Technology and the Perils of Poetry; or, Why Criticism Never Catches Up

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In Plato's Phaedrus, after a curious 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 excursus into the intricacies of sexuality 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.5

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).

5Editor's note: It is our pleasure to announce the upcoming Critical Theory Since Plato, edited by Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle. A thoroughly revised third edition of this acclaimed 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 Orythia, either abducted by Boreas as the myth says, or perhaps just blown off the rocks by a puff of air, as Socrates suggests. Either way, writing descends into the muckiness 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? 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 grammatics and contemporary preoccupation with “discursive practices.” The very idea of writing has become a collective fetish for theon 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, in 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 best classicus is Plato’s Republic, where the poets get eviction from the ideal city (595D) 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 wiry 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”—a dislocation is
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 resorted to alarming symptoms of change as if they were running the university, killing off literature, and bringing the idea of political discourse and education in civic culture to a parlous state. Yeats' "rough beast" merely "slouching 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 reign disavowal of his own thought. 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 bylio 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. For us, it is no longer just reading if one cannot compose at the keyboard, one is a a more intriguing point of analogy. Both the ancient and contemporary "revolutions" are at root technological, as the Greek word tekne, doing service as both "art" and "technology" suggests. In a moment of high comedy in the Cyclops, 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 tekne (art), for example.
HERMIONE: Very true.
SOCRATES: That may be identified with whose and expresses the possession of mind—you have only to take away the and insert a, between a and e.
HERMIONE: This is a very shabby etymology. (416b-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 tutoring to show a profound relation. But if we read the Phaedrus only through the binary net of the phormasion, the very point that escapes is that writing is a problem because it is the introduction of a new technology. Herodote's memorizing reading goes all the way around the Freisian woodshed in order to prove that the dialogue is really about the "father of speech [asserting] his authority over the father of writing" (102). But that can be made only by ignoring the elegant and amusing self-consciousness about technique 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 Herodot's fantasy on this theme: he makes up "Thamus" in defiance of conventional wisdom, and thereby turns the whole myth upside down. 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 fava-broad thought about draughts and dice, Theuth seems as important as Socrates, so he troops his own hand with his best inventions, 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 (phormasion) for memory and wisdom.'

Now, Thamus knows that a phormasion 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 frame 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 youth; 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 concomit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows.13

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 under- cut 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 puns 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.14 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 dia-

logues that knowledge is recollection (anamnesis), the work of re-

minding 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 pedagogi-
cal plays for teaching pupils in the Academy how to talk like Socrates—in brief, to deflate windbags.15 After the Phaedo, 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 showoff or a freak, something to be done perhaps is a carnival or as advertising for some new-fangled "art of memory."16 The objective, as described in Republic, is to be "literate or letter-perfect" (402b; cf. 360c), 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
"Aristotelis" in Parmenides (137c) and later by the Eleatic Stranger, from "the school of Parmenides and Zeno" in Sophist (261a).

At any rate, there is no reason to think that Plato was not sufficiently the master of his own irony, and his art, so understand that error can be discovered and overcome more readily than confusion or a refusal to think. His text, in other words, is eminently reducible 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?

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 violent 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 tyrants, which brushes away what it judges to be irrelevant with too 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. 28 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 Thrasymus is addressed by Thamus, he is called "technikote"—as we would say, a "technologist." And though Plato gets his name right, he describes Thrasymus’s invention as grammata—not graphe, 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 Cynics and Sophists—Plato could scarcely have seen the 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 pharmakeia) of executing signs. 29 Eric Havelock’s main point is that Greek writing, unlike any other system based on syllables or unitary verbs 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 be separated out as a "pair." By analogy, if you did an inventory of your tropical fish tank, you would 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 exalt 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 sees it. 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, once 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 effect.15

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 whereby 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 casts the imagination toward a metaphysics that looks for paws, for elements or stoichia that can be put in one-to-one correspondence with some grammar or graphical system of representation. From the distance of 2500 years, can there be any doubt that this is the root sector of the digital, so to speak? 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: diacesis or division, perhaps not seeing 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 milagros. The "art" needs no table to introduce it, just a reminder of a "pair of procedures." (265)

PHAEDRUS: What procedures (eidos) do you mean?
SOCRATES: The first is that in which we bring a dispersed plurality under a single form, beings it all together as the purpose being to define such and such... (as) the definition given just now of love...
PHAE Drus. And what is the second procedure...?

Socrates: The reverse of the other whereby we are enabled to divide into forms, following the objective recollection; 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 (diaimeon kai synagogen), 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 Statesmen, 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 "when ever I deem another man able to discern an objective unity and plurality, I follow "in hit footsteps where he leads as a god" (496b; Odyssey 5.156). 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 foreplay to the dialectical meatcutters 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 (278c).

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 low in that maze, puzzled now not by the gleaming but ever-receding image of atheoria. Truth (we have long since dashed 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 at crisis. While the late Paul de Man found "crisis" and "criticism" so closely allied as to suggest that the terms are redundant, crisis is driven by an underlying technology that sets up philosophical atomism as the ideological substrate of logical analysis. 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 e or d, but not neither and not both). Joined to the idea that one can take something apart to its ultimate constituents—and its counter-part, 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 affection we now call them "aporiai," 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 reach 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.28 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 exactlying specific ways.29

This dilemma is blood kin to the problem of deconstruction, operating on a Sausmarezian 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 transis-
tors, 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.30

So what happens in poetry? We will take a simple instance, Robert Burns’ famous simile, “My Lute 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 uncon-
strained figures: they have point. But any opposite 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 Lute’s like the melody; / That’s sweetly played in tune.”

I have coined the tautology 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 asphiks 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 Lute’s like a red, red rose,
That’s newly sprung in June;
Oh My Lute’s like the melody
That’s sweetly played in tune
As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in love am I;
And I will love 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 lose thee still, my dear,
While the sands o’ life shal run.
And fare thee well, my only love,
And fare thee well awhile!
And I will come again, my love,
Though it were ten thousand mile.
菩萨蛮
pú sà mán

沈前发尽千般感，
zhěn qián fā jìn qiān bān gǎn
妻休且待青山烂。
yāo xiū qiě dài qīng shān làn
水面静传沉浮，
shuǐ miàn jìng chuán chén 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，
xī jiù 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 sea,
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 fall: nor will it
The sun shall shine at midnight. 8

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 self 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 Studies, at the National University of Taiwan in Taipei, November 3-11, 1986. The papers from that conference were circulated in the dedication to the Orpheum, some papers from the White Chimney 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 Kovesy, 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 Phaedrus,” 69, in Dissimulation, trans. by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 61-67. It will be plain that I take a very different view of this dialogue.

3 When Platonov asks Sokrates at the start of the dialogue if he really believes the myth about Sciron, see Orphism at the spot where the dialogue takes place, he replies, “I should be quite in the fashion if I believed it, as the men of science do. I might proceed to give a scientific account of how the master, while at play with Phaestus, was blown by a gust of Beres from the rocks hard by, and having thus met her death was seized by Beres, though it may have happened on the Areoiagai, according to another version of the occurrence.” 220b.e.

4 See, for example, “Pharmacia,” p. 6-7, notes 3 & 6, referring the reader to Robin’s Le Théâtre pharmaceutique de l’onde, 2nd ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961); and earlier work by G. R. G. and F. Portugal.


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 Plato (Cambridge, Mac-Harvard University Press, 1996); Alvin Kernan, The Death of Literature (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Alvin Kernan, et al., What Happened to the Humanities (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). See also John Goodey’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 irrelevance” 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 basis of the Seventh letter and postulate of Plato’s “exotic” doctrine.

9 The Culture of Literary (Cambridge, Mac-Harvard University Press, 1994), Goddard, however, suggests that we are about to enter a “post-literary” age, a point that leaves out of account the way thoroughly literary is the foundation for the expansion of digital communication.

10 Derid s’s semantic preference for the ‘original’ myth, the undecrypted version in which Thamus is Ammon, who is in fact Ra, the sun-god, is not so much of a surprise as it might seem, if we take the point of Sander Goodhart’s thesis in Surveying Contemporary Reading the End of Literature (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990). Goodhart argues that those works we typically call “literature” actually reveal themselves to be crutches of familiar, conventional artistic material, such that when critics seek to make crevices, the writing we call “criticism” turns out to merely doppler literature, “empirizing it of all critical content and rewriting it in favor of the more familiar structures of difference criticism has expected” (xii). For further treatment of similar examples, see my “The Conciseness of the King: Doggrel, Hamlet and The Problem of Reading” Comparative Literature 49 (Fall, 1997), 299-316.


12 Cf. William Carlos Williams, Poems, and New York Directions, (1955), 251: “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 Progno (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), though a stronger case can be made by close examination of the cognitive content and strategies of the more complex dialogues.

14 Or, as the opening account in Proust suggests, after memorializing one of these mind bridges, all one is fit for is the rising of horses. Cfr. Proust 280.

15 Derid s’s new otherness-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 press-out of “text,” (cf. esp. “Pharmacy” 51, 106-109.

16 This is part of the reason Socrates hides himself under his cloak to deliver his “shameful” speech, ignorant of the truth of loss.

17 I treat this at length in Plato, the Mind, and the Neo-Presocratic, in progress with some emphasis on the alternative term for “letters,” “script” 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 grammatical or graphic marks. See especially Cynore 426-427, and the arguments below, cf. “Plato’s
Pharmacy." (140-141). The more serious and dynamic point is that this excess 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 Aristotelian Poetics are particularly intriguing. I must here in passing that this point helps to explain why literary critics, unlike practicing linguists, have fallen into such hopeless confusion over Sausser's self-controlary notion of "the sign."

18 For its succinct account of this diverse passage, see my "Computers, Classrooms and Communities," Work and Days 12 (Spring/Fall 1994), 175-187.

19 That is, the "best actor" on a storage device which brings up an operating system, lifting it up, in an American folk idiom, by its bootstrap. The "bootstrap loader" is a tiny piece of machine language that points to a larger segment of code that loads into memory a preliminary input/output system which then reads from the storage device the boot (as pavement) known as the file system, and so on, and so on, at an alarming incremental rate of complexity.

20 See Lynn Rosen, Aristotle's Alchemy (Springfield, Ill.: Thomas, 1968) and in (over)due course, Plato, Aristotle and the Poet.


22 There is an important and long neglected connection on this score to the work of the Cambridge Neo-Platonists, especially Ralph Cavendish's True Individual System of The Universe: The First Part: What Is the Reason and Philosophy of All Being (Cambridge: 1688) and its Impossible Demonstration (1697), to both Coleridge and indirectly, to Kant. Briefly, Cavendish's huge project met with considerable opposition over the perceived heterodoxies of its conception of the Deep, particularly ironic since his purpose was to demonstrate that if one accepts an empiric (or "corporal") theory of matter, the inevitable Roads will be atheism. His complex and subtle exploration of the heliocentric alternative was evidently too much for the empirically minded British, to whom, if its God couldn't be a person, obviously couldn't be.


24 In a charmingly reductive way, all researchers and "Knowledge Engineers" take this to be the problem of "ontology."

25 Cf. here, Warren S. Collier's fallen away English Major and Philosopher, whose Peircean diagrams in Ambivalence of Man (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1983) informed the inventors of the trinomial. In N-N semiconductor, the current flows from a Collector, across a diode (i.e., channel) to an Emitter, only when the base (obscured to the channel) is supplying current. It is a semiconductor since the dopant substance in the channel is non-conductive without the base current.

26 See Golden Treasury of Chinese Lyrics, trans. Yu Yuan Zhong (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1990), p. 2. The tradition here is a collaboration with my student (and wife) Wei Zhui, taking Xu's version (below) at a point of departure:

On the pillow we make a thousand vows, we say
Our love will last unless green mountains run away,
On the water slate float a lump of lead,
The Yellow River rises up to the bed,
Nuns can be seen in broad daylight,
The Empress on the south shines bright.
Farewell, let love not be done
Unless at midnight rise the sun.