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## On the Meaning of the Key Concepts in Plato's Criticism of Writing: A Philological Approach to *Phaedrus* 274b–278e

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ON THE MEANING OF THE KEY CONCEPTS IN PLATO'S CRITICISM OF WRITING:  
A PHILOLOGICAL APPROACH TO *PHAEDRUS* 274B–278E

ABSTRACT. The standard modern interpretation of Plato's Criticism of Writing (*Phaedrus* 274b–278e) is based on misunderstandings and incorrect interpretations of the key concepts of this text. The original Platonic meaning of the concepts in question can be found in the dialogues. Instead of importing modern prejudices into the interpretation of Plato's Criticism of Writing, this article offers an exercise in explaining Plato out of Plato (in accordance with the old Greek principle Ὅμηρον ἔξ Ὁμήρου σαφηνίζειν. The sense of the Criticism of Writing turns out to be the contrary of what it has been believed to be in the last 50 years since G. Vlastos 1963.

KEYWORDS: Plato's Criticism of Writing, *syngramma*, *timiōtera*, *boēthein tōi logōi*, Gregory Vlastos.

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A. With the subtitle of my paper “A *philological* approach to *Phaedrus* 274b–278e” I do not intend to construe an artificial opposition between a philological approach and a philosophical one. There are no two different and separate ways to what Plato meant, nor are there two different truths about his criticism of writing. Our understanding of a philosophical text must of course be a philosophical understanding. When I talk of a philological approach, I do so in order to make clear from the start that I do not intend to violate or to neglect the usual rules and procedures of philological exegesis — rules and procedures that we have to observe in any interpretation, be it a literary or philosophical, a theological or a juridical one. I call them philological rules because Greek Classical Philology of the 3rd century B.C. was the

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first discipline to spell them out. To violate or neglect these rules and procedures is in my view no philosophical merit.

I'm going to show that the standard modern interpretation of our text is based on the neglect of philologically indispensable interpretive steps. In which respects and at which points my interpretation diverges from other interpretations will be pointed out at the end.

B. First, let us recall Plato's criticism of writing. I would divide the text into six sections.

1. After the question of artfulness and artlessness of *logoi* has been discussed sufficiently (ικανῶς), Socrates wants to turn to the question of their propriety and impropriety (εὐπρέπεια – ἀπρέπεια). As a start, he points to the basic fact that the decisive criterion will be whether we can please god with our use of *logoi*. On this issue, Socrates can tell a tale he has heard from the ancients. (274b2–c4)

2. It is the tale of the Egyptian god Theuth, who invented a couple of arts, among them the art of writing, and presented them to Thamous, king of Egypt. The king asked Theuth about the usefulness of each art. When the inventor praised writing as the art that will make the Egyptians wiser and improve their memory, Thamous replied that writing will rather damage memory and induce forgetfulness, since people will rely on signs external to the soul. And having read a lot without teaching (ἄνευ διδαχῆς), they will not become wise but only appear to be wise (δοξόσοφοι γεγονότες ἀντὶ σοφῶν). In short, it is quite naive to believe that writing can yield insights that are clear and reliable (σαφές καὶ βέβαιον). Written words can do no more than remind the one who knows already what the writing is about. (274c5–275d2)

3. For writing – γραφή in general – has these three flaws or shortcomings: (1) It cannot respond when you have a question – it will always say the same, (2) it rolls about everywhere, gets into the hands of those who understand it and of those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. (3) When attacked, the written *logos* is unable to defend or to help itself, it needs its father (the author) for help. But there is a different kind of *logos*, which is free of these flaws: the living and animate dis-

course of the man who knows, of which the written discourse can be called an image (εἶδωλον). (275d4–276a9)

4. Socrates now proceeds to a simile. Just as a sensible farmer (α νοῦν ἔχων γεωργός) will not plant seeds which he wanted to bear fruit in gardens of Adonis, but will make use of such gardens only as an amusement at the time of the festival of Adonis, likewise the dialectician will not plant his philosophical seed which is of importance to him into his gardens of Adonis, i.e. his writings, except when he writes for his amusement (πασιδιᾶς χάριν), storing up reminders for himself and for those who follow the same track. His serious treatment of his ‘seeds’ will consist in oral dialectic with a proper soul (λαβῶν ψυχὴν προσήκουσαν), to whom he imparts *logoi* accompanied by knowledge, *logoi* that are capable of helping themselves and which make the soul happy. (276b1–277a5)

5. By now, Socrates says, we are able to answer the original question regarding the reproach levelled against Lysias as a speech-writer, and the question of which *logoi* are written in an artful manner and which not. Regarding the second question, Socrates summarizes: The artful spoken or written *logos* must be based (1) on full dialectical knowledge of the objects to be treated, (2) on a complete knowledge of the different kinds of souls, and (3) on the ability of matching the right kind of *logos* to the right kind of soul. Regarding the first question, Socrates takes up what had been said to follow from the Egyptian tale: to believe that anything clear and reliable can result from a written book is shameful, because too simple-minded, whereas a man who knows that nothing written is worth serious attention and that the best written *logoi* are reminders for those who already know would be a model for Socrates and Phaedrus. (277a6–278b6)

6. Finally, Socrates formulates the following message to all who write speeches like Lysias or poetry like Homer or lyrical poetry or who write political *logoi* calling them laws: If an author wrote what he wrote knowing the truth and being able to help his writing by entering an ἔλεγχος and showing orally (λέγων αὐτὸς) that what he wrote is of inferior value, then he deserves the name – not σοφός, which would

be proper only for god, but — φιλόσοφος. If, on the other hand, an author has nothing of higher value than what he wrote, he could fairly be called a poet or a speech-writer or a writer of laws.

So far, the text we call Plato's *Criticism of Writing*. (If Plato had given this chapter a separate title, he rather would have entitled it "Under which conditions is the use of writing not shameful", or "How can the use of writing please god?")

The Greek concepts in this chapter the meaning of which seem to be clear at first sight, but on closer inspection need further philological clarification, are the following:

1. σύγγραμμα — does it really mean 'treatise'?
2. γραφή — why does Plato talk about the flaws of γραφή?
3. Ἀδώνιδος κήποι — what kind of gardens are they?
4. εἶδωλον — why is it important to know that the dialogues are εἶδωλα?
5. βοηθεῖν τῷ λόγῳ — in what consists this ability?
6. εἰδῶς ἧ τὸ ἀληθές ἔχει — what kind of truth is meant?
7. τὰ γεγραμμένα φαῦλα ἀποδείξαι — have we to translate φαῦλα by 'false'?
8. σιγᾶν πρὸς οὓς δεῖ — why should it be necessary to remain silent to anybody?
9. τιμώτερα — what is "of higher value", and compared to what?
10. θεῶ χαρίζεσθαι — what has god to do with my use of *logoi*?

C. The standard modern interpretation of Plato's criticism of writing is the following.<sup>1</sup>

1. Plato does not include his dialogues in his criticism. Rather, his target are συγγράμματα (277d7, 278c4). The Greek word σύγγραμμα means 'treatise', i.e. a systematic exposition in writing, and does not cover the literary form of dialogue.

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed description, analysis and criticism of the modern theory of the Platonic dialogue, as it developed from Schleiermacher's Introduction to his translation of Plato (1804) through the 19th and 20th centuries, until it became the dominant view in practically all countries and all currents of Plato studies, can be found in my book Szlezák 1985: 331–375 (Anhang I: „Die moderne Theorie der Dialogform”).

2. Therefore the three shortcomings of writing do not apply to Plato's dialogues. These are able — in contradistinction to all other sorts of writing — to give new answers, to choose the appropriate reader and to help themselves when attacked. Thus, the Platonic dialogue is a unique kind of writing. It is a book, which transcends its character of being a book.

3. Βοηθεῖν τῷ λόγῳ, 'to come to the help of one's *logos*', designates what we all practice when after reading a paper we are confronted with critical questions: we defend our statements, we vindicate them against stupid or malicious misunderstanding, we refute sophistical objections to them, we reinforce them by showing how they follow from strong premises or have illuminating implications.<sup>2</sup>

4. The τιμώτερον the φιλόσοφος must have at his disposal mean nothing but live debate and the oral dialectic which Plato rated "a far more valuable activity than written composition"<sup>3</sup>.

5. From all this, and especially from the last two points follows that there is no necessity to assume that Plato requires the philosopher to go philosophically beyond his written exposition, no necessity to admit that Plato's oral philosophy comprised more than his dialogues.

D. Unfortunately, this standard modern interpretation of the criticism of writing is based on faulty assumptions about the Platonic meaning of the terms used in it.

1. Let us start with the word σύγγραμμα. It means 'treatise', we were told a hundred times in 20th century scholarship. And 'treatise' means "a systematic exposition or argument in writing including a methodical discussion of the facts and principles involved and conclusions reached"<sup>4</sup>. Relying on this understanding of σύγγραμμα and of 'treatise', Guthrie could maintain (in his monumental *History of Greek Philosophy*) that a Platonic dialogue is "no ordinary writ-

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<sup>2</sup>I follow here the explanation of βοηθεῖν τῷ λόγῳ given by G. Vlastos in Vlastos 1963: 653. Only the last part of Vlastos' explanation ("by showing how they follow...") comes near to what Plato meant. Vlastos obviously did not realize that this meaning of βοηθεῖν τῷ λόγῳ is apt to refute his 'refutation' of Krämer's interpretation.

<sup>3</sup>Vlastos 1963: 654.

<sup>4</sup>Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary. Springfield: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1975.

ten work (σύγγραμμα) purporting to summarize final conclusions”<sup>5</sup>. Countless important and less important scholars had voiced this view before Guthrie, yet none of them (including Guthrie) ever put the simple question whether ancient Greek usage would confirm their view. In other words: a basic philological requirement, indispensable for any sort of interpretation, be it philosophical or philological, viz. to ascertain the ancient Greek usage of a key notion, was skipped by scholars of all nations. Not happy with this strange omission, I collected in 1985, in my *Platon und die Schriftlichkeit der Philosophie*, all occurrences of σύγγραμμα, συγγραφή and συγγράφειν in pre-Platonic literature, plus a number of occurrences of σύγγραμμα in post-Platonic writings<sup>6</sup>. The result of this survey – to my knowledge the first one and the only one up to this day – was unambiguous: the Greeks did not use the word σύγγραμμα in the sense of ‘systematic exposition’ – anything ‘written together’ could be called a σύγγραμμα, even works of poetry (though mostly it means ‘prose work’). And the Greeks of later times, who in their Atticist attitude in general carefully preserved the usage of the classical time, had not the slightest qualms to call the dialogues “Πλάτωνος συγγράμματα” or “Πλατωνικά συγγράμματα”.<sup>7</sup> Thus the notion of the necessarily undialogical σύγγραμμα, which would exempt his own dialogues from Plato’s criticism of writing, proves to be a futile modern invention. Yet this *syngamma*-argument was a main stabilizing column of the edifice to the modern theory of the Platonic dialogue. Fortunately, this ‘argument’ has disappeared, at least in Germany, since 1985 (though no one says where he or she learned about its futility). Strangely enough, it is still in use in Oxford: 30 years after the ancient Greek use of σύγγραμμα has been documented, Myles Burnyeat in his recent book on the Seventh Letter still relies on the validity of the once generally believed equation σύγγραμμα = ‘treatise’.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Guthrie 1978: 411. Guthrie referred the words quoted here to the *Republic* in particular, but obviously meant them to apply to all dialogues.

<sup>6</sup> Szlezák 1985: 376–385.

<sup>7</sup> Szlezák 1985: 379–380.

<sup>8</sup> Burnyeat & Frede 2015. Burnyeat claims to know that Plato denies “that he ever has or ever will write a treatise (341c5: σύγγραμμα) on his own philosophy” (p. 164). In

2. The second important notion is γραφή (275d4). Γραφή as such has three unsurmountable shortcomings. Why does Plato use this word in this context? Because it is the most general designation of the concept of ‘writing’. If γραφή as such has the three basic flaws, his own writings will have them too. If he meant that his works don’t have these flaws, he ought to have said it here.

3. What are ‘gardens of Adonis’? Ἀδώνιδος κῆποι were small pots or baskets used in the cult of Adonis.<sup>9</sup> They were filled with soil, into which grain was planted. They were kept in the heat and in the dark, so that the plants grew up in only eight days. But these plants had no seed, i.e. no grains, no fruit, in Greek: no σπέρματα, no καρπός. In the light of the summer day they withered quickly, and the baskets were set afloat with the lamentation “ὦ τὸν Ἄδωνιν”, commemorating the death of Aphrodite’s beloved Adonis. Now think of a farmer who would plant all his seed (grain) into gardens of Adonis. He would deprive himself of the harvest or ‘fruit’, because these gardens don’t bear fruit. So he would run the risk of starvation for his family, and certainly no one could call him “a sensible farmer” (νοῦν ἔχων γεωργός, cf. 276b1–2). If we don’t want to spoil Plato’s simile, we have to acknowledge that the dialectician will not plant all his grain in his literary gardens of Adonis, just as the sensible farmer cannot do that with his seed. Some modern scholars obviously do not know what Ἀδώνιδος κῆποι are: Winfried Kühn e.g. spoils the simile by saying that the Platonic philosopher will put all his knowledge into his writings<sup>10</sup> (by which he would come by the side of the senseless farmer), or take the translators A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff, who translate the words θεωρῶν καλοὺς ἐν ἡμέραισιν ὀκτῶ γιγνομένους (“seeing that the gardens become beautiful within eight days”, 276b4) by “watching them bear

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reality, the Seventh Letter does not raise the question of the form of a possible writing on Plato’s philosophy, it just states that it does not make sense to write at all “περὶ ὧν ἐγὼ σπουδάζω” (341c1–2). Cf. Szlezák 1979.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Baudy 1986.

<sup>10</sup> Kühn 1998. See also my reply to Kühn, Szlezák 1999.

fruit within seven [sic] days”<sup>11</sup> – they don’t seem to have understood the point of the simile, which is precisely that a garden of Adonis on principle cannot bear fruit (καρπός).

4. The φιλόσοφος will orally produce τιμώτερα, ‘more valuable things’, than those he composed or wrote (278d8). The standard explanation declares that the τιμώτερα are the activity of leading live dialectical debate. This interpretation is impossible for at least three reasons: (1) for this sense, one would require a Greek text like “τὸν μὴ ἔχοντα τιμώτερόν τι τοῦ συντιθέναι ἢ γράφειν” (“the one who does not have something more valuable than composing or writing”), whereas the transmitted text has: “τὸν μὴ ἔχοντα τιμώτερα ὧν συνέθηκεν ἢ ἔγραψεν”. Thus, the standard interpretation is linguistically impossible. It wants to make us believe that Plato compared the activity of live debate not with another activity, but with the *results* of another activity, i.e. of writing. In reality, he compares his books, which are the results of his activity of writing and publishing, with the philosophical results of his other activity, viz. leading live debate in the Academy. These results were summarized in his oral theory of principles. (2) The meaning of τιμώτερα has already been anticipated in the *Phaedrus* itself. After Lysias’ speech on Eros a better speech is sought for. It will have to fulfil the condition that it contains μείζω, βελτίω and πλείω καὶ πλείονος ἄξια (*Phdr.* 234e3, 235d6, 236b2). These expressions refer clearly to the philosophical content: the better speech must have better contents, must comprise things of higher philosophical value (πλείονος ἄξια). Indeed, Socrates’ first speech on Eros does contain better philosophical content, πλείονος ἄξια, than Lysias’ speech, and his second speech is again full of πλείονος ἄξια in comparison with his first one. So the reader knows already what is the condition for one *logos* to be superior to another *logos*: to contain πλείονος ἄξια. Now, τιμώτερα is just a synonym for πλείονος ἄξια. The philosopher’s oral defense of his written *logos* will have to comprise (πλείω καὶ) πλείονος ἄξια. Otherwise he will not be able to show the inferiority of his written ex-

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<sup>11</sup> Cooper 1997: 553. Perhaps the translators were influenced by R. Hackforth (Hackforth 1952: 159) who translated “watching it producing fine fruit within eight days”.



position (τὰ γεγραμμένα φαῦλα ἀποδειῖξαι, 278c6–7). And without that he would not qualify for the name of φιλόσοφος. Modern commentators failed to see the link between the earlier passage and the later one, although the same question is discussed in both passages, namely the question what makes one exposition superior to another one. They did not see the link because they did not look for it — again the neglect of a basic philological task. (3) And they did not try to determine the Greek philosophical usage of τίμιον (which is again the same sort of neglect as with σύγγραμμα). I have tried to fill this gap left by scholarship in my contribution to the *Festschrift* for Walter Burkert.<sup>12</sup> I scrutinized dozens of passages from five 4th century authors, who all show the same understanding of τίμιον, which is epitomized in Aristotle's laconic statement: ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἀρχὴ τίμιον (*De incessu animalium*, 706b12). They all, i.e. Philippus of Opus, Theophrastus, Speusippus, Aristotle and Plato, regard τιμή and τὸ τίμιον as a basic feature of their respective ἀρχαί. Therefore, what is τιμώτερον is something which is nearer to the ἀρχή. The Platonic philosopher will in his oral defense of his written *logos* proceed beyond what he wrote and thereby get nearer to the principle or principles.

5. The written *logos* is the εἶδωλον — 'image', not 'phantom' (cf. Rowe) — of the live and animate discourse of the dialectician (276a9). Of course, Plato is talking here of his own writings.<sup>13</sup> Now, if Plato offers his dialogues as images of possible philosophical talks, we can learn from these images how the dialectician will proceed when leading a conversation. This helps us to grasp the Platonic sense of βοηθεῖν τῷ λόγῳ,<sup>14</sup> of τὰ γεγραμμένα φαῦλα ἀποδειῖξαι, and of σιγᾶν πρὸς οὓς δεῖ. (a) Images of the dialectician coming to the help of his own *logos* can be found e.g. in the *Phaedo*, the *Republic* and the *Laws*. In all three cases the word βοηθεῖν or its synonym ἐπικουρεῖν occurs, so there can be no doubt that they are examples of the procedure mentioned in the

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Szlezák 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Szlezák 2009.

<sup>14</sup> For the sense of βοηθεῖν τῷ λόγῳ see, besides the relevant passages in Szlezák 1985, also Szlezák 1989.

*Phaedrus*. And in all three examples the philosophical ‘help’ consists in introducing new concepts and theories, which go considerably beyond the intellectual level of what had preceded. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates ‘helps’ his thesis of the immortality of soul by means of the story of his ‘second sailing’ (*Phd.* 88d ff.), in the *Republic* he helps his first *logos* in defense of justice by his sketch of an ideal state based on the rule of philosophers (*R.* 368b ff.), whereas in the *Laws* the ‘Athenian’ helps the law against impiety (ἀσέβεια) by introducing his theory of movement, of the self-movement of soul and the government of the cosmos by the gods (891b–899c). It is evident that in all these cases the help offered by the philosopher contains concepts and theories which are τιμιώτερα, things of higher philosophical value or rank, and that they lead the discussion further up towards the principles (ἀρχαί) (cf. *Lg.* 891c2–6). The dialogues thus illustrate, using particular instances, the general requirement formulated in the *Phaedrus*. With the help of these illustrations we can now grasp the sense of Plato’s linking together the concepts of βοηθεῖν and τιμιώτερα. It is by *this* kind of help, viz. by means of theories of higher philosophical dignity and power, that the Platonic φιλόσοφος will be able to orally overtop his written *logos*. And it is by this kind of help that the philosopher will prove to be the εἰδῶς (276a8) or the εἰδῶς ἧ τὸ ἀληθὲς ἔχει (278c4–5), i.e. the dialectician who has grasped the noetic ‘truth’ of the things he is talking about. (b) By these same illustrations we understand now the Platonic meaning of τὰ γεγραμμένα φαῦλα ἀποδειξαι. If the written dialogue has the same relation to the oral help as Socrates’ dialogue with Thrasymachus has to the help for justice in the *Republic*, books II–X, or as Socrates’ first arguments in favour of immortality have to the help in his ‘second sailing’, then it is easy to accept that it be called φαῦλον, which in any case has to be taken in a comparative sense: the written dialogue is by no means worthless, but certainly inferior in comparison to Plato’s oral theory of principles. (c) And there is one more feature of Plato’s dialogues which we have to take as illustration of a basic quality of the dialectician, namely that he knows to whom he should speak and to whom he should remain silent (*Phdr.* 276a6–7). This ability is illus-

trated at passages like *Republic* 506e and 533a, where Socrates refuses to tell Glaucon his view on the essence (the τί ἔστιν) of the Good, although he does have an own view (α δοκοῦν μοι) on it, and to give a sketch of dialectics (in spite of his willingness, προθυμία, in general). As most readers of the dialogues acknowledge, there are many similar passages to be found in Plato. He wanted us to understand what it means that the true philosopher is able to σιγᾶν πρὸς οὓς δεῖ.

6. The dialectician's remaining silent if necessary — and it is necessary when he is confronted with people “who have no business with philosophy” (275e2 παρ’ οἷς οὐδὲν προσήκει), or with people who are not yet mature for his insights, as Glaukon and Adeimantos in the *Republic* (506e, 533a1) — is precisely his θεῶν χαρίζεσθαι, his use of *logoi* that will please god: since the ideas, and, *a fortiori*, the principles are θεῖα, divine, he will expound them only to interlocutors who have the necessary intellectual and ethical preparation. Since a writing can at any time get into the hands of those who have no business with philosophy, he will not expound them in a written book.

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I hope I could convince you that it is worthwhile to ask for the original Platonic meaning of the concepts involved. I simply followed the old philological principle of Ὅμηρον ἐξ Ὀμήρου σαφηνίζειν, or, in our case, Πλάτωνα ἐκ Πλάτωνος.

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