of all the matters Homer addresses, such as how to drive a chariot or how to be a commander of an army, they can only be inferior judges to the experts in each technical matter concerned. Ion is supposed to be a leading performer of Homeric poems as well as a critic of Homeric poetry at the time (530c-d), but apparently cannot even pinpoint the nature of *his* own expertise. The only honorable way out for him in the end is to agree to Socrates' view that the rhapsode can perform or praise Homer's poems well, not as a result of his skill (*tekhnê*) or knowledge (*epistêmê*), but by divine dispensation, or more simply, by being divine (*theios*) (541e-42b).

Plato's Socrates introduces his idea of poets and rhapsodes as divinely inspired beings in his striking simile of the magnet and iron rings. The Muse is likened to a magnet that attracts iron (533e-34a):⁸

The result is sometimes quite a long chain of rings and scraps of iron suspended from one another, all of them depending on that stone for their power. Similarly, the Muse herself makes some men inspired (*entheous*), from whom a chain of other men is strung out who catch their own inspiration from theirs. For all good epic poets recite all that splendid poetry not by virtue of a skill, but in a state of inspiration and possession. The same is true of good lyric poets as well: just as Corybantic worshippers dance without being in control of their senses, so too it's when they are not in control of *their* senses that the lyric poets compose those fine lyric poems. But once launched into their rhythm and musical mode, they catch a Bacchic frenzy: they are possessed, just like Bacchic women, who when possessed and out of their senses draw milk and honey from rivers—exactly what the souls of the lyric poets do, as they say themselves.

It must surely be significant that similes, which are very common literary devices in Homer, are employed here to convince Ion, the professional

⁷ For the idea of Homer as the educator of Greece, cf. Plato, *Republic* 606e and Verdenius 1970. For Homer's continuing influence on ancient Greeks and Romans, especially on education and rhetoric, see North 1952.

⁸ The quotations from *Ion* in this article are taken from Saunders 1987 with occasional modification and some transliterated Greek words inserted as necessary.

performer of Homeric poems. Later on, the chain is further extended to include rhapsodes and other performers who catch inspiration from the poets, and through them their spectators (535e-36b). It is notable that Socrates compares the inspired state of the poets to a Bacchic frenzy (*bakkheousi*) in which the affected person is “possessed” (*katekhomenoi*) (534a).

The idea of poetry as a product of divine inspiration has a long tradition, evident since the oldest poets in Greece, Homer and Hesiod. After all, Homer begins his *Iliad* with the line “Sing Goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilles.” The line implies that it is the goddess Muse who does the singing, and the poet is merely her mouthpiece.⁹ Socrates turns this very convention against the poets to undermine their claim to any skill (*tekhnê*).¹⁰ He says that the poet (*poiêtês*) has to be inspired (*entheos*) and out of his mind (*ekphrôn*), with his sense (*nous*) no longer within him, in order to be able to compose his poems (*Ion* 534b). To enhance this view Socrates paints a convincing picture of the psychology of epic performance (535b-c):

When you give a performance of epic and stun your audience, and you sing (*âidêis*)¹¹ of Odysseus leaping onto the threshold and revealing himself to the suitors and pouring forth his arrows before his feet, or of Achilles rushing at Hector, or one of those piteous episodes about Andromache or Hecuba or Priam, are you, at that moment, in control of your senses? Or are you taken out of yourself, and does your soul, inspired as it is, imagine itself present at the events you describe—either at Ithaca or Troy or wherever else the scene of the epic is set?

To this Ion can only agree (535c), saying that when he says something piteous, his eyes fill with tears, and when singing something frightening or

⁹ Cf. the opening lines of Homer’s *Odyssey* and Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, where the poet also calls to the Muse(s) to relate the poem. In the *Theogony* Hesiod describes how he met the Muses on Mt. Helicon and received the gift of poetry from them (22-34). For further Homeric and Hesiodic references on divine inspiration, see Sperduti 1950: espec. 224-25 and 228-29.

¹⁰ The words *tekhnê* (“skill”) and *epistêmê* (“knowledge”)—used synonymously in this dialogue—are denied to poets or rhapsodes in Socrates’ analysis. See Murray (1996:108) on *Ion* 532c6.

¹¹ This word alludes to the mode of delivery of epic poetry. The poems were apparently melodiously chanted with (originally) or without (by Plato’s day) the accompaniment of the lyre. Cf. “Rhapsodes” in Hornblower and Spawforth 1996:1311-12.

terrible, his hair stands on end and his heart thumps. When Socrates asks if he is aware that his audience is similarly affected, Ion agrees again (535e):

Yes, I'm very well aware of it. At each performance, I look down on them from up there on the platform as they weep and look at me with dire emotion in their eyes, in amazement at my story. You see, I have to pay a lot of attention to them—since if I make them cry I shall laugh all the way to the bank, whereas if I provoke their laughter it's I who'll do the crying, for loss of my money.

We may detect a touch of cynicism on the part of Plato here. On the one hand, he is presenting a deliberately exaggerated picture of the divine poet or performer who composes or performs in the state of “madness.” On the other hand, he paints a realistic picture of a professional performer fully aware of the audience's reaction and its financial result.¹² The power of performance and an audience's fascination with it obviously existed, as it does today, but this was an age of reason that no longer believed in divine inspiration as depicted in Homer, or not literally at any rate. It is perfectly possible that the idea of Muse-inspired poetry was more or less the “official” view maintained by the Greeks since Homer even down to Plato's day, but the idea that poets compose and performers perform in a state of “divine madness” where they lack control of their senses is not a common view in ancient Greece, and more likely to be a Platonic “myth.”¹³ On the evidence of this dialogue, it is hard to think that Plato sincerely believed that poets composed or performed in a frenzied state. Even Ion himself protests that he is not “possessed and frenzied” (*katekhomenos kai mainomenos*, 536d) when he is commenting on Homer's poetry.

The exact nature of divine inspiration in ancient Greek literature is a subject of much debate. In Homer, there is no sign of divine madness or frenzy in the cases of the bards Demodocus and Phemius. In fact Phemius says that he is “self-taught” but the songs are “planted by the gods” (*Od.* 22.347-48), suggesting the co-existence of divine inspiration and human

¹² Cf. Weineck 1998:30: “he is quite conscious of manipulating his audience, and his own passions are diametrically opposed to those of his listeners instead of being ‘magnetically’ related to them.”

¹³ Cf. Murray 1992:34. The earliest extant source of the notion of the frenzied poet is Democritus (mid-fifth to mid-fourth century B.C.E.; in Diels 1952:fr. 17 and fr. 18), but it appears that Plato is the author most responsible for propagating the idea. Cf. Dodds 1951:82; Tigerstedt 1969:espec. 66-67.

technique.¹⁴ Penelope Murray (1999:32) observes that Demodocus' art is also described in the *Odyssey* (8.44-45) as both god-given and the product of his own mind (*thûmos*). Pausanias (9.29.2) records an old tradition in which there were three Muses, Meletê (Study), Mnêmê (Memory) and Aoidê (Song) whose names also seem to point to both divine and human aspects of the Muses' art. As Detienne puts it (1996:41), "*Meletê* designated the discipline indispensable to any bardic apprentice: attention, concentration, and mental exercise." This seems to indicate the important part played by the conscious human effort in the creation and performance of poetry, far from the image of the frenzied divine poet who is "out of his mind," and also incidentally points to the close connection between memory and poetry (cf. Murray 1999:36).

Anthropological studies have also taught us to be aware of different sorts of "divine" or trance-like inspiration found in various cultures around the world. Ruth Finnegan (1988:73-75) describes Eskimo poets' deep poetic concentration during composition and cites an example from the southern Pacific where the poet is believed to receive divine inspiration to compose his "rough draft," which is subsequently polished in consultation with others. From these as well as from other examples from the Pacific, Finnegan (*ibid.*:95-102) observes the recurring emphasis on divine inspiration as well as memorization in the composition of songs and dances. This seems to me to be akin to Homer's notion of a poetic inspiration that does not work without conscious human endeavor.

Felicia Hughes-Freeland's (1997) description of the Javanese dance theory of Joged Mataram appears to shed further light on the nature of trance-like performance. According to the theory, "the experienced dancer ceases to experience the doing of the movements: the acquired habits of movement have their own momentum independent of the performer's intention" (61) and "one is not aware of self or the audience, and one is aware of one's fellow-dancers and the pillars on the stage to the extent that one does not collide with them" (64-65). This sort of balance between the performer being absorbed in the performance on the one hand and yet being conscious of the practicalities on the other, I imagine, could be found in almost any of the performing arts. In light of such comparative evidence, perhaps Plato's description of Ion's experience, which combines the "inspired" state and the pragmatic consciousness of the audience reaction, is not so cynical as it is realistic.

The *Ion* incidentally provides us with the main evidence for how Homer was memorized and received in the late fifth to early fourth century

¹⁴ Cf. Maehler 1999:7 and Macleod 1999:46.

B.C.E. While they are debating whether the rhapsode can be an expert on everything that Homer treated in his works, Socrates and Ion produce some quotations from Homer as pieces of evidence. The first example regarding chariot-driving is produced by Ion (537a-b, quoted from *Il.* 23.335-40), but Socrates never needs Ion's help again, for he himself produces all the rest of the examples from Homer (three from the *Iliad* and one from the *Odyssey*; 538c-d, 539a-d). To make Socrates outdo the professional in reciting Homer is surely Plato's deliberate irony.

Another remarkable point about this sequence is that Ion's and the first three of Socrates' Homeric examples are each slightly "misquoted" or at any rate noticeably different from the extant texts that we have. For example, the first line of Ion's quotation (537a8-b5) reads:

klinthênai de, phêsi, kai autos euxestôi eni diphroî

Lean over, he says, yourself also in your well-polished chariot.

Whereas the corresponding line in Homer (*Il.* 23.335) of our extant text reads:

autos de klinthênai euplektôi eni diphroî

Yourselves lean over in your well-plated chariot.

So Plato makes Ion insert "he [i.e., Homer] says" and "also" into his quoted passage, changes the word order, and replaces *euplektôi* ("well-plated") with *euxestôi* ("well-polished"). This variant reading is not found in any other manuscript tradition and the word order is so radically different that it is very unlikely to be a result of scribal errors. It is more likely to be Plato's own "version" as a result of his citing from memory. And yet the line, with the words jumbled up and with the addition of one little word, *kai* ("and"), still scans correctly as hexameter, which makes it sound like a genuine Homeric line.

The deviation from our text is even more pronounced in Socrates' first quotation at 538c:

***oinôi pramneiôi, phêsin, epi d' aigeion knê tûron
knêsti khalkeîi, para de kromuon potôi opson.***

**of Pramneian wine, he says, and over it she grated the cheese of a goat,
with a grater of bronze, and then an onion as relish for the drink.**

This in fact is a mixture of *Il.* 11.639-40:

**oinôi pramneiôi, epi d' aigeion knê tûron
knêsti khalkeiêi, epi d'alphita leuka palune,**

**of Pramneian wine, and over it she grated the cheese of a goat,
with a greater of bronze, and sprinkled white barley over it,**

and of *Il.* 11.630:

khalkeion kaneon, epi de kromuon potôi opson

a bronze basket, **and then an onion as relish for the drink.**

The proximity of the two Homeric passages, occurring within the same context (Hecamede serving food and drink to Machaon), and the presence of the word for bronze in both are likely to have triggered this confusion. Again, this variant is not attested in any other manuscript tradition, and highly unlikely to be a scribal error. It is most certainly Plato's misquotation—"une défaillance de mémoire" as Labarbe puts it—but again the lines scan as hexameter verse, thus sounding like genuine Homeric lines.¹⁵

What are we to make of such variations? Ion does not appear to notice these "errors," either his own or Socrates', despite the fact that he is supposed to be a leading expert in Homeric verse. Nor does it seem to matter to Socrates, who introduces his quotations by saying "he [Homer] puts it more or less like this" (538c). The most likely explanation is that Plato was not himself aware of making these mistakes, having quoted the Homeric lines from memory. This casual attitude to literary quotations is very common in Plato's writings, reflecting no doubt the usual way people quoted Homer and other authors in their daily conversation. We might expect that professional rhapsodes in real life would have had a more accurate knowledge of Homeric verses than Plato, but it is not inconceivable that the sort of slight variations as we have seen in Ion's quotation above could have naturally occurred in live performances. Comparative evidence seems to

¹⁵ Cf. Labarbe 1949:104. Cf. Xenophon, *Symposium* 4.7, where the second half of *Il.* 11.630 is quoted correctly with *epi*. Plato refers to the same episode in *Republic* 405e-06a, but misremembers the characters involved, substituting Eurypylos and Patroclus for Machaon and Hecamede. Cf. Murray 1996 on *Ion* 538c1. The other quotes by Socrates in the rest of the sequence have less radical variations. For further details, see Labarbe 1949:88-136.

suggest that such inexact reproduction of verses is not uncommon in oral poetry, and we might be witnessing here one of the last stages of the oral transmission of Homeric texts in Plato's dialogues, albeit only in quotations.¹⁶ We can also infer that educated Athenians such as Socrates and Plato knew enough Homer by heart not only to remember much of the texts correctly but also to recast, albeit inadvertently, original lines with different words or in different word order and still make them say roughly the same thing and scan as hexameter. Here is a hint of creative memory driven by the rhythm of the hexameter, which was no doubt drilled into the Greek mind from an early age.

At this point it may be useful to have a general overview of Plato's uses of Homer. Plato's attack on poets, especially Homer, is well-known, but in fact his direct criticism of Homer is confined to only three dialogues, the *Republic*, where Socrates famously banishes poets from his ideal state (607a), *Hippias Minor*, and *Ion*, which we have just seen. Out of 35 canonical dialogues (including the ones that are not thought to be by Plato himself), 30 of them contain Homeric references, either mentioning Homer as the poet *par excellence* or his characters as examples, or quoting or referring to his poems as a source of information of great authority that everyone knows and draws on.¹⁷

It is ironic that despite his aspiration to replace Homer with philosophy as the new curriculum of education, or rather because of it, Plato had to use Homer to authenticate his arguments and to make his philosophical dialogues lively and natural. It was natural because Greeks in those days were educated with Homer's texts and they quoted from them all the time.¹⁸ Hence, references to Homer formed a large part of the art of conversation and indeed of Socratic dialectic, too.¹⁹ The complete poems of Homer no doubt were available both as written texts and through public

¹⁶ For the fluidity of oral poetry, see Lord 1960:99-123.

¹⁷ For the most comprehensive survey to date of Homeric quotations and references, see Labarbe 1949.

¹⁸ E.g., Plato's *Symposium* and Xenophon's *Symposium*, especially the case of Niceratus, whose father Nicias made him learn the entire *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Xenophon, *Symposium* 3.5). Cf. Verdenius 1970.

¹⁹ It appears that Socrates was particularly fond of quoting Homer, judging not only by Plato's evidence but also Xenophon's, who reports that Socrates was accused of constantly quoting a certain passage from Homer, *Il.* 2.188-91 and 198-202 (*Memorabilia* 1.2.58).

performances, but the memorized texts (or parts of texts) had their own life, as it were. They had their mini-performances in daily conversations.

I turn now to my second text, Plato's *Phaedrus*. It is a dialogue between Socrates and his friend Phaedrus on at least three main topics. At first the subject is a speech by Lysias, which prompts two speeches by Socrates on the nature of love. Then they discuss the nature of rhetoric and, finally, the contrast between written and spoken words. What is of particular interest to our current investigation is the preamble, where Phaedrus talks about the ways in which he can reproduce a speech by Lysias, the leading orator at that time.²⁰ When he first meets Socrates while out walking, Phaedrus talks as if he has been listening to Lysias' speech delivered by the orator himself ("I have been with Lysias," he says), but it turns out that he has actually been reading a written text of the speech that advises young men not to yield to sexual advances from those who are in love with them, but rather to ones from those who are not. Socrates sees through Phaedrus' coded language and unmasks the real situation (228a-b):²¹

[that] he wasn't content with a single hearing of Lysias' speech but made him repeat it a number of times, and that Lysias willingly complied. But even that didn't satisfy Phaedrus, and in the end he took the manuscript and went over his favourite passages by himself. Finally, exhausted by sitting at this occupation since early morning, he went out for a walk with the whole speech, I could swear, firmly in his head, unless it was excessively long. His motive in going outside the walls was to be able to declaim it aloud.

A number of interesting observations can be made about this passage. Lysias presumably had a written version of his speech, but it was clearly meant for oral delivery.²² Phaedrus as a member of the audience may request to hear it more than once and try to memorize it or he may obtain the manuscript from the author and read it. What he subsequently does seems to imply that after studying the speech, what he then wanted to do was to deliver it by himself, hopefully to some audience of his own. This seems to

²⁰ The dramatic date of the *Phaedrus* (presumed to be sometime in the late fifth century B.C.E.) cannot be determined, as the pieces of internal evidence contradict one another. The date of composition is likely to be at a later stage of Plato's career. Cf. Nehamas and Woodruff 1995:xiii-xiv and Rowe 2000:13-14.

²¹ Translations from the *Phaedrus* in this article are taken from Hamilton 1973.

²² Cf. Thomas (1992:124): "In public oratory, Greek orators fostered the appearance of improvisation and spontaneity, even if they had a text."

imply that the speech must be performed in order to be fully appreciated, even by the audience on the receiving end.

What happens next in the dialogue is equally interesting. Phaedrus says that he has not learned the speech by heart, but he can summarize the argument point by point for Socrates (228d). Clearly he would have preferred to perform a version of the speech orally by himself. But Socrates spots that Phaedrus is hiding the manuscript itself under his cloak, and insists that he would rather hear “Lysias,” that is, the text itself, read aloud to him (228d-e).²³ So here are two ways of thinking: (1) speeches have to be delivered live but (2) the authentic authorial voice retrieved from the fixed text is more desirable than a second-hand re-creation of the performance by someone else.

We are witnessing here an interesting phase of oral culture, when written texts have arrived as an optional memory aid and yet the purely oral mode of memorizing and reproducing the oral performance is very much alive and appears even to be preferred by keen learners. As we have seen in *Ion*, allowance seems to be made for a degree of inaccuracy in the case of recall from memory—as long as you get the gist right.²⁴ But this new technology—writing—has made it possible to produce the “author himself” in the form of the fixed text, and with it we can see the arrival of the new concept of authenticity.²⁵

But Lysias’ speech, read out by Phaedrus, is not the end of the story. It triggers Socrates’ own speech (237a-41d) first to outdo it along the same lines of argument (you should yield to those who are not in love with you), and then another speech (244a-57b) to reverse the conclusion (you should yield to those who are in love with you). Unlike Lysias’ written text, which has no room for expansion, we are given the picture of Socrates “actually” improvising and composing the speeches to respond to immediate questions. Plato takes enormous trouble to set the scene (230b-c) on a hot summer day, with Socrates and Phaedrus sheltering in the shade of a plane tree under

²³ Sheid and Svenbro (1996:124-25) observe the sexual connotation of the “reader” and the “writer” being under the same cloak, and the implication of this passage that the written words become a complete “text” only when woven with a live voice.

²⁴ Cf. Thucydides 1.22, for the same attitude towards oral memory, which he utilized to write his set speeches. For lack of precision in oral style, see Gagarin 1999:166.

²⁵ For the formulation of writing as a technology, see Ong 1988:espec. 80-82, and for writing’s effect on the mode of thinking, especially Plato’s, see Havelock 1963.

which runs a cool spring sacred to a river god and some nymphs. They lie down, listening to the cicadas' chorus over their heads.²⁶

It is in this setting that Socrates hears Lysias' speech read out to him and then gives his own in response. He describes himself as "inspired" (or "beside myself"; *enthousiasô*, 241e5) and his style is often poetic, even addressing the Muses as he begins his first speech (237a7) and launching into hexameter verse at the end of the speech (241d1).²⁷ Although these two instances show a very heavy hint of Socratic irony, there is no doubt that Plato is trying to bring some element of poetic inspiration into his creation as well as to recreate some essence of the live performance of Socratic dialectic. A little later in the dialogue (245a) Socrates speaks of poetic inspiration in terms similar to those in *Ion*, though in this instance with no obvious irony: "But if a man comes to the door of poetry untouched by the madness of the Muses, believing that technique alone will make him a good poet, he and his sane compositions never reach perfection, but are utterly eclipsed by the performances of the inspired madman."

What was the motive for Plato to write this dialogue dotted with many poetic expressions? Is it merely play, by which he is confessing that he has a soft spot for poetry? Is he being ironic or seriously trying to present Socrates as an inspired teacher whose art of philosophy is the true art of the Muses that we must follow? And why did Plato write anything at all? As is well known, Plato's attitude toward writing was deeply skeptical. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates relates a myth reputedly from Egypt (274c-75b): the god Theuth invents writing but the king of Egypt denounces it as something harmful that damages rather than improves one's memory, and that also can give a large quantity of information without proper instruction, which fills the learners with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom. After telling this story, Socrates goes on to express in his own words the inadequacy of writing (275d)—it cannot answer any queries, can be misunderstood without the author to explain it, and is available even to unsuitable readers.

These were the very problems that Plato himself faced when committing his thoughts to writing, and he gives this warning in his *Seventh Letter*, widely considered to be written either by himself or by a source close

²⁶ For a detailed analysis of the significance of the dialogue's setting, see Ferrari 1987:espec. 1-36.

²⁷ This incidentally provides further evidence for the extent to which educated Greeks in the fifth and fourth centuries were imbued with poetry, especially with Homeric verse.

to him. Concerning his philosophical quest, he says (341c-d; Hamilton 1973:136):

No treatise by me concerning it exists or ever will exist. It is not something that can be put into words like other branches of learning; only after long partnership in a common life devoted to this very thing does truth flash upon the soul, like a flame (*phôs*) kindled by a leaping spark (*pûros*), and once it is born there it nourishes itself thereafter. Yet this too I know, that if there were to be any oral or written teaching on this matter it would best come from me, and that it is I who would feel most deeply the harm caused by an inferior exposition.

Here is the same attitude toward writing as we have seen in the *Phaedrus*. The written text cannot answer any queries, but if it has to be committed to writing at all it has to come from the author himself.²⁸ That certainly explains why Plato did write his works, albeit reluctantly, but why did he write dialogues in particular? This is a complex question that may never be adequately answered, but one of the possible answers will be his need to convey that “flame” (*phôs*) as he calls it in the *Seventh Letter*, something that one simply cannot put into words. Ideally we should have a live performance of philosophical discussion either with Socrates or with Plato in order to catch that flame from them. So the second-best thing for the author was to attempt to simulate the live performance of dialectic as best as he could to foster the *habit* of doing philosophy in the souls of the readers.²⁹

At the same time, Plato is also aware that in order for his dialogues to have life, to pass on the “flame,” his writing itself will have to have that “flame” in the first place. He is aware that his dialogues need to have something of the magical quality that Homer and other great poets possess, something more than the sum total of questions and answers, doctrines and fancy myths.³⁰ He is trying to capture and pass on something beyond

²⁸ However, see Edelstein (1966:83) for the subtle difference in attitude to writing between the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*.

²⁹ Cf. Thomas (1992:127): “The texts were reminders, mnemonic aids, for what was more accurately propagated and understood through the living performance, from the teacher himself.”

³⁰ Plato as an inspired poet is eloquently described in the following words of von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff regarding the *Phaedrus* (1920:486; trans. by Nicholson 1999:88): “Why then does he write, and why does he write this very dialogue? As he tells us himself, it is play. And why does he play? Anyone who grasps this dialogue as a whole has no difficulty in seeing the answer. He has to write; he is driven by something unconscious, an inner force. This too is a divine madness. The poet within drives him to

technique. In committing his words to writing in a dialogue form, Plato could expect his works to be partially learned by heart, or at least read aloud,³¹ which could bring out some essence of his teacher Socrates' "performance," that is, his discussions with his friends. In this sense, we can interpret the format of the dialogue as Plato's invitation to performance.³² Whether you simply retrieve it mechanically from the pages or from memory, as Phaedrus did with Lysias' speech, or join in by thinking aloud as Socrates did afterwards is left up to us.³³

Conclusion

From our Platonic evidence taken mainly from the *Ion* and *Phaedrus*, we can make a number of observations. In Plato's day, Homeric epics had more or less definitive written texts that were available for learners to memorize. Not only professional rhapsodes, who were able to recite the entire Homeric poems from memory, but also some laypersons knew all or sizeable portions of them by heart. Proper recitals had theatrical elements that added to the audience's fascination. However, Homeric texts were more casually quoted as an encyclopedic source of knowledge and wisdom either

write, and no matter how low he may set the value of poetry, he lets poetry flourish just as, now, he has let rhetoric flourish. On one condition: one must have recognized the truth and be prepared to defend it (278c), one must have that goal before one's eyes and seek with all one's might to accomplish in words that which will please the gods (273e). Wisdom belongs to God alone, but we can all become lovers of wisdom."

³¹ Cf. Ryle 1966 for the view that most of Plato's dialogues were composed to be orally delivered. For evidence indicating that written texts were normally read aloud, see Thomas 1992:4.

³² Clay (1992:117) points out the effect of the dialogue form that invites the reader to be "the audience of a philosophical drama" and to "imitate—or impersonate—the speakers of a dialogue." For a comprehensive discussion of ancient evidence relating to Plato's dialogues as performance texts (either for recitation or theatrical performance), see Charalabopoulos 2001. For dramatic elements in Plato's work, see Tarrant 1955.

³³ Regarding these choices, see Notopoulos (1938:478): "The memory which Plato advocates, it will be seen, is not the memory of the written word, which is simply a static and retentive memory, but the creative memory of the oral literature which is vital and synonymous with thinking itself" and Ferrari (1987:214): "what matters most is that we do philosophy rather than merely go for its effects, follow Socrates rather than Phaedrus." Also see Sayre (1988:108-9) for the view that Plato's dialogues invite the reader's active participation in the discovery of the truth.

in daily conversation (as Plato depicted) or in writing (as in Plato's own) and on such occasions a considerable degree of departure from the texts was permitted, though the sense of the "fixed" text evidently existed.

Further evidence suggests that education in Plato's day largely consisted of memorizing Homer. That education then furnished some (such as Plato and Socrates) with the ability to spin out a line or two in hexameter verse. It is likely that the internalized rhythmic patterns have a certain momentum that facilitates words to come out in verse, a process that the Greeks might have associated with inspiration. Cross-cultural evidence also seems to be consistent with the observation that memorization is at the basis of "inspired" poetic creativity.

From the *Phaedrus* we can also learn that orators delivered their speeches live even when they had the option of composing and keeping the text in writing or reading from a written text. The mode of reception, however, is varied. It is acknowledged that the author's live performance is the ideal since the audience can pose questions directly to the author. Members of the audience may try to memorize as much of the speech as they can and pass that on to another audience orally, or obtain its written text and either learn it by heart to deliver it or to read the text out for themselves or for others. In other words, literary texts, both poetic and rhetorical, are primarily something to be performed, something to be brought to life with the help of living voice. This is undoubtedly the habit that Plato could count on in his contemporary readership when he wrote his philosophical dialogues. Plato's dialogues are like Homer's poetry or Lysias' speeches in this respect, though they are not meant for mere oral reproduction of "fixed" texts, but rather to invite and inspire living performances of philosophy.

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