The Impact of Writing: Interpreting Plato's Critiques of Poetry and Writing in the Context of the Spread of Literacy

Patrick Penso
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Introduction

Most of us have the conception that the conditions of an author's society heavily influence the nature of their writings. In only a few cases, in my opinion, is this more clear and significant than in the writings of Plato, who wrote some of his most important dialogues at a time of immense cultural change. Plato was writing at a time where literacy was, for the first time, on the horizon for the ancient Greeks. The emergence of literacy did not represent simply the introduction of a new technology or a new way of preserving information. Rather, the spread of literacy for the ancient Greeks presented a completely new way of approaching, perceiving, and understanding life – which introduced the possibility of the upheaval of everything that had ever been known. In this thesis, I want to explore the ways that the imminent shift to literacy can be understood as an explanation for Plato's treatment of two fundamentally important aspects of his culture– poetry and writing.

Plato's criticisms of poetry and writing have long served as subjects for scholarly debate, primarily because of the confusion that arises when we consider that he himself utilized both of them repeatedly. Obviously, we would not have any knowledge of his opinions and ideas surrounding writing if he did not commit them to writing himself. Similarly, with his extensive use of metaphor, simile, and imagery, the poetic nature of Plato's writings can hardly be denied. And yet, across multiple dialogues, he attacks these two mediums vehemently, often portraying both of them as antithetical to virtue and wisdom. These attitudes are perplexing due to the apparent hypocrisy that arises from Plato's own use of these systems. What are we to make of these apparent contradictions?

I take this difficulty, as well as the evidence for the spread of literacy during Plato's time, as the leaping off point for which I examine the specific arguments made against poetry and

writing. I do not take it as a coincidence that his treatment of these two forms of language exhibit a similar degree of complexity and obtuseness. I believe we can interpret Plato's attitudes towards poetry and writing as a way of conceptualizing his understanding of the effects upon individuals of oral and literate cultures. What is gained, and simultaneously, what is lost when a culture becomes literate? Plato's attitudes towards poetry and writing, I believe, reveal a way he attempted to think through this question.

It is important, however, to first explain my conception of the relationship between the dialogues' arguments with the actual beliefs held by Plato. Any interpretation that attempts to make claims about the attitudes of Plato through a reading of the dialogues faces the incredibly difficult question of how much of the views espoused in the dialogues should be attributed to Plato himself, how much should be attributed to his teacher Socrates, and how much of the dialogues' arguments reflect the values of neither. My approach to his problem is to take the stance that, while we can never be completely sure of the things he truly believed, we can nevertheless use some of the values expressed in the dialogues to make educated guesses about Plato's attitudes towards things that would have been particularly relevant to him. As a result, I write under the assumption that the attitudes surrounding poetry and writing are the express views neither of Socrates nor Plato, but rather examples of Plato using the character of Socrates to present purely *rational* ways in which poetry and writing can be conceived of as negative things. The rational formulations that serve as the basis for the critiques of poetry and writing may have come from Socrates or Plato, but I don't think Plato believed them to the fullest extent. The degree to which we should assume Plato himself believes these rational arguments is what I will attempt to illustrate throughout the paper.

The body of this paper is divided into four sections. First, I will provide a brief overview of the cultural conditions that serve as the origin of Plato's views about poetry and writing, emphasizing that Plato is writing at a time in which the cultural landscape is still dominated by orality and an oral state of mind, but also at a time in which the spread of literacy lies in the not so distant future. In the second and third sections, I unpack the complexities and paradoxes behind Plato's treatments of poetry and writing, eventually suggesting that Plato's awareness of the ways that poetry and writing can be both useful and detrimental to the experience of philosophy indicates a desire to characterize these uses of language with unfixed definitions. In the fourth section, I illustrate the dynamics of oral cultures in contrast with literate cultures, emphasizing that this portrayal of poetry and writing can be interpreted as the result of the ways that the definitions of words change as an oral culture transitions into a literate one.

Poetry, Orality, and Literacy in Plato's Time

Situating the conception of the Platonic dialogues among the spread of literacy reveals how the attitudes in the dialogues can be understood as a response to the dynamics of oral and literature cultures. It's believed that the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus* were written in the middle period of Plato's time of authorship, [1] with most attributing the two dialogues to 375-365 B.C.E. Eric Havelock has suggested that reading and writing skills were being developed among the people of ancient Athens as far back as the seventh and late 6th centuries B.C.E, but literacy at that time was most likely restricted to craftspeople who utilized the written word for their trade.[2] It wouldn't be until the end of the fourth century, as Havelock suggests, that literacy would spread to common citizens. [3] This situates the writing of the Platonic dialogues in that middle period where some people are literate, while others still are not. Importantly, it also places Plato's writings at a time in which the spread of literacy among the common people is in the not so distant future.

Despite the fact that the initial seeds of literacy were beginning to spread, Plato's society was, almost certainly, a predominantly oral one, in which oral methods of communication still served as the primary way in which citizens learned about themselves and the world. This has been postulated by scholars, notably Eric Havelock, who analyzed Plato's written attitudes about poetry in the *Republic* to deduce that, at the time of the dialogue's composition, the public performance of poetry was most likely still a dominant aspect of ancient Athenian culture. According to Havelock, the weight of Plato's testimony against the performance of poetry, that is, the fierceness and the seriousness of his criticisms of poetry, seems to indicate that the oral performance of poetry was "far more central to the Greek cultural pattern than we would

[1] Reeve 2012, vi.
[2] Havelock 2019, 188.
[3] Ibid., 189.

normally conceive to be the case." [4] Importantly, it's believed that the public performance of poetry for those of Plato's time was also not just an activity engaged in by a small number of people for leisure, but rather was more a fundamental aspect of social engagement and education. According to Murray, "Greek education was based on *mousike,* that is all the arts over which the Muses presided: poetry, music, song, and dance." [5] Poetry, as a result, was one of the main avenues "where one was trained to become a good citizen." [6] We can use these pieces of evidence to infer that Athens, at the time of Plato's writings, was one in which oral forms of communication were largely responsible for the shaping and the development of citizens and could be classified as a primarily oral culture.

The importance of Plato's Athens being a dominantly oral culture and poetry serving as the model for education meant that the values put forward by the poets were those which became the ethical standard for the Athenians of Plato's time. Indeed, as Murray writes, "poetry [was] not studied for its aesthetic qualities, but for its ethical content." [7] But what were these values placed on a pedestal due to the prioritization and popularity of the poets? Consider Homer, who was the most famous of the epic poets and the one most fundamental to an Athenian education and performance [8] Homer tells of a world of larger than life heroes whose tales and sufferings relate to the human condition. The world of Homer is a tragic one where good people often receive cruel fates from the gods. In the *Iliad*, Achilles, aided by Athena, kills Hector, the noble guardian of Troy. This action dooms Troy to fall and everyone in it to die or become a slave. Odysseus, because of the wrath of Poseidon, is delayed in his homecoming for twenty years. The

[4] Havelock 1982, 37.
[5] Murray 1996, 15.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., 16.
[8] Ibid., 19.

stories of Homer are thus characterized by their placing of characters in a world full of tragic circumstances, most of whom meet terrible and sad fates often out of their control.

Eric Havelock also suggested that the combination of the tragic world that Homer and other poets put forward with the fact that poets were held up as the standard for education resulted in the development of a conception among the Greek common people that their world mirrored that of the world of the epic poets.[9] This mindset, in the eyes of Havelock, is inspired by the level of identification that must have occurred between the reciter of epic poetry and the themes of epic poetry. [10] In order for him to memorize the poems, Havelock says, the rhapsode had to throw themselves into the situations of the characters and fully envelop themselves in their world, which would inevitably cause the total loss of objectivity towards their own personal situation.[11] Not only is the performer impacted this way, as Havelock suggests, but the audience member witnessing this performance would remember the intensity of the emotions of the performer as he associated with the character, so much so that it would drive the audience member's memory of the performance as well. [12] Thus, Havelock's theory supposes that the prevalence of the public performance of poetry meant that civilians, whether they deliberately wanted to or not, began to internalize the messages put forward by oral works such as the Homeric epics, so much so to the point that their awareness of the nature of their own situations in life began to be impacted by them.

I outline these points for the purpose of demonstrating the important dynamics of orality at play during the time of Plato's writing. From this evidence, we can get a sense of the ability of orality, aided by poetry, to influence a culture's conception of themselves and of the world. Plato

[9] Havelock 1982, 45
[10] Ibid., 44.
[11] Ibid., 45.
[12] Ibid.

is writing his dialogues at a time where orality, which has constituted such an important and fundamental aspect of Greek identity for centuries before him, is still very much alive, but when its replacement, a world of literacy, already lies on the horizon. Plato, as a writer and as a man of significant cultural status in Athens, thus has the unique position of being able to see and write about this transition as it is developing in front of him.

These considerations need to be kept in mind during an analysis of Plato's attitudes towards poetry and writing. Poetry and writing are the two facets of his culture most related to the dynamics of orality and literacy, whose forces are coming to a head during the time of the *Republic*'s and the *Phaedrus*'s composition. As I will demonstrate, I believe that contained within these dialogues' attitudes towards poetry and writing is a worldview that can be interpreted as a response to the dynamics of oral and literate cultures. First, I will explore the treatment of poetry in Book X of the *Republic*, ultimately suggesting that while the dialogue's arguments portray poetry extremely negatively, the dialogue's structure reveals an attitude that Plato saw poetry as a tool useful to philosophy. The criticisms of poetry reveal that Plato conceived of poetry as potentially dangerous because of its ability to inspire empathy. His extensive use of it, as well as the way in which the dialogue invites the reader to question its argumentation, reveals Plato's awareness that poetry can be good if it is utilized to inspire inner deliberation in the reader.

Poetry in Book X and Philosophy's Relationship to Poetry and Myth

Plato's criticism of poetry throughout the *Republic*, which ultimately leads to the conclusion that for a state to be completely just, poetry must be expelled, [13] is a well known and expansive aspect of the work. The question of why Plato would be so vehemently against the idea of poetry has occupied scholars for years, as it is hard to reconcile how a man to whom we attribute such wisdom would have such negative views towards poetry, something to which we today ascribe great value. The attack on poetry in Book X of the *Republic*, as I will show, portrays poetry as something negative and corrupting, but the situational context of the *Republic* as a whole encourages us to complicate the view that Plato conceived of poetry is something antithetical to wisdom and philosophy.

At first glance, Plato's criticisms of poetry in Book X appear to be the result of his view that poetry stands in opposition to a virtuous person's attempt to live a good life. The first section of Book X is largely concerned with establishing why the poets and tragedians are imitators whose work is thrice removed from the truth.[14] After this discussion, Plato transitions to a conversation about why engaging in poetry is actually negatively impactful upon one's soul. To make this argument, he postulates the presence of a rational and irrational element within each person's soul.[15] The rational element, he conjectures, is that within us which is concerned with perceiving things exactly as they are.[16] Since we are human, however, there are some things that we do not perceive exactly as they are, which Plato says must be due to the irrational element of the soul.[17] Thus, Plato says that the part of the soul that "puts its trust in measurement and calculation (μέτρῳ γε καὶ λογισμῷ πιστεῦον) would be the best element in the soul (βέλτιστον ἂν

[13] *Republic X,* 607b.
[14] Ibid., 595a-602c.
[15] Ibid., 602e.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., 602e-603a.

εἴη τῆς ψυχῆς).” [18] The association of measurement and calculation with the superior and best element of the soul will be one of the main pieces of evidence Plato puts forward to conceive of poetry as a harmful practice to the virtuous person, as he will then go on to form a connection between poetry and the inferior part of the soul.

Plato then goes on to link poetry to the inferior element of the soul by saying it is this element that encourages us to lament in our sufferings. To explain this, he uses an example of a noble father who has recently lost his son and who is experiencing feelings of grief but has to deal with how to navigate those feelings in public. [19] In public, the father is encouraged to be strong and not grieve about it, even though, in private, he wishes to indulge in his grief. [20] Given the fact that the father wants to grieve but also knows that he is encouraged not to, Socrates thus deduces that these opposite impulses are the symptoms of the two opposite elements in the soul. [21] His logic is that the better element of the soul encourages us not to excessively grieve; it must, therefore, be the inferior part of the soul which encourages us to engage in past sufferings.

With these arguments, Plato establishes the idea that doing anything that causes one to engage in past sufferings is antithetical to living as virtuous as possible. This will lead to a claim that we ought to live our lives always in service of perceiving our lives just as they are. For when we have misfortunes, as he says, “there is nothing to be gained by taking them hard (οὐδὲν προβαῖνον τῷ χαλεπῶς φέροντι), nor is any aspect of human affairs worth getting very serious about (οὔτε τι τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων ἄξιον ὂν μεγάλης σπουδῆς)”. [22] This conception of approaching life encourages us to have an impersonal view of ourselves and the importance of our affairs, and

[18] Ibid., 603a.
[19] Ibid., 603e.
[20] Ibid., 604a.
[21] Ibid., 604b.
[22] Ibid., 604b-c.

conveys the message that engaging with grief over our human matters is nothing better than a waste of time.

Conversely, the discussion portrays the best way to live as to always act in service of accurately assessing the severity of our misfortunes. As Plato writes, we ought to always be able to "arrange our affairs (τίθεσθαι τὰ αὑτοῦ πράγματα), given what has befallen us, in whatever way reason determines would be best (ὅπῃ ὁ λόγος αἱρεῖ βέλτιστ᾽ ἂν ἔχειν)."[23] Thus, the way that this argument portrays the best way to live is to always allow one's reason (λόγος) to act as the guiding principle through which one determines the severity of their sufferings. Plato then compares engagement with poetry and recollection of one's sufferings to children (παιδας), who, after physically injuring themselves, "hold on to the hurt part and spend their time wailing" (ἐχομένους τοῦ πληγέντος ἐν τῷ βοᾶν διατρίβειν).[24] The verb used in the phrase "spend their time wailing," διατρίβειν, can also translate to "waste one's time" or "wear away", thus, by engaging the part of the soul that recounts its suffering and lamentations, Plato says one literally wastes their time away in miseries. By associating the best way to live with a life that prioritizes always accurately assessing our affairs, Plato sets up a contrast between the life of virtue and the life that engages with poetry.

Thus, the problem with poetry, in Plato's eyes, is precisely that it is more aligned with this element in our soul that causes us to act like children rather than the one that encourages us to act virtuously and with reason. For, as he says, the poet "does not naturally relate to this best element in the soul, and his wisdom is not directed to pleasing it…but [rather] to the irritable and complex character (ἀγανακτητικόν τε καὶ ποικίλον ἦθος), because it is easy to imitate".[25] Thus, Plato supposes that all of us have an aspect of our character that is "irritable" (ἀγανακτητικόν)

[23] Ibid., 604c.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., 605a.

and "complex" (ποικίλον), which the poet appeals to since he knows that, in doing so, he will be popular among the masses. Plato also says that poetry "arouses and nourishes this element in the soul (τοῦτο ἐγείρει τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ τρέφει)".[26] Plato's word for nourishes, τρέφει, is also sometimes used in the context of women feeding or suckling an infant, which alludes back to his earlier point in which he says to engage in recollections of your sufferings is to act no better than a child wailing and holding on to the hurt part after injuring themselves.

It is this aspect of poetry, in the words of Plato, that has the greatest negative impact upon those who engage with it. For Plato also says that by supporting this irrational element of the soul, poetry "destroys the rational one (ἀπόλλυσι τὸ λογιστικόν).[27] Thus, Plato says that engaging in poetry literally comes with the destruction of one's own rational capabilities. Since Socrates has previously established that the rational element of the soul is the superior and more virtuous one, [28] to engage in poetry, then, is to willingly do something that makes one less virtuous. Indeed, Socrates goes on to say that the poet "produces a bad constitution in the soul of each individual" (κακὴν πολιτείαν ἰδίᾳ ἑκάστου τῇ ψυχῇ ἐμποιεῖν) by distorting their understanding of the severity of their misfortunes.[29] Here, then, there is a direct association between engaging in poetry and acting virtuously; since poetry corrupts the rational element and distorts our perception of life, engaging with it is harmful and damaging to one's being.

These distinctions set up a simple dichotomy between the virtuous person and the unvirtuous one in the eyes of Plato. This idea will be further expounded upon as Socrates goes on to levy the "chief" (μέγιστον) charge against imitative poetry, which is "its power to corrupt

[26] Ibid., 605b.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., 603a.
[29] Ibid., 605b-c.

(λωβᾶσθαι) all but a very few good people" (ἐκτὸς πάνυ τινῶν ὀλίγων).[30] Thus, as he says, poetry's power to influence everyone in society is its greatest danger. Socrates puts it like this:

> When even the best of us hear Homer, or some other tragic poet, imitating one of the heroes in a state of grief and making a long speech of lamentation, or even chanting and beating his breast, you know we enjoy it and give ourselves over to it. We suffer along with the hero and take his sufferings seriously.[31]

Plato says that not even the best of us (βέλτιστοι ἡμῶν) can hear the stories of Homer and not sympathize with the character, a testament to his conception of poetry's greatest vice as its all-pervasive influence. He supposes that, when hearing the story of a tragic hero, one can't help but to lament and suffer along with the hero (ἐπόμεθα συμπάσχοντες) so that the hero's sufferings become their own. This distorts one's view of their own sufferings as they become conflated with that of the character. Here, then, Plato expounds a view that poetry's ability to encourage us to lament in our suffering is something negative and non-virtuous.

By laying forth these arguments, the dialogue supposes that there is a dichotomy between the person who engages in poetry and the one who wants to live a virtuous and philosophic life, as the arguments suggest that the two are fundamentally incompatible. This dichotomy allows us to see the way that philosophic discourse and poetic discourse represent, on the surface, two differing models of going through life and potentially explains why Plato would criticize poetry. Jeng writes that Plato's discussion of what the noble father should do after losing his son is a prominent example of the contrast between poetic and philosophic discourse.[32] Philosophical discourse, as espoused in the *Republic*, urges one to take a deeply impersonal view of life so that we realize all our sufferings are simply a result of the way the world is and not to ascribe too much meaning to the things that happen to us. [33] Recalling Plato's discussion of the noble father

[30] Ibid., 605c.
[31] Ibid., 605c-d.
[32] Jeng, 2020, 323.
[33] *Republic X*, 604c

who is encouraged not to grieve in public, Jeng writes "poetic discourse lends voice to the father's pain; instead of echoing that pain, philosophic discourse adopts a 'fighting' or 'distancing' stance against it." [34] In the dialogue, Socrates states that the laws and customs of man encourage him to not lament his sufferings, but instead to turn his attention to what he can do to solve them. [35] Philosophic discourse urges the individual not to consider what is good for himself, but what is best for the community and the world as a whole.[36] Thus, philosophical discourse, in this case, appears to be most concerned with shifting the focus away from the individual towards the community and the world as a whole.

Unlike philosophical discourse, poetic discourse encourages one to turn inward and direct their attention to their own thoughts and feelings. One way it does this is by depicting change. In the epic poems, characters undergo immense amounts of change, as they make mistakes, reap the consequences of those mistakes, and ultimately adapt to a new way of life as a result of those mistakes. If we recall the earlier description of how poetry causes its audience to feel the sufferings of the character, it means that in Plato's conception, the audience member also undergoes change throughout the course of the poem. This is a negative thing for the Socrates of the *Republic* because change is seen as something harmful and undesirable. [37] According to an argument from Book II, when something is in its ideal state, any sort of change means change for the worse.[38] In other words, Socrates portrays change for its own sake as something negative.[39] Thus, poetry's intimate association with change appears to further set it at odds with what Plato and Socrates appear to conceive of as important to philosophy.

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[34] Jeng, 323.
[35] *Republic X,* 604d.
[36] Jeng, 323.
[37] Ibid., 326
[38] *Republic II,* 381b-c.
[39] Jeng, 326.

Along with change, Jeng emphasizes that poetic discourse also fundamentally values the idea of freedom in a way that seems to contrast with the goals of philosophy. Poetry grants one agency over their own emotions by allowing them the freedom to pursue what is pleasurable and avoid what is painful, as engagement with poetry allows one the ability to legitimize their greatest pleasures or avoid their deepest sufferings.[40] As Jeng puts it, "to act and react as feelings come and go is felt as exercising freedom, especially freedom from law and the dictates of reason." [41] This facet of poetry reveals that the distinction between the life of a philosopher as espoused in the *Republic* and the life of one who engages with poetic discourse is underlined by a choice between whether or not one wishes to grapple with feelings that are typically suppressed by the laws and customs of rational society. As Jeng puts it, "freedom is an attempt to overcome the vulnerability of being human in time. It is the vision of doing what one wishes without constraints." [42] By choosing to engage with poetry, one grants themselves the freedom to embrace all of what it means to be human, even those emotions and feelings that are suppressed by the rules and customs of the real world.

The dichotomy between poetic discourse and philosophic discourse seems to be further reinforced by the word that makes up "poetry" itself. The word for poet comes from the ancient Greek verb ποιέω, which meant "to make" or "compose," definitions that emphasize the poet's interest in creating a new reality – taking the one reality common to all and putting their own twist or spin on it. Philosophic discourse, as it is put forth in the above arguments of the *Republic*, is solely interested in encouraging one to perceive the world as it truly is. Charles Griswold puts it like this:

[40] Ibid., 328.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.

> making takes place in and contributes to the world of becoming. Philosophers, by contrast, are presented as committed to the pursuit of truth that is already 'out there,' independently of the mind and the world of becoming. Their effort has to do with discovery rather than making. [43]

By creating poetry and, by extension, creating a new reality, one inevitably takes themself away from the world in which they currently inhabit. The same thing happens to the audience of poetry, who, through their engagement with the world and their feelings of sympathy for the characters, are themselves transported to a new world after being subjected to poetry. The conception of creation at the heart of poetry further emphasizes the distinction set up between the values of poetry and Plato's conception of philosophy.

All the ways in which the fundamental ideals of poetry appear to be in opposition to philosophy, as well as Book X's vehement testimony against poetry, seem to indicate that poetry and Plato's conception of philosophy are two things that are fundamentally incompatible. The way in which poetry is broken down in the *Republic* through a purely rational way suggests that, perhaps, Plato did, in fact, despise poetry and think it to be in opposition to a just and a virtuous life.

This interpretation of the criticism of poetry, however, is complicated by evidence that Plato understood poetry's indispensability to the art of philosophy. The first piece of evidence we can look at for this claim is the fact that in the *Republic*, by attempting to imagine a perfect society, Plato gives the text a mythic foundation and *adopts* the role of a poet. The dialogue begins with Socrates and his interlocutors attempting to get at the true nature of justice, eventually attempting to conceptualize a just city, believing that such a city must be the mirror of a just person's soul.[44] Socrates even says "Come on, then, let's, in our discussion, create a city

[43] Griswold 2020.
[44] *Republic II,* 369a-b

from the beginning" (ἴθι δή, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, τῷ λόγῳ ἐξ ἀρχῆς ποιῶμεν πόλιν). [45] As one can notice, Plato here uses the word ποιῶμεν, from ποιέω, the verb which makes up the word for "poet." All the arguments that lead to the banishment of the poets from the ideal city in Book X, then, stem from a moment in which Socrates adopts the role of a poet and "creates" a new world. The entire conception of the ideal city, which appears to be one dictated by purely philosophical discourse, is thus an occurrence when Plato utilizes the tool of the poets and the foundation of "creating" that is at the heart of poetry.

There are also numerous flaws and imperfections present in the *Republic* which can be interpreted as evidence of the *Republic's* mythical nature beyond just the text's imagining of a new world. This evidence will complicate the idea that poetry actually does stand in opposition to philosophy. There are several times where characters in the dialogue, including Socrates, will point out that their line of argumentation regarding core themes of the dialogue doesn't really make any sense.[46] For example, there is a moment in Book IX where Socrates questions the veracity of their previously established tripartite definition of the soul.[47] At this moment, Socrates asks Glaucon to consider their previous definition, and "see if you think there is anything in it," not making a definite claim about the absolute truth of their ideas. [48] The dialogue seems to go back and forth on whether it wants to claim with certainty if the soul has three parts or not. As Sushystka points out, Socrates claims in Book X that if the soul is immortal, it cannot have a quarrel between its parts.[49] Then, later, he says "what we have said about the soul is true of it appears at present (οἷον ἐν τῷ παρόντι φαίνεται)".[50] Here, Plato uses the word *appears* (φαίνεται), rather than it is, which suggests there is an element of a lack of

[45] Ibid., 369c.
[46] Ibid., 64.
[47] Ibid., 63.
[48] *Republic IX,* 580c.
[49] Sushytska 2012, 63.
[50] *Republic X*, 611c.

certainty in the rational claims of the dialogue. It is possible that Plato purposefully sprinkled in these moments of confusion to complicate the rational fabric of the dialogue, providing further evidence that we are to question the rational claims made in the dialogue regarding poetry.

This idea clues us into the idea that Plato actually believed poetry useful to philosophy. Scholars like Sushytska have taken the poetic foundations of the dialogue as evidence that the expulsion of the poets is not meant to be taken literally. The dialogue, she says, should be read like a myth–which often says one thing while suggesting something else.[51] With a mythic text, it is often the responsibility of the reader to go out and deduce the meaning of the author's claims outside the text itself. [52] The mythical foundation of the text, as evidenced by the whole dialogue's reliance on the creation of a made-up city, complicates the view that Plato truly did dislike poetry.

To reinforce the interpretation that the criticism of poetry is not meant to be taken literally, Sushystka urges us to look at the fact that the ideal city, after expelling the poets and appointing its philosopher king, eventually devolves into tyranny and imbalance.[53] The ideal city that Plato builds, which relies purely on reason and rationality, fails, an idea that seems to indicate that Plato is actually suggesting that an attempt to limit creative freedom and expression can result in the downfall of society.[54] Also, earlier in the dialogue, Plato says that the qualities of the city mirror the qualities of the soul of an individual. [55] If both of these are believed to be true, we can then interpret that Plato is suggesting that a person who limits his creative expression and his engagement with poetry himself cannot be fully virtuous nor just.

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[51] Sushystka, 57.
[52] Ibid., 62.
[53] Sushytska, 67.
[54] Ibid., 66.
[55] *Republic IV,* 441c-d.

The extensive use of myth in the *Republic* is further evidence of both Plato's conception of the reliance of philosophy on myth and the mythic foundation of the text. As I mentioned before, the imagining of the ideal city is one way in which the text as a whole can be interpreted as mythic, but often, Plato utilizes also myth and mythic stories in the text as a vehicle to illustrate his ideas. There is the myth of Gyges in Book II, in which Glaucon puts forward a story about a ring that makes its wearer invisible.[56] Glaucon uses this story to conclude that no one is just voluntarily and that, if there were no fear of punishment, no one would act justly.[57] The *Republic,* as a whole, also ends with a myth – the myth of Er. In that story, Socrates tells us of a man named Er, who was killed in battle and eventually transported to a land between life and death.[58] Er is chosen to be a messenger to relate what happens to souls after they die and he then witnesses that the punishment of people in the afterlife is a reflection of the way that they acted on Earth. [59] I highlight these examples to reveal the *Republic*'s heavy reliance on myth. This reliance points both to philosophy's inherent dependence on myth and the idea that the text as a whole is mythic, clueing us into the idea that we should be consistently evaluating the claims about the dangers of poetry made throughout the dialogue.

While I have suggested that the presence of myth in the text is for the purpose of complicating the text's rational claims against poetry, the question of how exactly these Platonic myths should be interpreted has been long debated. The problem with this question is that Plato himself never answers it.[60] Pierre Destree says that Platonic myths "are more and more interpreted nowadays as part and parcel of the philosophical inquiry itself, and ought not be opposed, or even firmly distinguished, from the arguments given throughout the dialogue." [61]

[56] *Republic II*, 359c-360c
[57] Ibid., 360c.
[58] *Republic X*, 614b-d
[59] Ibid., 615a-621b.
[60] Smith 1986, 25.
[61] Destree 2012, 111.

That is, some say that the myths Plato uses are an extension of the arguments he gives throughout the dialogue, that they are another piece of the puzzle that contribute to the overall argument. Destree, however, argues that many Platonic myths are more than just another aspect of Plato's argument, but rather are unique in the sense that they are used for "protreptic" purposes, meaning they are meant to encourage the reader to act in one way or another. [62] This, I will suggest, is an attitude towards the interpretation of Platonic myths that makes the most sense to apply to the *Republic*. For, if we look at the ways that myth is beneficial to the act of philosophy, we see that it has a unique capability of inspiring deliberation in the reader that appears to be central to Plato's conception of philosophy.

The ways that myth and storytelling are useful to philosophy reveal that the act of engaging with poetry and myth appear to be tools that are almost *intrinsic* to Plato's conception of the act of philosophy. Myth is a useful way of demonstrating the hypotheses being discussed in the dialogue, as they can show what happens to a person when he does or doesn't live by the principles being discussed.[63] They can also help enliven the conversation and engage the reader in a way that purely rational and logic-based argumentation cannot. Myths can also be effective tools for summing up many of the important themes and images of the dialogue as a whole, an idea that perhaps clues us in to why Plato would choose to have the myth of Er end the entire dialogue.[64] There is something that can only be gained by adding stories and myths to philosophical works, as myths are often more likely to inspire change in the reader than logical articulations.[65] This is because stories, as Smith writes, are "playful" in a way that adds to the essential experience of philosophy. [66] Stories have the capability of inspiring inner deliberation in

[62] Ibid., 116.
[63] Smith, 21
[64] Ibid.
[65] Sushystka, 57.
[66] Smith, 21.

people in a way that encourages them to evaluate how the story is relevant to themselves or their life. Understanding this idea allows us to see why Plato would utilize this art of the poets, despite the criticisms against them.

After these considerations, we are left with a much more nuanced view that suggests Plato actually appreciated poetry and, in some way, believed it necessary for philosophy and for a virtuous life. The purely rational considerations of Socrates regarding poetry discussed above are called into question by the evidence for the dialogue's mythic foundation and the text's questioning of its own rational validity. But questions arise from this interpretation, such as, why even do this? What reason would Plato have for hiding this nuanced view of poetry behind his apparent criticism? I think this question gets at something that seems central to Plato's conception of philosophy, as the realization we come to after Plato's critique of poetry and the considerations that suggest Plato understood the value of poetry is that it seems as if the rationality of his claims are *designed* to be complicated and broken down. It is perhaps in this act of breaking down the rationality of the claims provided that Plato thought the true experience of philosophy arose. If we understand this idea, we get an explanation for why Plato chose to criticize poetry while simultaneously relying on it and understanding its value. The criticism of poetry appears to be one instance where Plato's attitudes about a topic seem to reside beyond the level of the arguments presented in the text itself.

Thus, Plato's criticism of poetry in the *Republic* and his incorporation of myth in the text seems to indicate that the act at the heart of philosophy, in Plato's eyes, actually mirrors the one at the heart of poetry. Regarding myth in the *Republic*, Smith writes that "the content and form of myth are provocative; one needs to ponder the meaning of the images of the myth and to attempt to separate what in the myths and what are the truths which Socrates is promoting through the

myths." [67] By constantly using myths, then, Plato seems to be encouraging the reader to think critically about what is being said and to parse the message of the myth, and the text as a whole, for themself. In this way, we see that, contrary to what it seems on the surface, both Platonic philosophy and poetic discourse appear to be interested in the idea of freedom of the individual. Plato's inclusion of myths means the reader is constantly granted the freedom to interpret the message of the myth for themselves. We see, then, that poetry and philosophy, at least as they appear in Plato, are not all that different. The agency for interpretation, in both cases, lies within the reader or audience member. Thus, one way we can explain Plato's extensive use of myth and storytelling is through his understanding of their capacity to inspire inner deliberation in the reader.

All of this is only able to be understood, of course, through the power of writing, which allows the reader to analyze the arguments of the dialogue as individual pieces of a greater whole. Thus it is imperative that we consider the relevance of the time that Plato is writing this dialogue and the spread of literacy among the ancient Greeks when considering his true attitudes towards poetry. For only through analyzing many of the dialogue's pieces do we see the way in which poetry and myth can be understood both as something in opposition to philosophy and simultaneously something that aids it. The ways in which poetic and philosophic discourse exhibit similar degrees of compatibility and incompatibility with one another suggests an explanation for why Plato would criticize poetry while simultaneously extensively relying on it.

Thus, the message we learn from Plato's treatment of poetry is that it can be dangerous because of many reasons, but that doesn't mean that it is *all* bad. Poetry can actually be extremely useful to the art of philosophy and, as Plato suggests, perhaps even necessary to live a good and virtuous life. This doesn't mean that poetry, however, is an *all* good thing either. It

[67] Smith, 28.

exists in this middle realm, incapable of a true and universal definition. His conception of poetry's usefulness can best be summed up in his understanding of its ability to both inspire inner deliberation in the reader and add a certain playfulness to the act of philosophy. Poetry is dangerous, however, in the sense that it can invite us to succumb and be lost in our emotions, taking us away from the vital experience of life and all the things we have before us. Because of these considerations, I suggest, Plato wished to conceptualize poetry with an unfixed definition, knowing that it can represent many things both good and bad to philosophy.

This conception of poetry is one that mirrors, in many ways, his conception of writing. His attitudes towards writing, as I will describe in the next section, on the surface again seem to reveal a desire to portray this usage of language with intrinsically negative qualities. When we dig a bit deeper, however, we see that Plato perhaps also saw writing as extremely useful to philosophy because of its ability to inspire inner deliberation in the reader.

Plato's Treatment of Writing and Its Relationship to Philosophy

Writing is another usage of language that is criticized throughout Plato's works and an aspect of the dialogues that conveys a similar message as the criticism of poetry. While Plato makes writing appear antithetical to the goals of philosophy and actually harmful to the quest for knowledge, his own usage of the written word implies that he did see some value in writing–the value of which it is perhaps the reader's responsibility to find out. An analysis of the *Phaedrus*' criticisms of writing reveals telling details about Plato's paradoxical relationship with the written word. The *Seventh Letter*, although its authenticity is a point of contention, can also be used to shed light on Plato's vision of the relationship of the written word to philosophy. I believe through a close analysis of his attitudes about writing, we are left with an understanding that Plato's criticism of writing and his simultaneous reliance on it is a result of an awareness both of the dangers inherent in the written word as well as its usefulness to inspire inner deliberation within its reader.

The main source typically looked to in an exploration of Plato's attitudes towards writing is the *Phaedrus*, a dialogue in which writing is heavily criticized towards the later part of the work. It's important to first note the context of the criticisms of writing in this dialogue. The criticisms occur when Socrates is telling Phaedrus an obviously made-up story about the advent of writing. In the story, Socrates says an Egyptian divinity by the name of Theuth was responsible for the discovery of many games and sciences, as well as writing. [68] Theuth presents these discoveries to the king of Egypt at the time, Thamus, who goes on to say numerous disparaging things about the written word.[69] From the onset of the criticism of writing, then, there is a level of distancing between Plato and the character espousing these views against

[68] *Phaedrus*, 274c-d.
[69] Ibid., 274e.

writing. The mythic nature of the story in which the criticism of writing takes palace encourages us to consider how much these would reflect Plato's actual values, and how much of it is meant to be ambiguous.

The first aspect of Thamus' criticism of writing says the written word is dangerous because it will begin to "introduce forgetfulness in the soul" (λήθην μὲν ἐν ψυχαῖς παρέξει) of the person who engages with it. [70] By reading, as Plato writes, people will begin to put too much faith in books, relying on the written word to remember things rather than their own memory.[71] Thus, it sounds that Plato is completely disregarding that, through reading, one is capable of learning things previously unknown to them and enhancing the number of things they generally know and are able to recall. This is one way that it can be said that writing actually improves one's memory. Here, however, Plato refers to the written word's ability to be utilized for remembering as proof that it will eventually begin to cause forgetfulness in the case of people who read books.

The criticism also portrays writing as negative because, as Socrates goes on to say, it only gives the appearance of knowledge and not the real thing. Writing, he says, "will enable [people] to hear many things without properly being taught, and they will imagine they will have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing." [72] Thus, he says that engaging with the written word will only give one the appearance of knowledge, and not the real thing. In the words of Thamus, Plato also says that writing is a potion (φάρμακον) not for remembering, but for reminding.[73] The distinction between remembering and reminding reinforces the flaw of writing in that it only gives the appearance of wisdom in the reader, and not the real thing. The

[70] Ibid., 275a.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid., a-b.
[73] Ibid., 275a

word choice here for potion, φάρμακον, a word that can both mean remedy or drug, reinforces the idea that the written word is something potentially dangerous that can be mistakenly perceived as something beneficial.

Plato also criticizes the written word's inability to communicate with its reader. As he says about writing, "you'd think [written words] were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever." [74] Thus, the complaint about writing is that it leaves no space for discourse; when something is written down, its position remains unchangeable and impossible to interact with. Socrates also points out that because of the fixedness of writing, when it is attacked "it always needs its father's support, alone it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support." [75] These criticisms show that Plato appears to be particularly interested in writing's lack of ability to engage in discourse with its reader. Here, we see that he raises a valid concern about writing, as the static and fixed state of the written word means that readers who may have questions about what is being discussed in the text are left helpless due to the fixed nature of words once they are written.

Indeed, writing's inability to engage in discourse with its reader is why, as Socrates goes on to say, the written word will always remain inferior to the oral teachings of a man who is knowledgeable about a subject. Plato writes that "the living, breathing (ζῶντα καὶ ἔμψυχον) discourse of the man who knows, of which the written one can be fairly called an image" is the superior brother to the written word.[76] The alive and embodied qualities that Plato ascribes to the spoken word seems to reveal an attitude that words only carry meaning when spoken out of the mouth of someone knowledgeable of the subject. Philosophy and the transfer of knowledge, he

[74] Ibid., 275d.
[75] Ibid., 275e.
[76] Ibid. 276a.

asserts, can only occur through the living conversation between two people. When words are written down, on the other hand, they become dead and lose any meaning or value. With this argument, then, Socrates says that learning cannot be acquired through books, but only through in person and embodied instruction. He does this by emphasizing the living quality of words spoken out of the mouth of someone who is knowledgeable, which contrasts with the static, fixed nature of words once they are written down.

These criticisms seem to suggest that Plato thought writing an inherently flawed medium and that true understanding and knowledge are incapable of arising from reading books. Scholars have often paired Plato's criticisms of writing in the *Phaedrus* with attitudes expressed in the *Seventh Letter* to further deduce that Plato was a strong critic of the written word. It is a point of contention, however, as to whether or not the letter was actually written by Plato or simply somebody writing under his name.[77] Whether or not the letter was actually written by Plato, it can be useful to explore the arguments in the letter in relation to the ideas expressed in the *Phaedrus* to delve further into the way we can interpret Plato's attitudes towards writing. In the letter, which is thought to be written by Plato after his travels to Syracuse, the author outlines the reasons that led to him getting involved with the Syracusan tyrant Dionysius I. In the letter, the author responds to a claim that Dionysius knows the core aspects of Plato's philosophy and that he has them written down, after which the author of the letter writes an indictment of the written word. To explore the potential relevance of the letter to Plato's attitudes about writing, I will first outline the criticisms of writing in the *Seventh Letter* that mirror some of the sentiments in the *Phaedrus,* as these should perhaps inform an interpretation of the letter's authenticity.

[77] Marren 2019, 92.

As it states in the letter, writing is only capable of reproducing the image (εἴδωλον) of something, not it's true form.[78] Thus, the author of the letter is suggesting that someone who reads something may give off a false claim to knowledge about something while, in reality, only knowing its image. This idea echoes the notion described in the *Phaedrus* in which Socrates says that writing is only capable of giving off the appearance of knowledge and not the real thing.[79] As a result, in both the letter and the *Phaedrus*, the author writes of similar concerns regarding the written word's ability to give off the appearance of knowledge about something and not the real thing.

In a similar vein, the writer of the letter seems particularly preoccupied with the idea that writing's fixedness allows for the author's words to be twisted and misunderstood. To the author of the letter, there is a great danger in committing one's inner beliefs to writing for this is similar to "banishing them to a state of disharmony and disrepute (ἀναρμοστίαν καὶ ἀπρέπειαν)."[80] The state of disharmony and disrepute refers to the author's conception that, because of the fixedness of the written word, words that are written down will inevitably be twisted and misrepresented by the general public. Earlier, the author also says "any man who is serious about truly serious subjects must absolutely avoid writing about them and making them sources of envy and embarrassment (φθόνον καὶ ἀπορίαν) for humanity." [81] The repetition of negative adjectives emphasizes the author's conception of the inherent danger of committing one's inner beliefs to writing, as he says that committing things to writing inevitably allows them to be misunderstood by the general public. Interestingly, this is less of a criticism of the flaws of writing and more an

[78] *Seventh Letter,* 342b
[79] *Phaedrus*, 275b.
[80] *The Seventh Letter,* transl. by John Radder 2019, 344d.
[81] Ibid., 344c

indictment of the author's conception of the general intellect of anyone who can read, saying that the world of people who read is a world of disharmony and chaos.

These sentiments are similar to what Plato has Socrates say in the *Phaedrus* as he describes writing as always needing its father to defend it.[82] Both of these ideas seem to indicate an anxiety that the author's writings will be interpreted incorrectly and a lamenting that they have no way of being defended properly once put into the written form. Both also assume that the base intellect of the general population of readers will be too low for them to properly understand the meaning of what is written on the page.

The similarity of these ideas across the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter* could be a sign of common authorship, but could also be attributed to the author of the letter trying to deliberately mimic some of the language in the dialogue. Another crucial passage that must be taken into account when considering the letter's authenticity, as well as its possible relevance to Plato's attitudes towards writing, occurs earlier in the text. Here, the writer is directly responding to the claim that Dionysius I has claimed to know and wrote down the core beliefs of Plato. In response to this, the author writes:

> At any rate, this is what I can say about all those who have written and will write on the subject, and all those who claim to know about what I work on, whether they have heard about it from me, or from others, or whether they have figured it out on their own: it is not possible, in my opinion at least, for these men to have any knowledge of the matter. There is certainly no treatise of mine on it, nor will there ever be. For unlike other sciences, this one can in no way be communicated by means of words. On the contrary, it is only through a prolonged communion with the subject, by living with it, that, like a light that is kindled by a flickering flame, it begins to suddenly nourish itself within one's soul.[83]

Thus, in this passage, the writer makes the claim that nothing has been written, nor will ever be written, that will be able to capture the truth of his philosophical ideals. If we assume he is

[82] *Phaedrus,* 275e.
[83] *Seventh Letter,* 341b-d.

including the writings of Plato himself in this category, the author is thus claiming that not even the dialogues contain Plato's true philosophical beliefs. Interestingly, he also says there is no way in which his true philosophical beliefs can be communicated by means of words. Finally, he concludes that while these things do not lend themselves to verbal expression, they are capable of being realized after continuous engagement with philosophy itself,

We can interpret the nature of the forger's comments about writing in the *Seventh Letter*, if it is indeed a forgery, as someone trying to think through the paradoxical nature of Plato's claims about writing in the *Phaedrus* and other dialogues with his extensive use of writing. For the forger, one way that this apparent contradiction can be resolved is by claiming, under the name of Plato, that he never wrote down any of the things he truly believed. This would allow for people to then look back at Plato's discussion of writing in the *Phaedrus* as one such moment in which he was not writing what he truly believed. Thus, if this is the case, the forger has been forced, under the guise of Plato, to take the extreme stance of claiming the philosopher never wrote down anything he truly believed to nullify this apparent contradiction. This is one way we can interpret the stance toward writing in the *Seventh Letter*.

If we believe that it was Plato who wrote the letter, however, his understanding of the relationship of writing to philosophy appears to be revealed as the passage conceives of the act of true philosophy as incapable of being captured in written form. First, the writer claims the things important to him "can in no way be communicated by means of words (ῥητὸν γὰρ οὐδαμῶς ἐστιν). Interestingly, ῥητὸν is a word that doesn't usually translate to written words, but instead usually referred to spoken utterances. Thus, the passage seems to suggest that the things Plato believed to be most important to philosophy were not things that could be spoken of aloud, let alone written on the page. With the passage, then, it seems that Plato is saying (if it is he who

authored this) that an understanding of the things he considered most important is incapable of coming out of anything that he himself wrote, as they didn't lend themselves to forms of verbal expression.

The writer maintains, however, that the truth of his philosophical doctrines are not fundamentally unattainable. They can be borne, as the writer says, through "a prolonged communion with the subject, by living with it (ἐκ πολλῆς συνουσίας γιγνομένης περὶ τὸ πρᾶγμα αὐτὸ). The word choice with συνουσίας, a noun that literally means the experience of living with, is also a word that often had the sense of sexual communion, which emphasizes the conception of an intimate aspect of the process of attaining knowledge. If this is Plato, he emphasizes that the ideas important to him and to his understanding of philosophy are never things that could be written or spoken about, but are instead things that can only be understood from within one's self. It's important to note that, interestingly, he does not say that to gain an understanding of his philosophical doctrines, you need to be taught by him. The suggestion is, rather, that through continuous intimate engagement with philosophy, one is capable of attaining awareness of true knowledge.

The sanctity to which the writer ascribes to this inner knowledge also seems to mimic Socrates' discussion in the *Phaedrus* of the living and embodied speech of a man who is knowledgeable. There, Socrates says that the living discourse between teacher and student is "a discourse that is written down, with knowledge, in the soul of the listener." [84] Indeed, in much the same way, the writer of the letter says that, after continuous engagement with one's self, knowledge of the things he alludes to can begin to nourish (τρέφει) themselves in the soul (ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ). As a result, it seems that Plato is alluding that the things to which he truly believes are capable of being discovered through engagement with one's own self and that, after doing so,

[84] *Phaedrus,* 276a.

knowledge can arise in one's soul similar to the way that knowledge can be written in the soul of a student learning from a knowledgeable teacher.

Thus, if the letter truly was written by Plato, we receive insight into the way he conceived of philosophy's relationship to writing, as the passage suggests that through continuous communion with the act of philosophy one can understand the truths Plato held within. Importantly, all the criticisms of writing in the *Phaedrus* and in the *Seventh Letter* appear in the context of someone claiming that through reading books, they know things. Indeed, as I mentioned, the author of the letter is responding to claims that the Syracusan tyrant, Dionysius, is saying that he knows the things to which Plato believed and was able to write them down. [85] But this does not mean Plato did not think the written word altogether unhelpful to the experience of philosophy. Although the author says the things to which he believes cannot be put into writing, he does not say that someone cannot *use* writing to discover these things themselves. He discusses this process of gaining true knowledge as a fundamentally *internal* one – one in which it is one's responsibility to engage with their inner self to find. We can use this idea to suppose he believed his own writing to be capable of inspiring the inner deliberation in the reader that he thought essential to the act of philosophy. This act of inner deliberation is perhaps the inner truth to which he said could never be communicated by "means of words."

Thus, if we believe the letter, it reveals something central to Plato's conception of philosophy. The author claims that he never wrote down the things he believed to be most important to philosophy. This statement then prompts us to go past the actual words on the surface of the dialogues to understand what Plato might have believed relevant to philosophy. Since it appears we are prompted to go beyond the physical words on the page to understand Plato's true attitudes towards writing, we can then infer that Plato believed there to be an aspect

[85] *Seventh Letter,* 341b.

of philosophy that was non-propositional. By non-propositional, I mean something that doesn't have anything to do with arguments or logical reasoning. Plato's conception of the non-propositional aspect of philosophy seems to be concerned with the reader's own inner deliberation as they evaluate the claims being made within the text. We saw an element of the non-propositional aspect of philosophy in his criticisms of poetry, as one needed to go beyond the actual words on the page (the criticisms) to see that he understood poetry's value to philosophy. I believe we should use the non-propositional aspect of philosophy to understand his attitudes towards writing as well.

The non-propositional aspect of philosophy is connected to the established notion that Plato was not interested in convincing his audience through his writings, but rather in inspiring the reader to continue philosophizing on their own. Robin Waterfield in the introduction to his translation of the *Phaedrus* says that "a Platonic dialogue is less concerned with giving answers than in provoking questions. " [86] This facet of the dialogues surfaces most clearly in the dialogues that end in a clear sense of aporia– in which no satisfactory conclusion to the topics being discussed are reached. The lack of a definite conclusion in many of the dialogues echoes the Socratic belief in the difficulty of attaining true knowledge and the conviction that knowledge truly arises when one understands that they know nothing. As Waterfield writes,

> In Plato's *Apology,* Socrates is presented as the wisest of men because he recognized his own lack of wisdom, whereas others thought that they were wise; so we may take *Phaedrus* and other Platonic dialogues to contain genuine wisdom because they recognize their own limitations. [87]

Thus, the underlying philosophical stance of many of the dialogues is the idea that true knowledge is something difficult, and perhaps impossible, to fully obtain and that there is

[86] Waterfield 2002, xxxix.
[87] Ibid., xli.

wisdom in knowing this. Indeed, they conceptualize this understanding as the only true form of wisdom.

This interpretation of the dialogues suggests that their point is to inspire the sort of inner deliberation Plato appears to deem most important to philosophy, its non-propositional aspect. I believe this idea is especially pertinent to his discussion of writing in the *Phaedrus*, as writing is the very thing that inspires this perception of philosophy. In other words, there is no way for this perception of philosophy to be conceived of without writing itself. Thus, it follows that this idea should be kept in mind when analyzing his criticisms of writing, as his suppositions about the way writing should be used suggest that he believed writing useful because of its ability to allow the reader to engage in the most essential part of philosophy – this idea of inner deliberation.

This interpretation would nullify the contradictions of his extensive criticism of the written word and his simultaneous reliance on it. If there is an aspect of Plato's conception of philosophy that is meant to be non-propositional, that means that every claim made in the dialogues, including the criticisms of writing, are meant to be evaluated and deconstructed. Additionally, it provides a way to see the claims in the *Seventh Letter* as not so extreme and difficult to ascribe to Plato. The author makes the claims in the letter that their most important philosophical beliefs have never been committed to writing, which would be true, if the author considered their most important philosophical beliefs to be centered around the principles promoted through the philosophical *stance* of the dialogues themselves, rather than the arguments presented on the page.

This idea is actually corroborated by a piece of evidence that comes down to us from Plato's pupil, Aristotle. Gibson writes that "in the Metaphysics (I. IV. 985b-VI. 988a), Aristotle testifies to Platonic theories that commentators have not been able to locate in Plato's dialogues."

[88] Gibson goes on to say that Aristotle also pointed out that some of Plato's written doctrines vary greatly from aspects of his oral, unwritten teachings. [89] Aristotle's testimony points to the existence of Plato's unwritten doctrines and suggests that the unwritten ones were those which he decided to teach in the Academy, which perhaps indicates that those are the ones he believed to be most important. The idea that Plato's oral teachings differed from his written ones seems to suggest that it was he who wrote the *Seventh Letter,* as it would explain the claim in the letter that he never wrote down his inner beliefs. There could be a connection between the unwritten doctrines, the inner beliefs mentioned in the *Seventh Letter* that he never committed to writing, and the non-propositional aspect of philosophy. This would suggest that Plato believed the most important aspect of philosophy to be its non-propositional aspect, which, as I said earlier, seems to be connected to the idea of the importance of the reader's own inner deliberation.

Of course, the idea that the *Seventh Letter* verifies the notion that the most important aspect of philosophy to Plato was never written is dependent on whether the letter is authentic which, as I mentioned before, is a matter up for debate. The discussion surrounding the authenticity of Plato's letters as a whole is a heated one, and one too long to outline in this current project. However, it's important to note that the letter that scholars most often deem authentic is, indeed, the *Seventh Letter*.[90] Robin Waterfield says it would take an extremely bold forger to not only write under the name of someone so recognizable and renowned, but also to do so at such extensive length as in the *Seventh Letter.*[91] The truth of the letter's authenticity will most likely never be fully known, but I believe there is reason enough to allow the *Seventh Letter* to inform our understanding of Plato's relationship to writing.

[88] Gibson 2005, 6.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Romm 2023.
[91] Ibid.

If we put aside the question of authenticity, then, the discussion of writing in the *Seventh Letter* is an avenue through which we can understand a way that Plato's conception of philosophy, paradoxically, can actually be aided by and enabled by the written word, despite the criticisms of writing in the *Letter* and in the *Phaedrus*. The discussion of writing in the letter suggests that the most important thing to philosophy for Plato was something never written down. This idea, combined with the dialogues' desire to suggest rather than make concrete claims, seems to indicate that Plato believed that there was a fundamental aspect of the experience of philosophy that was non-propositional and that was capable of being understood through continuous engagement with philosophy. It follows, then, that the inner deliberation that is inspired by the dialogues could be the thing he believes to be the most important aspect of philosophy.

The reader can only come to this understanding through an analysis of these arguments out of their specific contexts. We don't get a sense of the importance of the non-propositional aspect of philosophy through any analysis of the arguments in the dialogues themselves. We only get this sense through an understanding of the underlying philosophical stance of the dialogues as a whole, which was only made possible by his committing them to writing. This is one way we can interpret the written word as the motivating factor that determined his conception of philosophy as a whole, as it seems the thing Plato believes to be fundamentally important to philosophy to be something that comes out through analyzing the dialogues in written form. I believe Plato understood that his conception of philosophy was, at least partially, reliant on the written word and attempted to communicate this by clueing us into the importance of non-propositionality to philosophy.

This interpretation sheds light on why Plato perhaps chose to present his philosophical beliefs in the dialogue form. Drew Hyland suggests that Plato wrote dialogues so that the reader, out of the witnessing of "the concrete portrayal of philosophic situations… will encounter Plato's experience of philosophy." [92] Plato's early experience of philosophy was the witnessing and the recording of the conversations of Socrates.[93] It is possible that, after observing the conversation of Socrates, Plato began to conceptualize the true experience philosophy as not something that has anything to do with arguments, but rather through an understanding that comes to mind after being *presented* with arguments. Plato seems to believe that understanding arguments and having wisdom are two different things, as he portrays Socrates as the wisest man because he knows that he knows nothing. Thus, maybe it is the understanding that arguments, propositions, and logical reasoning are not wisdom that makes up Plato's conception of what wisdom actually is. By presenting the philosophical situations around which he began to understand his conception of philosophy, Plato is perhaps inviting the reader to come to the same understanding of philosophy that he does.

The idea that Plato's own experience of philosophy influenced his conception of how the dialogues should be approached is attested to by what we know about Plato's academy. While the nature of how teaching occurred in the Academy is not fully known, scholars have used the various dialogues as theories for what education in the Academy must have looked like, concluding that it is almost certain that the nature of the discussions being portrayed in the dialogues would mirror the sort of instruction performed in the Academy. [94] It is likely that education consisted of discussion, in which the dialogues could be used as guides or inspiration

[92] Hyland 1968, 42.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Friedlander 1969, 87.

to ideas.[95] Thus, in the Academy, it seems that the dialogues were used in which the students would be introduced to the experience of philosophy in the way that he was, that is, through engagement with philosophical conversation. Thus, Plato must have believed the dialogues in written form to be useful to the education of the philosophic man, which suggests he believed that one is capable of attaining knowledge through analyzing the dialogues.

Throughout this section, I have suggested that Plato conceived of the most important aspect of philosophy as something that doesn't have to do with arguments or reasoning, but rather the experience of inner deliberation. This does not mean, however, that he believed the written arguments in the dialogue to be of no value. The use of the dialogues in the Academy shows that he probably did not believe the arguments in the written teachings to be completely useless. As I mentioned before, the logical premises in the dialogue most likely served as jumping off points through which ideas and concepts could be fully explored. But it seems that he thought taking the written arguments as completely true to be a mistake. If Plato intended the arguments in the dialogues to be taken literally, then he would implicitly be saying that he has wisdom about these matters and that others should believe him, which would go against the idea he seems to believe that the only wisdom is acknowledging we know nothing. This seems to reveal a conception that the most important thing to philosophy is something non-propositional and that we can come to this truth through analysis of the dialogues.

Plato's goal of portraying the most important thing relevant to philosophy as something non-propositional is aided by the way his dialogues avoid the criticisms of writing in the *Phaedrus*. The way writing is condemned in the dialogues seems to apply to works that will make propositional claims, and yet, the dialogues that Plato wrote evade the criticisms which he applies to other written works. Hyland notes that the first major criticism in *Phaedrus* is that

[95] Ibid., 88.

writing induces forgetfulness in the mind of the person reading, and yet such concerns do not apply to the dialogues if the most *important* key ideas are not the physical ones on the page. [96] In this way, Plato avoids the criticism that can be applied to, for example, an ordinary philosophical treatise, which will make concrete claims that can easily be forgotten. If the knowledge of a Platonic dialogue doesn't necessarily rely on the physical words on the page, but rather in the deliberation it inspires in the reader, there is no danger of it inducing forgetfulness in those who read it.

A Platonic dialogue also avoids the criticism of writing that it is incapable of defending itself. If a Platonic dialogue is not interested in making concrete claims, it is not saying anything that necessarily needs to be defended by its author. [97] As I mentioned before, the truth that the Platonic dialogues seem interested in getting at is not something contained within the page, but rather in the deliberation it inspires in the reader. Thus, the Plato structured the writing of his dialogues in a way that excused himself from the dangers he espouses to writing in the *Phaedrus*.

Analyzing the ways in which his dialogues deviate from the criticisms he levies towards traditional writings allows us to see the centrality that non-propositionality has to Plato's conception of philosophy. Additionally, doing so explains how and why Plato would believe that reading his dialogues alone wouldn't give one an understanding of his true beliefs, but that they were possible to be understood through engagement with them. By putting his philosophical beliefs in dialogue form and refraining from making concrete claims related to his most sacred inner beliefs within them, Plato excuses himself from the flaws of writing that he points out in the *Phaedrus*. The exclusion of his own writings from the criticisms in the *Phaedrus* combined with the claim in the letter that wisdom is capable of arising from engagement with the subject,

[96] Hyland, 39.
[97] Ibid., 41.

seems to reveal an awareness that writing can be beneficial because of its ability to inspire inner deliberation in its reader. Since it also seems that we can interpret this act of inner deliberation as the most important thing to the act of philosophy for Plato, his conception of philosophy is thus reliant on the written word. His awareness of philosophy's reliance on the written word reveals an attitude about the usefulness of writing despite the criticisms of it in the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*.

Thus, I believe we can use these two moments of Plato's corpus typically utilized as pieces of evidence that the author was a strong opponent of the written word, the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*, to show that his relationship to writing is more nuanced than a simple condemnation of the practice. The criticisms of writing in the *Phaedrus* and *Seventh Letter* seem to show that he believed that utilizing the written word as a source for knowledge without approaching it philosophically is foolish. He clearly believed, however, that writing could be useful because of its capacity to inspire inner deliberation in its reader and its ability to encourage the reader to engage in the essential act of philosophy.

Plato used writing, while simultaneously criticizing it through propositional arguments, to exemplify what he believed to be the most important aspect of philosophy – namely that, at its core, it is non-propositional. The non-propositional aspect of philosophy is key to interpreting the criticisms of poetry and writing as they illuminate how he could criticize these forms of language while simultaneously relying on them. While both have their dangers, they also both allow the reader to engage in the essential experience of philosophy – the act of inner deliberation. Thus, we can say that, similar to his conception of poetry, Plato's true attitudes towards writing lack a fixed and universal quality. This is probably the result of an awareness of the ways in which writing can be both useful and detrimental to the act of philosophy.

The Relevance of the Abstractable Qualities of Writing to Plato's Conceptions of Poetry and Writing

Throughout this thesis, I have suggested that, despite Plato's criticisms of poetry and writing, he actually understood their usefulness and indispensability to philosophy. To conclude this work, I wish to illustrate how the dynamics of oral and literate cultures reveal how and why Plato could criticize poetry and writing while simultaneously recognizing their value to philosophy, keeping in mind that Plato is writing during a time in which the oral culture of the Greeks is transforming into a literate one. I believe writing's ability to allow for the abstraction of ideas out of a solely oral context provided the foundation on which Plato based his attitudes surrounding poetry and writing. To explore how this may be the case, I will first explain how the development of writing in a culture allows for ideas to be conceptualized in an entirely new way.

Before a culture becomes literate, words and ideas only have meaning in the context of their specific oral utterances. This is because oral speech, by itself, does not allow for the development of any sort of final or universal definition. As Hatab puts it, oral speech "is thoroughly concrete in its embodied milieu, the specific contexts of speech acts, the sensuous imagery, and the direct immersion in immediate descriptions and references." [98] Thus, before a word is able to be written, the only conception of the word that the culture can have is within a specific oral situation, so that the word exists not with a *definition*, but with a specific picture or context of what makes it up. Hatab uses the example of a tree to illustrate this facet of oral cultures. Before the introduction of writing, the word "tree" for an oral culture can only have meaning in the sense of the individuals of that culture's visual understanding of a tree.[99] As a

[98] Hatab 2007, 323.
[99] Ibid.

result, in an oral culture, the meanings of words and ideas can only be conceptualized in the exact context in which they are spoken.

Additionally, there is a lack of fixedness in what makes up the meanings of words in an oral culture, as oral utterances exist only in the moment they are spoken. As a result, in an oral culture, a word or phrase's definition can be fluid and ever-changing, always dependent on who the speaker is and how they wish to communicate. Certain concepts may be spoken once and never again returned to, meaning that specific definition or utterance could be spoken once and then forever lost to time. What I mean to emphasize here is that, in an oral culture, the definition and meanings of words are fundamentally fluid and always based in concrete situations.

When a culture becomes literate, however, this allows for the abstraction of ideas out of these specific oral contexts, so that the nature of a thing or idea can be explored in a more universal form. As Hatab writes, "once reading and writing become second nature, we develop a new way of accessing the world through the nonsensuous visual presence of alphabetic lines." [100] Words and phrases begin to have form out of the specific situations through which they existed in an oral context, so that the meaning of words can be understood in a more universal nature. The word tree now does not have to be in reference to a specific, concrete situation – but now rather can refer to the concept of what makes up a tree, what it is that defines "treeness" itself.[101] Thus, the introduction of writing means that words and meanings start to lose their fluid and continuously changing nature, beginning instead to have abstractable qualities and characteristics.

This ability of the written word has the potential to change the way the world is perceived for those that experience the shift to literacy. Ong writes of the ways that the psyches of humans

[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.

are permanently altered once becoming introduced to writing. Regarding oral composition, Ong says that something is permanently lost after a shift to literacy: "oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche." [102] Ong's ideas bring to mind the findings of Albert Lord and Millman Parry, who, in their studies of oral cultures in the Balkan regions found that individuals in these cultures were capable of composing works of oral composition the likes of which are unable to be imagined to those who have been introduced to literacy. [103] While much is able to be gained through the abstraction of ideas by the written word, much can also be lost. Importantly, if works of oral composition represent what can be said as a defining characteristic of that culture, the introduction of literacy thus poses a challenge to the long established identity of that culture through a transition of the collective psyche.

Cultures that experience a transition to orality not only have to contend with the possible loss of identity that can accompany the intellectual effects made possibly by literacy, they also have to grapple with how literacy impacts their understanding of what they *know*. If we return to the example earlier, what happens to that old conception of what a tree is, the one that only existed in relation to a specific embodied experience, after a culture's introduction to literacy? Well, the new society has to reckon with the fact that while their old conception of what makes up a tree can still be classified as "a tree," what makes it up is not *all* that which can possibly make up a tree. It is part, but not all, of the new definition. Writing allows for a stride towards objectivity, but the new conception of "tree" is limited by only our finite conception of what a "tree" can be. Everything that can and ever will make up "treeness" is, of course, unable to be

[102] Ong 1982, 15.
[103] Lorde 1963.

grasped by the human mind. Writing provides a jumping off point for objectivity, but never allows for complete, objective understanding.

This idea is relevant to an interpretation of the Platonic texts, as scholars have long testified to the idea that through the abstractable quality of the written word, Plato found a way to reject some of the established norms of the Greek's oral culture. Specifically, some say that writing provided a platform through which Plato could put forward new guidelines for approaching life, dictated by principles of reason and rationality, with the ultimate goal being to understand the true nature of things. Ong says that "Plato's entire epistemology was unwittingly a programmed rejection of the old oral, mobile, warm, personally interactive lifeworld of oral culture." [104] The ability of the written word to take the meaning of words from a living, oral context into a rigid, static, and unmoving form meant that Plato found in the written word a way to reject the values of the past Greek oral culture.[105] Ong further differentiates Platonic discourse from oral discourse as he says the Platonic ideas are "voiceless, immobile, devoid of all warmth, not interactive but isolated, not part of the human lifeworld at all but utterly above and beyond it." [106] Thus, the position of Ong and other scholars is that through the written word, Plato was able to formulate theories about the meanings of words that took them out of their purely oral and fluid states towards universal definitions.

As I have attempted to show throughout this thesis, this position, however, misses the mark for several reasons. First, if the hypothesis that says the writings of Plato were a deliberate rejection of the past oral culture was true, there would be no explanation for the facets of oral culture that Plato embraces in his dialogues. Gibson argues that the structure of many of the

[104] Ong, 79.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid., 79-80.

dialogues actually means they can be classified as orally derived compositions. [107] Specifically, Gibson demonstrates how Plato's *Sophist* demonstrates a form of ring composition in regards to its sequence of topics related to a specific theme that is consistent with works of oral composition like the Homeric epics.[108] Gibson demonstrates the presence of this ring composition in relation to the theme of mimesis in the dialogue, which is an important and recurring theme in Plato's dialogues. The presence of oral elements in Plato's dialogues complicates Ong's theories about Plato's utilization of the written word as a deliberate rejection of the past oral culture of the Greeks. It also provides evidence for the idea that we shouldn't consider Plato's definitions as attempting to be universal.

The ways in which the Platonic dialogues exhibit a sense of orality in their composition suggests that Plato attributed to the meanings of some words a fluid and changing state, reflecting the way that words have meaning in an oral culture. Gibson supposes that this is evidence for the idea that Plato's definitions of ideas actually go beyond just the physical words on the page. As he writes, "I argue that the shape of the traditional definitions—though 'unwritten'—communicates meaning over and above the meanings conveyed by the words and phrases in these compositions." [109] Thus, Gibson uses the orality of the dialogues to suppose that Plato's conceptions of ideas have meaning beyond the words on the page and that meaning is best able to be deduced through analyzing the structural components of the dialogue as a whole. These meanings are inseparable from the form in which they come as part of, that is, the specific context and situation of the dialogue itself, as "only by understanding the form in conjunction

[107] Gibson, 10.
[108] Ibid., 11.
[109] Ibid., 10.

with the content is it possible to get a sense of the range of meanings encapsulated in the traditional medium." [110]

Thus, Gibson puts forth an interpretation that fits in line with what I have suggested should be the way that Plato's critiques of poetry and writing should be interpreted. Gibson's analysis suggests Plato's definitions only have meaning in the context of their specific situations. This, I believe, is what Plato intended had in mind during the criticisms of poetry in the *Republic* and writing in the *Phaedrus*, as an analysis of both dialogues give us ample reason to understand why the criticisms are not meant to be taken literally. Plato's criticisms of these forms of language are best understood with an awareness of his desire to communicate meaning beyond the actual words on the page. The responsibility then falls on the reader of the dialogue to parse the meaning of the definition themselves. Thus, I believe we can say the way he defines these ideas is through an understanding of the way they can represent different things depending on the situation and content in which they are being employed. In other words, they do not lend themselves to fixed and universal definitions.

The way in which Plato's definitions don't have a concrete or embodied sense is reflective of the way words have meaning in an oral culture. This makes sense given that, as I established earlier, he is writing during a time in which Athenian culture was still predominantly oral. What is interesting is the way in which Plato is able to portray this element of his oral culture through *writing*, a medium that, on the surface, is in opposition to orality. It was only possible to do this due to the fact that he was writing at a time when only the initial seeds of literacy were beginning to spread. By capturing the ways in which words have meaning in an oral culture by utilizing writing, Plato shows us a window into a culture in the midst of a transition to literacy.

[110] Ibid., 14

There is another way in which the development of the written word explains Plato's desire to have unfixed definitions about poetry and writing. The abstraction of ideas to the written form allows for the development of a perception of knowledge that emphasizes the lack of "formness" in knowledge itself. This is because not only do ideas become more objectively understood when abstracted through the written word, but they also, paradoxically, become more shrouded in mystery, as the clarity provided by the written form comes with its own inherent limitations. This is because writing, as a fixed and unchanging medium, is fundamentally incapable of capturing the *true* nature of complex human systems, the majority of which are continuously changing and fluid. Additionally, the understanding assisted by the written word is still hampered by the limited ability of the human mind to conceptualize all of the abstractable qualities that can make something up, especially when we begin dealing with ideas such as love, justice or wisdom, which lend themselves to exceedingly difficult forms of definition. The intellectual capacities made possible by the written word, then, are partly made up of the paradoxical realization that the accumulation of greater knowledge and objectivity is also accompanied by a simultaneous understanding that the written word, fundamentally, has an inability to capture absolute truth. Writing allows for us to become wiser, only to then show us all that we cannot know.

I believe this idea heavily influenced Plato's attitudes towards philosophy itself, as the development of intellectual capacities made possible by writing and the spread of literacy echoes the Socratic sentiment of the impossibility of attaining true knowledge. Writing is an avenue through which we can become capable of understanding the vast nature of all that is out there, which often comes with an awareness that there is also much to which we do not and cannot know. I do not think it a coincidence that this realization that comes from the development of the

written word is one which mirrors the stance of Plato's teacher. It seems likely to me that Plato internalized this ideal and utilized it as the guiding principle through which he would attempt to think through not only his attitudes towards poetry and writing, but also his conception of philosophy as a whole. This would explain the desire to portray writings and poetry as bad things while simultaneously understanding their value, as it wouldn't make sense for Plato to want to make any definite claims about these systems given an awareness of the impossibility of fully understanding these things, let alone capturing their true nature in writing.

Poetry and writing were two things in which it especially made sense to convey their meanings this way due to their importance to the dynamics of orality and literacy playing out during Plato's time of writing. The popularity of poetry combined with the slow emergence of writing means it was likely that the possible effects of these uses of language weighed heavily on Plato's mind. As the critiques of writing and poetry show, Plato displays an awareness of the possible dangers of these systems. Poetry is dangerous, as he explains throughout the *Republic*, if we allow it to dictate our emotions and our entire perception of life. But poetry can also be useful to philosophy; it allows us to conceptualize things in new ways and from different perspectives. Thus, it aids philosophy in a way in which philosophy, in its ideal form, is impossible without it.

Similarly, writing can represent a danger if someone thinks that what they read in books can be used as the ultimate source of knowledge without questioning if the author is actually knowledgeable or not. On the other hand, writing can also serve as a tool through which the essential act of philosophy can occur. The duality of the possible impacts of these systems explains why Plato would not wish to categorize them with fixed and universal definitions.

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