

# Writing Knowledge in the Soul: Orality, Literacy, and Plato's Critique of Poetry

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**ABSTRACT:** In this essay I take up Plato's critique of poetry, which has little to do with epistemology and representational imitation, but rather the powerful effects that poetic performances can have on audiences, enthraling them with vivid image-worlds and blocking the powers of critical reflection. By focusing on the perceived psychological dangers of poetry in performance and reception, I want to suggest that Plato's critique was caught up in the larger story of momentous shifts in the Greek world, turning on the rise of literacy and its far-reaching effects in modifying the original and persisting oral character of Greek culture. The story of Plato's *Republic* in certain ways suggests something essential for comprehending the development of philosophy in Greece (and in any culture, I would add): that philosophy, as we understand it, would not have been *possible* apart from the skills and mental transformations stemming from education in reading and writing; and that primary features of oral language and practice were a significant barrier to the development of philosophical rationality (and also a worthy competitor for cultural status and authority). Accordingly, I go on to argue that the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus* is neither a defense of orality per se, nor a dismissal of writing, but rather a defense of a literate soul over against orality and the indiscriminate exposure of written texts to unworthy readers.

In my 1990 book, *Myth and Philosophy: A Contest of Truths*, I examined the complex relationships between *muthos* and *logos* in Greek thought, from Homer to Aristotle. Inspired by Nietzsche and Heidegger, my aim was to challenge the "progressive" view that philosophical reason displaced and corrected the early Greek dependence on myth and poetry. Myths never disappeared in Greek thought, not even in philosophy, and the supposed "correction" was in many respects rigged according to extra-mythical assumptions that suppressed the kind of truth presented in mythopoetic disclosure. Plato, of course, was a central figure in my

analysis, especially because of his ambiguous battle with the poets and poetry. I made brief mention of how the rise of literacy functioned in the development of philosophy and its implicit shift from the oral base of Greek poetry. Since 1990 I have become convinced that the transition from orality to discourse informed by writing and reading can be seen as *the* guiding thread throughout the rich history of Greek myth and philosophy. In this essay, I want to retrieve my discussion of Plato, now with a sharper focus on the orality-literacy question.

### PLATO AND MYTH

Greek philosophy was born as a departure from traditional forms of understanding in myth and poetry. Although never completely breaking with tradition, philosophical modes of rationality began to contest the stories of gods and heroes that shaped the early Greek world. This contest reached a climax in the dialogues of Plato. Yet Plato's frequent deployment of myths and the narrative form of his writings significantly complicate the story at hand. So much so that some interpreters challenge the standard reading of Plato as a staunch opponent of myth and poetry and a proponent of fixed metaphysical doctrines.<sup>1</sup> I believe that Plato was serious in his deployment of myth, which provided a vital supplement to rational analysis, and even served to delimit the reach and results of philosophical thought. Yet I also believe that Plato was serious when he targeted poetry and myth as obstacles to philosophical wisdom. Am I confused?

The critique of poetry in the *Republic* had nothing to do with "aesthetics" or a censorship of "the arts." Greek poetry was not an "art form" but a world-disclosive source of meaning for the Greeks, and in Plato's day epic and tragic poetry were still primary vehicles for cultural bearings and education. Plato's critique had to do with truth, the transmission of cultural values, and pedagogical authority. He was waging a momentous *diaphora*, or contest (607b), against established meanings on behalf of new standards of truth and morality. So Plato's philosophy was not averse to myth and poetry per se—since the dialogues were often informed by such things—but to *traditional* myth and poetry.

Plato's critique of traditional poetry was fundamental because it challenged both the material and formal elements at the heart of epic narratives and tragic drama. The material element can be summed up as the depiction of a tragic world-view; the formal element can be located in the psychological features of poetry's composition, performance, and reception—each of which involved forces that surpassed conscious control and blocked critical reflection. For Plato, the formal and material essence of traditional poetry represented a powerful, ingrained, cultural barrier that had to be overcome to clear the ground for two new ideals: rational inquiry and an overarching justice governing the world and the soul.

Epic and tragic poetry presented a world that is unstable, unpredictable, mysterious, and fatally ruinous of human possibilities. Here mortality is the baseline limit of life and death is portrayed as repulsive in its darkness (*Republic* 386–392). The poets tell “false stories” (*pseudeis muthous*), where heroes come to grief and surrender to powerful emotions, where the gods act immorally, fight each other, cause evil and ruin, punish the innocent, change form, disguise themselves, and lie (377–386). One thinks of Oedipus as the paradigm case of tragic life: a noble man faced with a terrible fate, who resists out of moral motives, and yet in this very resistance actualizes his fate.<sup>2</sup> One might also think of Socrates in this vein, a man who compares himself to a tragic hero (*Phaedo* 115a), and who is destroyed following a divine calling to practice philosophy. The *Republic* displays a wealth of meanings, but I think that the dialogue is essentially an anti-tragic *muthos* (a term applied to the account of the *polis* at 376d). The full course of the dialogue can be called a narrative about the possibility and desirability of a just life in a world that resists justice.<sup>3</sup> That the poets and their tragic stories figure prominently at both ends of the dialogue cannot be an accident. Traditional myths were fully expressive of the obstacles blocking the path of Socrates' mission. Plato wants to tell a *better* story than the poets, one that can overcome the possible tragedy of a just life. And one cannot help but remember the fate of Socrates, whose death at the hands of Athens *would* be tragic without the kind of rectification suggested in the *Republic*.

The formal element in Plato's critique concerns the psychological structure of poetic production, performance, and reception. The traditional view was that poets were inspired receptacles for the sacred power of the Muses, a “revelation” more than a “creation” (see the Prologue to Hesiod's *Theogony* 98–108). Plato agreed that a poet is “not in his senses but is like a fountain giving free course to the water that keeps flowing on” (*Laws* 719c). This matter of absorption in a force beyond the conscious mind was also implicated in the objections to *mimēsis* in the *Republic*. In Greek, *mimēsis* referred not only to representational likeness but also to psychological identification in poetic performance and audience reception, where actors, reciters, and listeners were “taken over” by the poetic imagery and its emotional force.<sup>4</sup> References to *mimēsis* in acting and spoken performance can be found in *Ion* 533–537, and *Sophist* 267.<sup>5</sup> What really mattered to Plato in the *Republic* was not mimetic representation, because the example of painting is described as merely an *analogy* for the genuine matter of concern, mimetic identification with poetic language (603c). And Socrates confesses (605c) that even the “best of us” can become enchanted by poetry and swept away by the *pleasure* of empathic union with the sufferings of tragic characters—an effect that ruins the “manly” ideal of silencing and mastering grief (605e). In Books 2 and 3, the censoring of poetry was qualified and seemed restricted to the context of educating children. But later, poetry's power threatens the reflective mental control of sophisticated adults as well, and for this reason *all* mimetic poetry (epic and tragic) are to be

banned from the ideal *polis* (595a). The only forms of poetry permitted are hymns to the gods and songs praising good men (607a–b).<sup>6</sup>

With the focus on the perceived psychological dangers of poetry in performance and reception, I want to suggest that Plato's critique was caught up in the larger story of momentous shifts in the Greek world, turning on the rise of literacy and its far-reaching effects in modifying the original and persisting oral character of Greek culture. The story of Plato's *Republic* in certain ways suggests something essential for comprehending the development of philosophy in Greece (and in any culture, I would add): that philosophy, as we understand it, would not have been *possible* apart from the skills and mental transformations stemming from education in reading and writing; and that primary features of oral language and practice were a significant barrier to the development of philosophical rationality (and also a worthy competitor for cultural status and authority).<sup>7</sup>

#### ORALITY AND LITERACY

Writing is far from simply the transfer of spoken words to graphic signs. If it were, we could not account for the far greater difficulty in learning to read and write, compared to natural language acquisition. There are many different ways to distinguish the nature and effects of writing from language confined to oral speech.<sup>8</sup> Oral language is primarily the province of hearing sounds, while writing turns to the seeing of words in a material medium. Accordingly, oral speech is exclusively temporal and memorial; the passing of sounds means that memory is the only source of preservation. Writing provides a material presence for words and a fixed structure of spatial relations, so that now language can "stand" as a permanent reference for memory and inspection. Because of the malleability of memory, oral speech, especially in poetic performance, is inevitably modified in each re-telling, while writing permits the repetition of a fixed content for each reading.

Oral language lives through embodied speech and reception, where tone, gesture, rhythm, emphasis, and facial expressions are essential to disclosive effects. Writing transforms language into disembodied graphic signs composed of alphabetic lines, which provides a disengagement from the animated milieu of conversation and face to face speech. For this reason orality is infused with existential contexts of lived scenarios, both in the content of poetic narratives and the specific circumstance of poetic performances before particular audiences. Written language becomes decontextualized in this respect. Partly because of the embodied, sensuous character of oral speech and the need to "draw" audiences to the temporal flux of language in immediate circumstances, "artistic" elements of enchanting imagery, rhythm, and musicality are essential to oral performance and reception.<sup>9</sup> With writing, the text persists right before one's eyes, lessening the need for an emotional lure and creating the space for detached attention.

Writing makes possible a wide array of reflective practices that are essential for philosophical thinking and that at best are unlikely to arise or flourish in an oral culture. While orality is constrained by immediate performances and the limited power of memory, writing offers a fixed text that can be revisited and critically scanned, which opens up attention to structured relationships, signs of consistency and inconsistency, and especially the shape of a whole text organized into parts. In this way the sense of a formal structure distinct from content is drawn out of language for the first time.<sup>10</sup> The range of intellectual discoveries in Greek thought—from mathematics to analytical atomism to metaphysics—cannot be understood apart from graphic and alphabetic figuration.<sup>11</sup>

Most remarkable, I think, is the capacity for abstraction that emerges from writing. 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. In the conversion of speech into written words, the graphics of alphabetic lines creates a radically different presence. The visual markings that make up t-r-e-e are utterly arbitrary in the sense of being nothing like the voiced word in its context of use. Instead of talking about trees in concrete situations, we now *see* this talk separated from contexts, and what we see is not a tree but a visual object utterly unlike a tree or any other sensuous thing in experience. But a link with actual speech acts is retained, and once reading and writing become second nature, we develop a new way of accessing the world through the *nonsensuous* visual presence of alphabetic lines. I want to suggest that the power of abstraction emerges by way of this technological transformation of speech. The written word “tree” itself has no concrete features other than its “abstract” graphic form in a material medium. And as Bruno Snell has argued, the function of the definite article in Greek language made it possible to create abstract substantives out of concrete nouns, adjectives, and verbs: not “Look at the tree over there,” but “the tree,” everything that makes up “treeness” in general; and “justice” as “the just,” that which is just in general, where the modifier “just” is converted into a subject of modification (*ta dikē*).<sup>12</sup> Is it the visual graphics of writing that creates a “concrete universal,” an accessible presence stripped of all specificity, which nevertheless points back to specific instances now “re-formed” in abstract terms? If true, this would help explain something that has always puzzled me: Plato and Aristotle deployed terms with original meanings of visual perception—*idea*, *eidos*, *theōria*—to denote conceptual forms and powers of intelligibility that presumably exceed or transcend sense perception—cf. *Republic* 507b: the true being of each thing is its *idea*, which is thought (*noeisthai*) but not seen (*horasthai*). In Plato's dialogues, a sensuous *eidos* can provide an analogical gateway to philosophical reflection, as in frequent references to craft, but a true *eidos* can only be ascertained by a qualitatively different kind of intellectual “vision.” We might well wonder what Aristotle meant when he said that nonmaterial

form is a “look disclosed in speech” (*to eidos to kata ton logon*) (*Physics* 193a31). Was it the written word that made possible the abstract “look” of ideas and the revolutionary construction of the “mind’s eye”?<sup>13</sup>

The questions at hand suggest a tempting provocation: that the philosophical deployment of vision words to render abstract concepts was *not* a case of mere metaphorical transfer from visual sensation, but rather a new kind of *actual* vision of the abstract lines of meaning-laden written words. Since literacy provided such radically new openings for thought, Greek philosophers were likely so enthralled by these new possibilities as to be less prone to reflexive awareness of the graphic medium at work in philosophical thinking. Yet there are hints of such awareness, as we will see.

### PLATO AND THE WRITTEN WORD

One thing is clear: Plato was a brilliant philosophical writer. And given the preceding analysis it seems evident that literacy played a crucial role in the development of philosophy. Yet Plato’s dialogues exhibit an ambiguity about writing and its value relative to living speech. For one thing the dialogue form represents a kind of writing that retains the milieu of conversation as its subject.<sup>14</sup> Also the *Phaedrus* contains a specific critique of writing, which I will get to shortly. I think Plato does give a certain priority to living dialogue, but recalling his concerns about the effects of poetry, the dialogical ideal is not a defense or retrieval of orality per se. The kind of philosophical dialogue promoted by Plato requires, I think, literate participants. And there are a number of references to writing in the dialogues that lead me to this view.

Yet again, the picture is not entirely clear. In the *Republic*, there is no specific mention of educating citizens in reading and writing. There is a consensus, though, that the composition of the *Republic* and the establishment of Plato’s Academy were close together in time.<sup>15</sup> The Academy certainly used books for instruction, but it should be mentioned that in Plato’s day the common practice was to read books aloud to an audience, rather than reading in private; yet silent reading was in fact practiced at the time.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, mathematical education, so important to Plato, required the careful study and analysis of graphic representations.<sup>17</sup> As far as the dialogues are concerned, it is in the *Laws* that reading and writing are specifically mandated for education (810–813).

One other effect of writing should be introduced: the capacity for individualized and internalized reflection made possible by books, which are portable and separable from public speech acts that are socially informed and externally directed. Adding my previous point about the abstract “look” of written words, which permits the reflective alteration of language into new conceptual forms, perhaps certain passages in the dialogues can be clarified by way of the connections between reading, abstraction, and internalization.

In the *Philebus* (38e–39b), memory and perception are compared to writing (*graphein*) words (*logos*) in the soul. Knowledge is written in the soul in the manner of a book (*biblion*). This account is preceded by the picture of a solitary soul, and its self-possession of thought prior to verbalizing aloud to others in spoken conversations. This fits many references in the dialogues to the soul's interior possession of ideas. The *Theaetetus* (189e–190a) describes thinking as the soul's *logos* and conversation (*dialegesthai*) with itself, a *logos* not spoken aloud to another person, but “silently to itself” (*sigē pros auton*). And in the *Protagoras* (347c–348e), Socrates advocates the self-sufficiency of relying on one's own voice in a conversation. In general terms, given that selfhood in epic poetry showed itself to be externalized, decentralized, and subjected to fate,<sup>18</sup> Plato advances a complete departure from this complex by describing the soul in terms of internality, unity, and self-mastery (*Republic* 443c–e).

This leads me to think that Plato's dialectical model of philosophy is not *radically* dialogical (in the sense of an irreducible intersubjective practice), that good results and participation in a conversation involve the importing or possession of reflective insight, something made possible by the technology and practice of writing (which would explain the metaphorical use of writing to describe knowledge in the soul).<sup>19</sup>

The *Phaedrus*, of course, complicates my argument because of its overt criticism of writing in favor of living speech. But let's look carefully at the text. Early on, Socrates confesses to preferring life in the city because he “loves learning” (*philomathēs*), which cannot be found in the country. He can be coaxed to leave the city if lured by *logous en bibliois*, “discourse in books” (230d–e). When Socrates tries to compete with Lysias's written speech about love, he does poorly and regrets his performance: he slipped into poetic modes of speech and ecstatic states of mind, in part because of enchantment at the physical presence of the beautiful *Phaedrus* (234d, 238e). The move to cover his head attests to Socrates' worry about the effects of embodied speech (and anticipates the later picture of the soul needing to control the force of the body). The implication here is that pure orality cannot be the solution to the coming concerns about writing.

Writing is not intrinsically problematic, but it is capable of serving deceptive rhetorical practices (267a ff.). In fact books on speeches provide guidance for the proper structure and function of speech writing (266d), which should possess the *dunamis* to “guide the soul” (271c–d). And the story about King Thamus and the god Theuth with respect to writing is prefaced by the task of discerning good from bad writing (274b).

Then comes the critique of writing (274 e ff.), which is called a *pharmakon* (with ambiguous connotations of a potion, a medicine, and a poison). A reliance on writing diminishes the skills of memory, and most importantly, writing involves “external” signs belonging to others rather than an internal possession. Writing

provides only the appearance of wisdom since it is external to the direct access to knowledge. Once written down, words become dead and mute; they cannot answer questions or defend themselves. Moreover, recorded words can circulate everywhere, indiscriminately to the able and unable alike.<sup>20</sup>

In an interesting passage, the *logos* (word or speech) that is superior to writing is “written” (*graphetai*) in the soul of the learner, and can both defend itself and distinguish proper from improper recipients (276a). Here we also hear of the contrast between the inferior “sowing” of words by pen and ink and a superior form of dialectic, which plants and sows in the soul the words of knowledge that can also be reproduced in others (this seems less like a “dialogue” and more like an “infusion”).<sup>21</sup>

Then the proper writing of speeches is described as being concerned with truth and deploying the procedures of definition, analysis, division, and collection (all literate skills, it seems to me).<sup>22</sup> Something like Plato’s dialogues themselves would seem to be exemplary here, and indeed philosophy is associated with the best kind of written *logos* (277b–278e). Any writing for “public” speeches is not worthy of serious attention. What *is* worthy are words “truly written in the soul,” marked by a “clear and perfect” *internal* understanding of goodness and justice, which then becomes ready for planting *in* other souls (278a–b).<sup>23</sup> A case can be made that Plato’s dialogues were not meant to be “published” in our sense of the term (for an open market of readers), but rather were used for the pedagogical purpose of philosophical education in the Academy, where the texts were recited, read, studied, and discussed, with the aim of *continuing* intellectual exploration and composition.<sup>24</sup> This might provide telling clues about why the dialogues exhibit an open and “unfinished” character.

I think that the ambiguous treatment of writing in the *Phaedrus* can be sorted out by way of the tension between written texts themselves and the intellectual *effects* made possible by literacy. The dialogue raises the problem of the detachability of written words from the milieu of lived speech. But this does not amount to a defense or retrieval of oral language per se, given the persistent criticisms in several dialogues of the oral power of poetry and political rhetoric to overwhelm the mind (and Socrates’ own confession of the failure of his oration in the *Phaedrus*). Rather, it seems to me that the critique of writing amounts to the defense of the knowing *literate* soul over against 1) the stand-alone character of a written text, apart from the living reality of knowledge, and 2) the sterility of writing when not originating from, or addressed to, those select souls who possess or are capable of possessing knowledge.

The complex question of the written word in relation to genuine knowledge—and of the status of the written dialogues—can perhaps be illuminated by attention to the *Seventh Letter*. The distance between writing and the original experience of living thought can mark the difference between an author’s authentic vision of reality and its transmission into and by a written text, which is judged



deficient in two senses: 1) public dissemination permits access for unworthy readers; 2) even worthy readers cannot fathom the full vision of reality inevitably concealed by written expression. The *Phaedrus* clearly speaks to the first deficiency: A written book is helpless without its "father" (the author) when it is released to the public and misused or reviled by the wrong kind of readers (275e). The second deficiency is implicitly at issue, I think, in the *Phaedrus* but is clearly explicated in the *Seventh Letter*. There Plato tells us that his teachings cannot be captured in written texts (341–342). Words are insufficient for conveying genuine knowledge that "flashes" in the soul after sustained discussion between teacher and student (341d). In the five steps of discovery (342), the soul's knowledge of true objects is beyond both words and images (a cited example of an image is the visual figure of a circle). No wise person would express his deepest thoughts in words, in *either* spoken words or especially the "unchangeable" form of written words (343). So language as such cannot do justice to true knowledge. Verbal names (and their extension in definitions) are arbitrary and variable signs that do not convey the eternal nature of true objects. Even the fixed form of written signs does not provide sufficient firmness or certainty (343b: *mēden hikanōs bebaiōs*) because graphic lines are tainted by matter and thus they mislead the soul with a false permanence.<sup>25</sup>

The danger of putting thoughts into words and writing is as follows: confining knowledge to the misplaced concreteness of defective images and verbal forms permits endless disputation about the different aspects and permutations of the "relative" nature of specified signs and their reciprocal heterogeneity. Such disputes are falsely assumed to engage the "soul of the writer" (*hē psuchē tou grapsantos*: 343d). Nevertheless, genuine knowledge can emerge from earnest instruction in language and writing, but only with a leap beyond language that flashes in the soul, and only in the chastened milieu of intimate teacher-student exchanges, not the unseemly arena of envy and discord in a public readership. What is most serious and worthy in someone's work cannot be found in books but in the treasured domain of the soul, "stored in the fairest place he possesses" (*ketai de pou en chōra tē kallistē tō toutou*: 344c). Knowledge cannot be fully realized in vocal utterances (*phōnais*) or in physical figures (*sōmatōn schēmasin*) but in souls (342c).

In closing, let me try to sort out the complicated relationships between language, writing, and knowledge in Plato's texts by way of the following summary claims: 1) Traditional poetry and its oral reception are obstacles to genuine knowledge. 2) Knowledge can be gained through philosophical methods made possible by literacy. 3) Philosophical education proceeds through conversations between literate participants. 4) Such conversations can be represented and facilitated by written dialogues. 5) In the process of philosophical education, knowledge can dawn in the soul, an illumination prepared by, but leaping beyond, rational discourse. 6) The living process of discovery and the intrinsic limits of language are appropriately

presented in dialogues that are “open” in both form and content, and that partly deploy mythopoetic supplements to, and constraints on, rational discourse. 7) Philosophical dialogues are primarily geared toward pedagogy, and are suitable only for the right kind of audience, one that is capable of philosophical learning and attuned with humility and reverence for the transcendent aims of philosophy. 8) Written texts must be protected from the misuses and abuses that follow indiscriminate publication, and thus must be restricted to the proper milieu of instruction. 9) Genuine knowledge is made possible by literate dialogue but is consummated in the leap of the soul’s “inward vision” that cannot be directly communicated. 10) Philosophical writing embodies a complex set of forces that both displaces and transforms traditional poetic language, in the direction of a rational discourse that breaks out into an “inspired,” receptive vision (the difference between poetry and philosophy is that poetry begins in inspiration and philosophy end in it).

In this rich array of forces, writing exhibits an essential ambiguity in being both 1) an empowerment of philosophy over the impediment of oral poetry, and 2) an impediment to the ultimate aims of philosophy. Such ambiguity may help us understand the way in which writing is both critiqued and sustained in the *Phaedrus*: the move from knowledge written on the page and performed on the stage of public debate to the “invisible vision” of knowledge written in the soul. I read this metaphorical transformation of writing as *sustaining* the power of literacy while warning against the limitations and drawbacks of written texts as such. Rather than a division between writing and something altogether different, we may have here a distinction between written texts and literate knowledge, which I think is shown in *Phaedrus* 276a: The written word is an image (*eidōlon*) of the true word (*logos*), the “living and breathing word” characterized as “knowledge written in the soul of the learner” (*epistēmēs graphetai en tē tou manthanontas psuchē*). The true word is called the “legitimate brother” of the “bastard” written word (the word apart from its father/author) and as having a “more powerful nature.” The distinction here between (written) image and genuine (written) reality suggests that “writing in the soul” is not *merely* a metaphor, but, as I would put it, an irreducible metaphor that embodies the distinction between written words as such and the *power* of literacy in its intellectual effects and capacities for new discoveries.

Within this story of philosophical writing there is shown the specter of philosophy’s Other, the phono-ecstatics of original orality, which we literates have lost, and which cannot be called “phono-centric” because no “center” is given in a life that is no more than world-disclosive transactional speech acts passing in time and preserved only through the fragile power of memory. Yet even in a literate culture, a modified orality persists as the disclosive life of social speech practice, which precedes and haunts reflection, and which the first great philosophical writer wrestled with in dialogues that both reformed primary orality and warned against the “dead letters” of philosophical texts.<sup>26</sup>

## NOTES

1. Among several important studies in this vein, see two works by John Sallis: *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); and *Chorology: On Beginning in Plato's Timaeus* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). See also Drew Hyland, *Finitude and Transcendence in the Platonic Dialogues* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).
2. See my discussion of tragic poetry in *Myth and Philosophy: A Contest of Truths* (Chicago: Open Court, 1990), chap. 5.
3. The internal virtue of justice is defended by Socrates against Thrasymachus and the cynical implications of the Gyges myth (Books 1–2). The long digression about the *polis* is meant to clarify the picture of a just soul and its advantages, and the digression unfolds to meet the daunting task posed to Socrates in Book 2: Prove not only that the just man is worthy but *happier* than the unjust man, that he will flourish in some way—and this in terms of the toughest case imaginable, pitting the unjust man thought by everyone to be just against the just man thought by everyone to be unjust (361). This task is reiterated as the purpose of the entire conversation in Book 10 (612). And the rectification myth of Er (616–18) performs the climax of Socrates' project. Immortality serves an essential function in overcoming the limits on rationality and justice in earthly life. Homer's depiction of Odysseus is in many ways a stark contrast to Platonic hopes. He is a heterogeneous character, called *polutropos*, a man of "many ways" (*Odyssey* I, 1), and his capacity for deceptive cunning (*mētis*) is frequently celebrated (XIII, 295ff.). And most notably, Odysseus turns down Calypso's offer of immortality (V, 203ff.), preferring his homecoming that includes old age and death. Indeed, the opening of the story (I, 59) tells us that Odysseus "yearns to die" (*thanein himeretai*). And it should be noted that Odysseus makes his choice *after* having witnessed the grim reality of Hades described in Book XI. Given this picture of heroic finitude, it is telling that the myth of Er has Odysseus recanting his Homeric persona, choosing for his next embodiment the quiet, unaccomplished life of a private individual (*Republic* 620C).
4. See Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 1–33; and Raymond A. Prier, *Thauma Idesthai* (Gainesville: Florida State University Press, 1989), 169–79.
5. In the *Ion* (533), the power (*dunamis*) of poetry is depicted as a chain of magnetic rings, which transmit a compelling force of attraction from the Muses to poets to audiences.
6. It should be noted that epic poetry itself recognized the enchanting power of poetic speech (e.g., *Iliad* IX.186–89 and *Odyssey* XI.334); and its danger for mortals was vividly portrayed in the episode of the Sirens (*Odyssey* XII), whose song brings death rather than life by causing men to forget their vital tasks. The Sirens can be seen to embody the sheer static power of poetic enchantment *without* its role of engendering memory. The Sirens, then, are a demonic divergence from the Muses and their cultural function of establishing and sustaining stories for future appropriations of a memorable past (cf. *Iliad* VI.357–58). See Charles Segal, *Singers, Heroes, and Gods in the Odyssey* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 100ff. The central

problem of mimetic identification is that critical reflection is incommensurate with the “captivating” language of poetry. Any reflective stance would ruin the force of poetic communication. The hymns and songs permitted in the *Republic* are ethically beneficial, and so their mimetic effects are worthy and need not be subjected to critical reflection.

7. In recent years there has been an enormous amount of scholarship on the question of orality and literacy, and particularly in the context of ancient Greek culture. For some representative studies, see two works by Eric A. Havelock: *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963) and *The Muse Learns to Write* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986); Kevin Robb, *Literacy and Paideia in Ancient Greece* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Harvey Yunis, ed., *Written Texts and the Rise of Literate Culture in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 2002). Greece has the distinction of being a special laboratory case, because it developed the intellectual vocabulary of literacy that served to shape succeeding cultures, and this development occurred *internal* to a society that was originally oral and that experienced first hand the tensions and transitions attaching to the emergence of literacy out on oral background. See Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write*, chap. 9. An important precedent for my analysis is P. Christopher Smith, “Orality and Writing: Plato’s *Phaedrus* and the *Pharmakon* Revisited,” in *Between Philosophy and Poetry: Writing Rhythm History*, ed. Massimo Verdiccio and Robert Burch (New York: Continuum, 2002), 73–89.
8. I will focus on only a few areas that can fit my purposes in this essay; and in this brief discussion I am forced to simplify distinctions that in reality exhibit much overlapping complexity.
9. In Homer, for example, poetry is presumed to convey knowledge and truth *together* with emotional pleasure (*Iliad* II.484–58; IX.186–89; *Odyssey* XII.188).
10. Perhaps the first reference to a written text as an organic whole is found in the *Phaedrus* 264c.
11. See Kevin Robb, ed., *Language and Thought in Early Greek Philosophy* (La Salle, Ill.: Monist Library of Philosophy, 1983).
12. See Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, trans. T. G. Rosenmeyer (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), chap. 10.
13. See Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write*, 111. When I pose typical philosophical questions in class—say, What is courage?—if students have any initial mental image, is it likely to be the graphic word “courage,” even if I don’t write it on the board? In preliterate Greece, if courage were being considered it would likely involve scenes of action informed by traditional poetic stories about heroic exemplars. A sensuous *eidos* can provide an analogical reference for philosophical reflection (as with examples of craft) but it cannot fully suffice. Writing may also permit the transformation of ordinary Greek words into technical terms because of the abstract difference between script and spoken uses. An example is *ousia* as “property” and “being” (the beginning of the *Meno* shows *both* senses deployed).

14. The setting at the start of the *Theaetetus* is rich with a remarkable ambiguity: Euclides wrote down the *logos* of a conversation, which is then read aloud to the group—so here we have a written dialogue portraying a conversation that turns to the reading/reciting of a written text that recorded a dialogical conversation (whew!).
15. Robb, *Literacy and Paideia in Ancient Greece*, 232. The *Protagoras*, presumably earlier than the *Republic*, mentions the learning of letters in education (325c ff.).
16. See Jesper Svenbro, "The Interior Voice: On the Invention of Silent Reading," in *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in Its Social Context*, eds. John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 366–84. Svenbro also discusses *scriptio continua*, the absence of word spacing in Greek written texts, which shows that books were intended primarily for oral recitation (because here the ear would pick up word differentiation more than the eye). Even silent reading can occupy a grey zone of "hearing with the eyes." This complicates my suggestion that written words created new visual objects that aided abstraction and reflection. Nevertheless, learning to *write*—by first learning letters and then writing words down—can serve my analysis, because the learning and the act of writing must involve piecemeal attention to the different words; and presumably people did not vocalize letters and words when writing them out. So despite the oral use of books in the Academy, there remains a way to speak of silent visual attention to words, which could square with Plato's depiction of a *silent* comprehension of the *logos* associated with writing (in the *Philebus* and *Theaetetus*). Incidentally, in the *Phaedo* 97c, Socrates tells of having heard a recitation of a book by Anaxagoras, and then eagerly attaining a copy and rapidly reading it himself (presumably in silence).
17. In the *Meno*, just before the instruction of the slave boy, Socrates discusses the graphic example of a geometrical figure (*schēma*), defined as the limit (*peras*) of a solid (76a). Before he talks with the boy, Socrates asks if he speaks Greek, and he then draws a square figure in the sand (82b). The boy's difficulty with the problem of doubling the figure's area is that he merely supposes (*oietai*) the answer by doubling the sides (82e). Socrates tells him to visually point out the line rather than "reckon" (*arithmein*) the answer. Socrates then draws the diagonal line (*grammē*) that will show the boy the answer.
18. See my analysis in *Myth and Philosophy*, 72–88.
19. In *On the Soul*, Aristotle uses the same metaphor. In the account of *nous* as the potential for thinking forms, Aristotle says that what is potentially in the mind is "in the same way that letters are on a tablet that bears no actual writing; this is just what happens in the mind" (430a1–2). Then after including the soul in processes of making akin to *technē* forming matter, Aristotle says that the soul is both a receptive "becoming all things" and an active "making all things" (430a10); and that the soul is like a hand in being an instrument (*organon*) that employs instruments: *nous* is a form (*eidōs*) that employs forms (*eidōn*) (432a1). So the mind both receives intelligible forms without sensible matter (429a15) and activates intelligible form, and this twofold process is compared with *technē* (430a13). Would it be too much a stretch to detect here a tacit reference to the receptive and active techniques of reading and writing?
20. Plato's point about question and answer presumably reflects a pedagogical program: "Why do you believe X?" not only prepares the defense of beliefs but the teaching of knowledge by way of personal discovery. But it would be wrong to think that earlier

- poetic forms were barren of pedagogical intent and effects. The exemplary function of narrative accounts of the deeds and dispositions of heroic figures surely entails a teaching program: “How does one *do X*?” is just as much an instruction as “What is *X*?”
21. For discussions of the shifts from oral to written practices pertaining to cultural education, see Jesper Svenbro, *Phrasikleia: An Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), chap. 9; and Jennifer Wise, *Dionysus Writes: The Invention of Theater in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), chap. 1.
  22. Smith notes and discusses how literacy functions in the background of this judgment: At 264c, the organic order of a speech is needful of a “bodily” structure that is written out (*gegrammena*) in order to delineate proper relationships. Also, in *Philebus* 18b–d, Theuth reappears as the one who distinguishes and organizes the forms of vocal elements into a system of their combinations and differences; such structure must involve a passage from sonic elements to graphic letters, because the knowledge involved is called *technē grammatikē* and its possessor is called a *grammatikos* (“Orality and Writing,” 79–80, 85–86).
  23. The soul’s inward possession of knowledge seems essential to counteract the conditioning power of poetry, where the effects of poetic *mimēsis* settle into the very nature of a person, in body, speech, and thought (*Republic* 395).
  24. See Robb, *Literacy and Paideia in Ancient Greece*, 235ff. According to Robb, Aristotle’s Lyceum was the first recognizable school dedicated to reading, analyzing, amassing, and composing written texts; the Academy was in transition from an oral to a literate focus. In the *Laws* (811d–e), after traditional poetry and texts are deemed harmful for education, the kind of discussions presently conducted—and “all our other (like) discourses”—are deemed worthy and should be written down for instructional purposes.
  25. This point is clarified in the discussion of the graphic image of a circle, which has physical features that conflict with the true meaning of the idea (it can be “rubbed out” and it “everywhere touches a straight line” in likewise being composed of “points” and so it is mixed with an opposite nature).
  26. I have deliberately left out a discussion of Derrida’s work on this topic, postponing it for a time until I have sorted out what I want to draw from the Greek material, before addressing Derrida’s important and influential treatments (always a daunting task for me, I confess). Smith’s essay, “Orality and Writing,” is right, I think, in showing how the kind of analysis advanced in my study would call for a revision of Derrida’s claims about Plato’s apparent displacement of writing on behalf of a grounding “voice.”