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# Technology and the Perils of Poetry; or, Why Criticism Never Catches Up<sup>1</sup>



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In Plato's *Phaedrus*, after a rousing discussion of love, seduction, and the soul, leading on to a crucial account of the divisions and collections that enable thought, Socrates is finally ready to take up the question of what makes writing good or bad. This extraordinary dialogue, which has never been easy to read, has become in our time one of the indispensable sites for reflection on the problem of discourse—and thereby, upon the state and condition of the humanities. The text has served in particular as the occasion for a highly provocative and influential excursion into the intricacies of textuality by one of the most celebrated critics and theorists of our time, Jacques Derrida, who calls insistent attention to the peculiarity of Plato's simultaneous dismissal and invention of mythic tales—"in the name of truth"—as central to the dynamic of the dialogue.<sup>2</sup>

The dialogue itself, however, seems almost a compendium of crucial topics from Plato's early to middle dialogues, making it all the more striking when Plato sets up the conclusion by having Socrates tell one of his charming stories about the Egyptian king Thamus at Thebes, to whom the god Theuth presented his sundry inventions, including "number and calculation, geometry and astronomy, not to speak of draughts and dice, and above all writing" (274d).

*Editor's note: It is our pleasure to take this opportunity to announce the upcoming Critical Theory Since Plato, edited by Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle. A thoroughly revised third edition of this celebrated anthology is due out this spring.*

But in the aftermath of Derrida's exuberant (if not exorbitant) reading of it under the sign of *pharmakon*, medicine that can either cure or kill, Plato's text—and Socrates' story—has suffered something of the fate narrated at the start of the dialogue. The very subject of writing, that is to say, falls off its perch like Oreithyia, either abducted by Boreas as the myth says, or perhaps just blown off the rocks by a puff of air, as Socrates suggests.<sup>3</sup> Either way, writing descends into the murkiness of our anxieties, a subject of irresistible fascination but boundless confusion.

That surely has been the fate of Plato's dialogue, which has been regarded as either among Plato's juvenilia because it seemed to be such a rhetorical and argumentative mess, or among the products of his dotage—for who but a senile old codger would seem to condemn the very art he practiced?<sup>4</sup> But there is a sense in which Plato's text has become once again all but unreadable, taken up into the web of Derrida's grammatology and contemporary preoccupation with "discursive practices."<sup>5</sup> The very idea of writing has become a collective fetish for theory and criticism in a time when we seem no longer sure what it is *for*.

I thus risk at least an indiscretion in offering what may be a contentious argument about an undeniably intricate document, as a way to raise certain issues of originality and institutions. I make matters worse by having the bad grace to direct this paper, by a very long way around, to poetry and the reading of poetry when it has become a commonplace of our public discourse to talk as if it were dead, past, or passé in the era of the World Wide Web, or could only be "read" in the mode of inevitable error or endless semiotic displacement down the links of an infinite signifying chain.

For poetry, however, this a very familiar peril, in no small part because Plato's anxieties about it have been institutionalized into the very notion that "humanistic discourse" is something set apart from natural science, technology, and in some disciplinary regimes, philosophy and social science. The *locus classicus* is Plato's *Republic*, where the poets get evicted from the ideal city (595ff) and critics get their mission statement for apologetics (607b–e); but *Phaedrus* gives us a much subtler, more ironic treatment of writing, where polemical oppositions are moderated by a sense of wry amusement that seems to mirror the predicaments of institutions.

The immediate point of analogy is that when Plato writes about writing, he does so from within the massive cultural transition that Eric Havelock has called the "literate revolution"<sup>6</sup>—a dislocation as

confusing and nervous-making in Plato's time as anything we face on the electronic front today. In the wake of the "digital revolution," some of our best critics have responded to alarming symptoms of change as if they were ruining the university, killing off literature, and bringing the idea of political discourse and education in civic culture to a parlous state.<sup>7</sup> Yeats' "rough beast" merely "slouched toward Bethlehem to be born": this one clones itself at the speed of light, in every seam in our private lives, our social, economic, and educational institutions around the globe.

But if anything, the transition in Plato's time was more traumatic, since the coming of literacy could only happen if traditional Greek religion—and that meant, in the common understanding, the poets—could be gotten out of the way: a mortal enterprise for Socrates, and dangerous enough to Plato that he had to feign disavowal of his own thought.<sup>8</sup> Even so, neither Plato nor anybody else ever succeeded in getting imaginative literature out of the city, or religion either, for that matter. And after the "literate revolution," we seem to forget that poetry, far from withering away, led the way in literacy, ahead of philosophy and science, statecraft and engineering, to say nothing of religions that live by The Book. The same revolution that gave us Plato and Aristotle produced Aeschylus, Sophocles and Thucydides some 80 years earlier, and Euclid 80 years later. Indeed, the current transition is less a revolution than the next inexorable step in what Wlad Godzich characterizes as *The Culture of Literacy*.<sup>9</sup> For us, it is no longer just reading: if one cannot compose at the keyboard, one is a peasant in the electronic age.

But there is a more intriguing point of analogy. Both the ancient and contemporary "revolutions" are at root technological, as the Greek word *techne*, doing service as both "art" and "technology" suggests. In a moment of high comedy in the *Cratylus*, however, Socrates does a semiological number on this word to show that it *really* means "possession of mind":

SOCRATES: There is the meaning of the word *techne* (art), for example.

HERMOGENES: Very true.

SOCRATES: That may be identified with *echonoe* and expresses the possession of mind—you have only to take away the *t* and insert *o*, between *ch* and *n*, and between *n* and *e*.

HERMOGENES: That is a very shabby etymology. (414b–c)

Shabby etymology, indeed; but Plato is not just doing etymologies: this is a form of cognitive criticism that depends very precisely upon

the *techne* of the Greek alphabet, cutting and suturing to show a profound relation. But if we read the *Phaedrus* only through the binary net of the *pharmakon*, the very point that escapes is that writing is a problem because it is *the introduction of a new technology*. Derrida's mesmerizing reading goes all the way around the Freudian woodshed in order to prove that this dialogue is really about the "father of speech [asserting] his authority over the father of writing" (102). But that case can be made only by ignoring the elegant and amusing self-consciousness *about techniques of writing* which marks everything in Socrates' artfully concocted story and pervades the dialogue as a whole.

At the outset, for example, Socrates makes up a name, Thamus, for a figure conventionally identified as the god Ammon, presenting him simply as "the king of the whole country" while Theuth gets his own name and the right markers of identity. So *of course* Plato knew the "right" names, contrary to Derrida's fantasia on this theme: he makes up "Thamus" in defiance of conventional wisdom, and thereby turns the whole myth upside down.<sup>10</sup> Thamus is mainly a critic, one so full of opinions that Socrates doesn't even want to go into it: "On each art," we are told, "Thamus had plenty of views both for and against; it would take too long to give them in detail." While we might want to know what this old fuss-budget thought about draughts and dice, Theuth seems as impatient as Socrates, so he trumps his own hand with his best invention, writing:

But when it came to writing, Theuth said, 'Here, O king, is a branch of learning that will make the people of Egypt wise and improve their memories; my discovery provides a recipe (*pharmakon*) for memory and wisdom.'

Now, Thamus knows that a *pharmakon* that can either cure or kill: in this case, the main point is that he has already made up his mind:

Oh man full of arts, to one it is given to create the things of art and to another to judge what measure of harm and of profit they have for those that shall employ them. And so it is that you, by reason of your tender regard for the writing that is your offspring, have declared the very opposite of its true effect. If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because *they* rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance, for by telling them of many things without teaching them you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing, and as men filled, not with

wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows.<sup>11</sup>

The problem for the ordinary (and, evidently, the extraordinary reader too) is that Socrates puts Thamus in the privileged role (familiar throughout the middle dialogues) of the one who judges the use of others' inventions—even though Socrates has just undercut Thamus' status (he's a man who happens to be a king, no god) and his character (he's a self-important windbag). But then, at the end of the dialogue, Plato puts Socrates exactly in the position of Thamus, expressing his own skepticism about writing because it doesn't tell you *how* to read it but only goes on "telling you just the same thing forever" (275d). Before we leap off the rocks with our companion Pharmaceia (or get blown off by the windbag) it is worth asking again what is going on here?

Not only Thamus and Socrates but Plato too is worried that if writing is let out of the academic corral, it will be the cause of endless mischief—and about that, they are not wrong—because the problem of writing cannot be severed from the question of knowledge or wisdom.<sup>12</sup> Both Thamus and Socrates are illiterate: **Plato** is the writer, finally getting his authorial chops in tune. This irony doubles back on itself precisely because Thamus, like the pretenders Socrates destroys in early dialogues, presumes without reflection that he already has all the wisdom he needs.

Even if we say that Thamus is right that writing will impair memory, he is off the mark in thinking that it is only good for "reminder." Given Socrates' familiar doctrine from the *Phaedo* and earlier dialogues that knowledge is recollection (*anamnesis*), the work of reminding is done by dialectic, *not writing*. In this light, it is clear why the early dialogues are set up so as to be memorized: little pedagogical plays for teaching pupils in the Academy how to talk like Socrates—in brief, to deflate windbags.<sup>13</sup> After the *Phaedrus*, the role of memory changes drastically. By the time of the *Parmenides*, the last dialogue where Plato concocts an account about how he "heard" an invented exchange, the dialogues could scarcely be memorized by a non-reader—and memorizing *these* would be prodigious feats for a show-off or a freak, something to be done perhaps in a carnival or as advertising for some new-fangled "art of memory."<sup>14</sup> The objective, as described in *Republic*, is to be "literate or letter-perfect" (402b; cf. 368c), not any longer to imitate Socrates, particularly when that loveable original, dialectically examined, betrayed so many flaws associated with the Sophists that he needed to be replaced by

“Aristoteles” in *Parmenides* (137c) and later by the Eleatic Stranger, from “the school of Parmenides and Zeno” in *Sophist* (216a).

At any rate, there is no reason to think that Plato was not sufficiently the master of his own irony, and his art, to understand that error can be discovered and overcome more readily than confusion or a refusal to think. His text, in other words, is eminently *readable* on the condition of following its technical dimension with the same meticulous attention as the writing itself displays, not merely receiving it like an automaton but actively reasoning along with it. So we might well ask, what went wrong, and why does it keep going wrong? Why can't we read this without going sideways?<sup>15</sup>

Plato's main worry about writing is not that it can't be filled up with being but that it is a machine: it can be so easily emptied of sense that the victim does not even notice the loss. When that happens (in lucky times), the result is mere rhetoric (another of Plato's targets), all bluster and vacuity, even though great careers can *always* be made of that. We see the things words will let us do, with no evident constraints, and off we go, writing our way so far out of touch with reality that we lapse into irrelevance (*Phaedrus* 261; *Sophist* 259c). In less lucky times, we get tyranny, which brushes away what it judges to be irrelevant with no sense of irony and hence, no idea of justice at all. The enduring trouble is that it is not always easy to judge one's luck.

Irony enters at another level when we look to the “art” Plato himself was trying to introduce in the *Phaedrus* in order to fix the tendency of dialectic to collapse into rhetoric that cannot even pretend to have a grip on anything real.<sup>16</sup> In the process, however, Plato makes a mistake, all the more revealing because there is no direct way that he could have detected it as such.

When Theuth is addressed by Thamus, he is called “*technikotate*,”—as we would say, a “*technologist*.” And though Plato gets his name right, he describes Theuth's invention as *grammata*—not *graphé*, the art of “writing”, but the drawing of *letters* (274d). Without a highly technical excursus of his own—it is there to be followed in *Cratylus* and *Sophist*—Plato could scarcely have seen this mistake because for an ordinary Greek to write *was to write letters*, not necessarily conceived as characters standing for words, but quite literally following a recipe (also *pharmakon*) of excruciating steps.<sup>17</sup> Eric Havelock's main point is that Greek writing, unlike any other system based on syllables or unitary words breaks both alike into one set of constituent elements. In other systems of writing, the vowel appears as the tonal medium

which binds the consonants into a meaningful unit and therefore is not something that either can or should to be separated out as a “part.” By analogy, if you did an inventory of your tropical fish tank, you would not list the water. In the Greek scheme, the vowels are on exactly the same logical level as the articulated consonants—which makes a system *alphabetic* whether it is the International Phonetic Alphabet, or Pinyin transliteration.

Havelock’s claim falls under suspicion in part because it asserts absolute “originality” for the Greeks and thus raises the spectre of linguistic ethnocentrism and propels us to look for—and find—the strategies in other languages that are functionally equivalent. But though all of this happens in language, the issue is really not linguistic: it is imaginative. To just that extent it is also technological, which is the first (overdue) step toward the conclusion of my argument.

### **The Technology Effect**

Whenever a new technology is adopted, it reveals itself first as an event of the imagination, with the result that the concrete technical specificity of the invention sinks into the actual outcome and disappears. So how could Plato find the source of his confusion? One cannot know what writing will do until one *writes*. Meanwhile, the mind, embracing the new machine, floats free or flies toward the new horizon opened by it—or, alternatively refuses, like Thamus, because the new horizon eclipses one old, familiar, and dear. Either way, the technology is folded into everyday life as something that seems to run by itself—only to surface later as a puzzle, as when Heidegger asks, ‘Does Man think Language, or does Language think Man?’

As I write this, I am using equipment hooked up to several dozen servers, gateways, and multi-protocol routers, which put at my fingertips more information than Plato could possibly have imagined. (Heidegger, sniffing technology, would perhaps have fled, like Blake’s Thel, back to some cottage in the woods). Poor Thamus would have probably died of shock. Even at home, I have two functioning networks, three telephone lines, more electronic gadgets and junk than is good for any person. Even the smaller of my two household servers, humming in the basement like profane little deities, could probably hold all the texts collected in the fabled library at Alexandria with room to spare.

For all that, it has not done anything very remarkable to my



memory, one way or the other, and has left my wisdom, so far as I can tell, pretty much untouched. But being technologist enough (not merely a user) to have written some serious code—i.e., accounting packages, software for medical practices, utilities, interrupt-driven communications routines, text editors and filters, and intricate coding schemes for databases, meant to save bytes—that is now utterly useless because current hardware solves most such problems by brute force, the only advantage I would claim from having almost turned myself into an engineer is that it ruthlessly demystified the technology and has given me a much more vivid and concrete sense of respect for its imaginative effects.<sup>18</sup>

Plato treats the Egyptians ironically, I think, as a way to keep writing in perspective—the old Egyptians were about as far from him as Plato is from us—as he began to feel, in alarm, its unsuspected power. But the technology effect wherein the enabled imagination forgets what enabled it persists all the more strongly with each institutionalizing step, until the accretion of ideas into physical structures seems to yield a machine that not only runs by itself but cannot be stopped by ordinary means, if it can be stopped at all.

Below the level of its themes, the technical details of the *Phaedrus* show perfectly how the alphabetical ground for Greek writing cants the imagination toward a metaphysic that looks for parts, for elements or *stoichia* that can be put in one-to-one correspondence with some *grammata* or graphical system of representation. From the distance of 2500 years, can there be any doubt that this is the boot sector of the digital, so to speak?<sup>19</sup> It is the technology of technologies, and it covers the gamut from schools and churches and institutions of state to physical science, civil, mechanical, electrical engineering. But also, first and last, poetry.

Plato tries to fix dialectic in the *Phaedrus* by abducting a grammatical operation: diaeresis or division, perhaps not sensing how far this would move him away from Socrates and toward his best pupil, Aristotle, who would not only develop this crude technique into the marvelous machine of species-differentia definitions but into the juggernaut of the syllogism.<sup>20</sup> The “art” needs no fable to introduce it, just a reminder of a “pair of procedures.” (265)

PHAEDRUS: What procedures (*eidoin*) do you mean?

SOCRATES: The first is that in which we bring a dispersed

plurality under a single form, seeing it all together- the purpose being to define so-and-so . . . [as] the definition given just now of love. . . .

PHAEDRUS: And what is the second procedure . . . ?

SOCRATES: The reverse of the other, whereby we are enabled to divide into forms, following the objective articulation; we are not to attempt to hack off parts like a clumsy butcher.

Though Socrates says he is “a lover of these divisions and collections (*diaireseon kai synagogon*), that [he] may gain the power to speak and to think” Plato never quite gets the hang of it, and hacks away, sometimes with hilarious results in *Sophist* and *Statesman*, always getting himself into a fix where the only way out is to tell a story. So there is quite a burden in Socrates’ quotation from Homer, saying “whenever I deem another man able to discern an objective unity and plurality, I follow ‘in his footsteps where he leadeth as a god’ (266b; *Odyssey* 5.193). The link here to Aristotle (called *nous*, or ‘mind’ in the Academy) is obvious, though to judge from the scholarly record, the technology of this transition likewise tends to sink into the imagined result and disappears. Clearly, it sets up a farewell to the dialectical meat-cutters as mere forerunners of the true “lovers of wisdom” or *philosophers*. But this term, stolen from the Sophists, is formally introduced here by a contrast more technical than anything in *Republic* to writers who merely “spend hours, twisting [phrases] this way and that, pasting them together and pulling them apart”: the poets (2784).

Plato never quits.

But still, he never gets it right. Instead of arriving at some omega point on the horizon where knowledge is perfect and *One*, every division produces another, in an endless sequence of paradoxes, antinomies, and infinite regressions. Criticism is still lost in that maze, puzzled now not by the gleaming but ever-receding image of *aletheia*, Truth (we have long since trashed that one), but by our own subject matter, poetry; and our own disciplinary calling, the teaching of reading. Meanwhile, in the labyrinth, we may think we hear the Minotaur approaching, licking his greasy lips. How can the “center” hold? *There is no center*, so there is no clear way out. So we go on, publishing and perishing, not at all sure what we should say to our graduate students, facing a terrible dearth of tenure-track jobs.

The technology effect includes this agony, always experienced as crisis. While the late Paul de Man found “crisis” and “criticism” so closely allied as to suggest that the terms are redundant,<sup>21</sup> crisis is driven by an underlying technology that sets up philosophical atomism as the ideational substrate of logical analysis.<sup>22</sup> The enterprise of

“the critique,” since Plato, grinds on, overrunning any ethnic or national barriers, armed only with the same common-sense logic that Plato dug out of dialectic and Aristotle institutionalized into formal logic by linking the law of non-contradiction—(*a* cannot both be *a* and *not a*)—to the rule of the excluded middle—(*a* must be either *c* or *d*, but not neither and not both). Joined to the idea that one can take something apart to its ultimate constituents—and its counterpart, that one can then recombine the same constituents to create things that never were—it is perhaps the most powerful piece of technology the world has so far seen. It is definitely not Egyptian.

The problem is just that this technology systematically misses what is right under its nose. Language—and the world—simply does not *follow* this logic even though it seems to sponsor it; and the puzzles and problems (with Greek affectation we now call them “*aporias*,” Greek for getting stuck and being without means to fix it) arise not from the nature of language but from a misapprehension of the technology of poetry. Poetry survives all these shocks, crises, and paradigm shifts because it is a way of thinking in and through language with exquisite specificity that is anterior to these logical puzzles. No wonder poetry is a puzzle to logic. It is the source of the insights we build on, a manifestation, in language, of a primary human power that prefigures the very ground that analytical reason will occupy and exploit. It is available to us without privileging any particular technology or language, time or place, as the strategic deployment of human intelligence and spirit that gives original form to ideas and makes them move.

But it is merest sentimentality to think we can just ‘go back’ to poetry and teach it the way we used to, as if nothing else in the world had changed. Not only is poetry already out ahead of us (where it has always been), it is already a thoroughly integrated part of the very technology we are endeavoring to critique. I will conclude with a simple illustration focusing briefly on the logic of metaphor as a technique for establishing complex relations between terms by the most economical possible means: ordinary language. We all know the problems humanists have had with this homely trope, since it is at the very heart of the long contemporary love affair, going sour, with radical skepticism. But we will look here across the great distance we have put between art and technology by considering briefly the havoc metaphor creates in the inner sanctum of the technologists’ summer palace (or perhaps, Cretan labyrinth), the Artificial Intelligence lab.

I have in mind the monster known to AI initiates as “the frame

problem,” which does not at first declare itself to be about metaphor at all.<sup>23</sup> It is a vicious dilemma, not unlike the infinite regression of semiosis. If you want to emulate intelligent action, you must have some representation of changes that action brings to its world, even in the toy world of a thought experiment. So consider an “intelligent” machine that fills a cup with coffee, places the coffee on a saucer, and then moves the saucer. How does the robot know that the *coffee* moved? This is by no means the nastiest nor even the most amusing example, but it illustrates the problem: how many propositions (“frame axioms”) does one have to add to inform the machine what stays the same when just one thing changes? An infinite number, complicated by the fact that some changes of one thing change many features of others, in exactly specific ways.<sup>24</sup>

This dilemma is blood kin to the problem of deconstruction, operating on a Saussurean conception of a “sign,” which never runs out of work, but also never gets any work *done*. The link to metaphor is just this: one connection between two terms rapidly devolves into a continuous web of connections, some to other *connections*, and so on. The common problem is the need for second order terms that order relations among relations. Where do *they* come from?

As it turns out, this problem is just another version of Charles Sanders Peirce’s conception of *abduction*, itself a metaphor, which is the leap to a hypothesis (or grasping a theme: a “hint at the riddle” as Peirce put it) without which neither induction nor deduction can even get started. In a longer discourse, this would be the place to bring in switching diagrams with N-P-N semi-conductors or transistors, the ultimate “binary” devices, to show that *they* are *not binary*, but *trinary*: the current flows from the collector to the emitter, *only when the base current is turned on*.<sup>25</sup>

So what happens in poetry? We will take a simple instance, Robert Burns’ famous simile, “My Luve is like a red, red rose / That’s lately sprung in June.” It is easy to see that this figure works by taking two terms, Love and Rose, and relating them upon some basis of similarity. But what basis? If I were to say, ‘Oh. I get it. Love has thorns; it is vegetative; it is seasonally afflicted by aphids’ we would take it as a joke or a mistake, even though love does have “thorns” and these days may be afflicted by really scary “aphids.” The humor lies in the fact that we apprehend metaphors in context not as unconstrained figures: they have *point*. But any apposite metaphor seems to run wild for the sufficient reason that the stuff of the world is even more densely interconnected than our lexicon. So what is it that

constrains one metaphor? The answer, as usual, is right ahead of us: *another metaphor*, in the second couplet of Burns' poem: "My Luv'e's like the melodie / That's sweetly played in tune."

I have coined the ungainly term, "mediating function" to designate second order relations exemplified when one figure is used to constrain the range of application of another. I think I can show, to a frightfully tedious level of detail, that this is what underlies not only our seemingly intuitive apprehension of themes, but our more subtle and dazzling exercises of exegetical cunning—particularly the ones that are misguided or wrong. That was no slip: readers and readings can and do make awful mistakes that are not mere choices of an interpretive frame.

When we read the rest of Burns' poem, we can see a matrix of relations among relations as strict in its operation as algebra but as fluid as a running stream. Mediating functions as a form of abduction do not so much carry the maiden (or the mind) away, as they capture an idea that will subsequently lead and guide us. This is not a matter of raw evidence nor the grinding of logical gears, but an apprehension of relations that are subtle but exceedingly stable across time and through experience. The *text* we read needs to be *a whole* poem, not just parts, in an effort to find specifically what is related to what. By the end of Burns' poem, Love's cruel irony, its thorns and aphids are not gone, but they belong to another moment, another poem. Here, Burns is inhabiting a condition of love that evokes its own claims, on its own terms:

Oh my Luv'e's like a red, red rose,  
That's newly sprung in June;  
Oh My Luv'e's like the melodie  
That's sweetly played in tune  
As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,  
So deep in luv'e am I;  
And I will luv'e thee still, my dear,  
Till a' the seas gang dry.  
Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,  
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;  
O I will love thee still, my dear,  
While the sands o' life shall run.  
And fare thee weel, my only luv'e,  
And fare thee weel awhile!  
And I will come again, my luv'e,  
Though it were ten thousand mile.

The originality of this poem lies in its rich and generative specificity, which in no way requires making a fetish of its uniqueness. Indeed, it points a clear path to companionate poems on solid human ground, wherever it might be, as in this anonymous Tang poem, inhabiting the same condition, but in its own specific terms:

(1) 菩 萨 蛮  
pú sà mán

枕	前	发	尽	千	般	愿，
zhěn	qián	fà	jìn	qiān	bān	yuàn
要	休	且	待	青	山	烂。
yào	xiū	qiě	dài	qīng	shān	làn
水	面	上	秤	锤	浮，	
shuǐ	miàn	shàng	chèng	chuí	fú	
直	待	黄	河	彻	底	枯。
zhí	dài	huáng	hé	chè	dǐ	kū
白	日	参	辰	现，		
bái	rì	shēn	chén	xiàn		
北	斗	回	南	面。		
běi	dǒu	huí	nán	miàn		
休	即	未	能	休，		
xiū	jí	wèi	néng	xiū		
且	待	三	更	见	日	头。
qiě	dài	sān	gēng	jiàn	rì	tóu

On the pillow we make a thousand vows,  
 That our love will last till all green mountains rot away,  
 Till balance beams shall float on the water,  
 And the Yellow River runs itself dry.  
 Not before the last star is visible at noon,  
 Or the Great Northern Dipper swings to the south  
 Will our love fail: not until  
 The sun shall shine at midnight.<sup>26</sup>

Poems such as these do not, of course, answer Plato's larger question about the true nature of love, nor do they provide any assurance that a pledge of constancy is itself free from the vagaries of change. They just tell us a truth about why people write and why that will never change. The technical details of analysis through which such comparisons across linguistic and cultural barriers could be carried out, however, suggest a quite remarkable vista for the revival of reading that is too interesting to ignore, just as it goes too far afield from the present topic to be treated here.

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#### NOTES

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the final *International Conference on Humanistic Discourse*, at the National University of Taiwan in Taipei, November 9–11, 1998. The papers from that conference were circulated in *Institutions and Originality*, occasional papers from the Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington. The Conference on Humanistic Discourse was originally funded by the Humboldt Foundation, as a project initiated by Murray Krieger, Jacques Derrida, Wolfgang Iser, Ernst Behler, Hazard Adams, and others, for international discussions of the present state and prospects for theory and criticism in the humanities.
- 2 Cf. "Plato's Pharmacy," 69, in *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 61–171. It will be plain that I take a very different view of this dialogue.
- 3 When Phaedrus asks Socrates at the start of the dialogue if he really believes the myth about Boreas seizing Orithyia at the spot where the dialogue takes place, he replies, "I should be quite in the fashion if I disbelieved it, as the men of science do. I might proceed to give a scientific account of how the maiden, while at play with Pharmacia, was blown by a gust of Boreas down from the rocks hard by, and having thus met her death was seized by Boreas, though it may have happened on the Areopagus, according to another version of the occurrence." 229b–c.
- 4 See, for example, "Pharmacy," p. 6–7, notes 5 & 6, referring the reader to Robin's *La Théorie platonicienne de l'amour*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964); and earlier work by H. Raeder and E. Bourguet.
- 5 Cf. Michel Foucault, "What is an Author," reprinted in Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, *Critical Theory Since 1965* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986).

- 6 See *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), and *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1963).
- 7 Perhaps, but I don't think these are the real terms of the transition despite the rhetoric that is everywhere. See, for example, Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1996); Alvin Kernan, *The Death of Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Alvin Kernan, ed., *What's Happened to the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). See also John Guillory's opinion in *Cultural Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), that literary study and the humanities generally are suffering not just from an "historical vulnerability" but in the apparent inability to "conceptualize a new disciplinary domain" are in a state that amounts to a "terminal crisis" 265.
- 8 Plato doesn't speak even if present; but he does make up stories about how he heard what Socrates said. Needless to say, I do not accept the hoax of the Seventh letter and postulate of Plato's "esoteric" doctrines.
- 9 *The Culture of Literacy* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1994). Godzich, however, suggests that we are about to enter a "post-literate" age, a point that leaves out of account how thoroughly literacy is the foundation for the expansion of digital communication.
- 10 Derrida's systematic preference for the 'original' myth, the undeconstructed version in which Thamus is Ammon, who is *really* Ra, the sun-god, is not so much of a surprise as it might seem, if we take the point of Sandor Goodhart's thesis in *Sacrificing Commentary: Reading the End of Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). Goodhart argues that those works we typically call "literature" actually reveal themselves to be critiques of familiar, conventional mythic material, such that when critics seek to make revelations, the writing we call "criticism" turns out to merely *displace* literature, "emptying it of its critical content and rewriting it in favor of the more familiar structures of difference criticism has expected" (xi). For fuller treatment of similar examples, see my "The Conscience of the King: Oedipus, Hamlet and The Problem of Reading" *Comparative Literature* 49 (Fall, 1997), 289–316.
- 11 *Phaedrus* 274–75; in Hamilton & Cairns, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 520. Unless otherwise indicated, I am using this edition. Stephanus numbers will be used throughout.
- 12 Cf. William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York New Directions, 1995), 231: "You can learn from poems / that an empty head tapped on / sounds hollow / in any language!"
- 13 So argues Gilbert Ryle, for one, in *Plato's Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), though a stronger case can be made by close examination of the cognitive contents and strategies of the more complex dialogues.
- 14 Or, as the opening account in *Parmenides* suggests, after memorizing one of these mind benders, all one is fit for is the raising of horses. Cf. *Parmenides* 126c.
- 15 Derrida's now altogether familiar answer is that to be a "text" is to be writing that will not permit itself to be read, always already (and forever) in need of the supplement, always withholding the full presence of "truth." Cf. esp. "Pharmacy" 61, 166–169.
- 16 This is part of the reason Socrates hides himself under his cloak to deliver his 'shameful' speech, ignorant of the truth of love.
- 17 I treat this at length (in *Plato, Aristotle, and the Poets*, in progress) with some emphasis on the alternative term for "letters": *stoicheia* or "element," the term he uses in the *Cratylus* and elsewhere when he wants to indicate a fundamental vocalic principle itself represented by one or possibly more *grammata*, or graphic marks. See especially *Cratylus* 426–427, and the argument below; cf. "Plato's



- Pharmacy," 140–141. The more serious and dramatic point is that this excursus is, in fact, the bridge between the late dialogues of Plato and Aristotle's *Categories*, *Physics*, and analysis of the Forms in *Metaphysics* and elsewhere. Its implications for Aristotle's *Poetics* are particularly intriguing. I note here in passing that this point helps to explain why literary critics, unlike practicing linguists, have fallen into such hopeless confusion over Saussure's self-contradictory notion of "the sign."
- 18 For an anecdotal account of this dreary passage, see my "Computers, Classrooms and Communities," *Works and Days* 12 (Spring/Fall 1994), 175–187.
- 19 That is, the "boot sector" on a storage device which brings up an operating system, lifting it up, in an American folk idiom, by its bootstraps. The "bootstrap loader" is a tiny piece of machine language that points to a longer segment of code that loads into memory a rudimentary input-output system which then reads from the storage device the bowl of spaghetti known as the file system, and so on, and on, at an alarming incremental rate of complexity.
- 20 See Lynn Rose, *Aristotle's Syllogistic* (Springfield, Ill.: Thomas, 1968) and in (over)due course, *Plato, Aristotle and the Poets*.
- 21 In "Crisis and Criticism" in *Blindness and Insight* (New York Oxford University Press, 1971).
- 22 There is an important and long neglected connection on this score to the work of the Cambridge Neo-Platonists, especially Ralph Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of The Universe: The First Part: Wherein All the Reason and Philosophy of Atheism Is Confuted and its Impossibility Demonstrated* (1678), to both Coleridge and indirectly, to Kant. In brief, Cudworth's huge treatise met with considerable opposition over the perceived heterodoxy of its conception of the deity, particularly ironic since his purpose was to demonstrate that if one accepts an atomistic or "corpuscular" theory of matter, the inevitable result will be atheism. His complex and subtle exploration of the hylozoic alternative was evidently too much for the empirically minded British, for whom, if their God couldn't be a *person*, evidently couldn't *be*.
- 23 See, for a start, Zenon W. Pylyshyn, ed., *The Robot's Dilemma: The Frame Problem in Artificial Intelligence* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1987); and Kenneth M. Ford & Zenon W. Pylyshyn, eds., *The Robot's Dilemma Revisited* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1996).
- 24 In a charmingly reductive way, AI researchers and "Knowledge Engineers" take *this* to be the problem of "ontology."
- 25 Cf. here, Warren S. McCulloch, fallen away English Major and Philosopher, whose Peircean diagrams in *Embodiments of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1965) informed the invention of the transistor. In N-P-N semiconductors, the current flows from a Collector, across a doped (i.e. contaminated) channel to an Emitter, only when the Base (wired to the channel) is supplying current. It is a *semi*-conductor since the doped substrate in the channel is non-conductive without the base current.
- 26 See *Golden Treasury of Chinese Lyrics*, trans. Xu Yuan Zhong (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1990), p. 2. The translation here is a collaboration with my student Gao, Wei Zhi, taking Xu's version (below) as a point of departure:
- On the pillow we make a thousand vows, we say  
Our love will last unless green mountains rot away,  
On the water can float a lump of lead,  
The Yellow River dries up to the bed,  
Stars can be seen in broad daylight,  
The Dipper in the south shines bright.  
Even so our love will not be done  
Unless at midnight rise the sun.