

On Written Speech

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Prelude

As beings who have some hold on the workings of *logos*, we are blessed with two chief miracles, which, for all their mundanity, are no less miraculous. These are spoken speech and written speech. This lecture is on written speech as such.

There is a temptation to suppose that the speech we read and the speech we speak are not all that different. Haven't we heard it said – or perhaps have said ourselves – that the written speech we spend so much time with has its own voice? Isn't it held as an aspiration that we enter into a conversation with these bundles of written speech we call books? And don't we mark it as an achievement to find that some sample of written speech speaks to us? All these are familiar ways to conflate written speech with spoken speech. These are ready temptations, perhaps because we suspect that written speech needs such a conflation to come out fairly when compared to spoken speech. For when we start comparing the two, spoken speech seems to claim a distinct advantage.

In the first place, spoken speech precedes written speech in time, both for our species and, usually, for each of us individually. After this first priority, many more and invidious distinctions suggest themselves: Spoken speech sounds; written speech is silent. Spoken speech is responsive, adaptable, immediate; written speech is impassive, indifferent, distant. Spoken speech is free; written speech is fixed. The one is alive – a child of the very breath that sustains us. The other is dead – dark marks dug onto a fair, flat surface.

Perhaps such a stark hierarchy so simply delivered has already begun to rankle. Good. But hold – for in this unjust relief we may see through the supposed deficiencies of written speech to glimpse its distinctive character,

its unique capacities. Let us compare the two, yes. But let us compare them as two, permitting ourselves neither any easy elision nor derisive ranking.

In this endeavor, I will need help. And for that help I turn to Plato. As I said, this lecture is on written speech as such, not on any particular written speech. Nevertheless, I will recruit three Platonic dialogues – incidentally three of the four dialogues in which some written speech is present. It is not incidental, though, that Plato’s writings should be my allies and my touchstones. For the crucial difference in the powers of spoken and written speech is their very stuff: they are, after all, written speeches of spoken speeches – mostly spoken by a man who, within the dialogues, never wrote (or nearly so) and all written by one who, within the dialogues, never utters a syllable.

I

Let us start with the marks made by writing, since the most obvious difference between spoken and written speech is that the latter is visible. Written speech is inscribed speech, made from some definite system of figural characters. And since we are hewing close to the differences between spoken and written speech, let us narrow our sight to phonetic script systems. For unlike other forms of scripts – say, unvocalized systems or ideogrammatic systems – phonetic scripts aim to imitate the sounds of spoken speech, and thus offer us a place for the most delicate of distinctions.

Phonetic scripts are the ones with which many of us are most if not exclusively familiar. English and French both, with some slight modifications, use the Latin script, which is phonetic. And, of course, Greek is written in a phonetic script. *A* and *B* or alpha and beta – the first two characters in these systems, these alpha-bets – announce their phonetic character straight away. What makes a script phonetic is that it can represent all the relevant sounds – that is, all the significance-bearing sounds of a language. And for that, you need characters for vowels and consonants.

Being, as we are, finite and bound at some point to replenish what we expend, any sound made with breath has a start and a stop. We can modulate the sounds we make with our breath by shaping our mouths in different ways, and we can start and stop that sound with even more numerous and varied configurations of our tongue, teeth, and lips. The differently shaped sounds are vowels, and the sundry ways to pick up or leave off those sounds are

consonants. There is an asymmetry here: Consonants, while they are the principal source of variety in our speech, cannot by themselves be spoken. As their class name tells us, they can sound only with some vocalization of a vowel. Their being sounded depends upon other sounds. A complete sound with its peculiar starts and stops is a syllable. An image for us: As with a line, the extremities of which are different in kind from it, a syllable's length is its vowel sound and the consonants are the points wherewith it may begin or end.

Phonetic script captures this heterogeneity by providing characters for both the vowel sounds of a language as well as the ever-attending consonants. But in that very capturing, it also erases this heterogeneity by providing what is always sonically dependent with a graphically independent character. To look at the character α and at the character β , nothing in their written shapes give any indication of their ontological asymmetry, or perhaps we should say, hierarchy. It certainly doesn't look like β depends on α ; as far as their inscribed form is concerned, they are equally letters. As written elements of speech, they offer no hint of the difference that makes all the difference when they are spoken together. With respect to their graphic character, they are as indiscernible as points – one is no different from the other. To return to our image: whereas a vocalized syllable has a continuous magnitude, like a line, a written syllable makes no such pretensions: it is as a collection of proximate points.

Between the audible syllable and the visible collection of letters, some transmutation has occurred. We might think of the letters as composing the syllable, or the syllable as being decomposable into letters. But that's not quite right, as it is not quite right to think of the line as composed of points. In spoken speech, the syllable is no piecemeal composition – it is a continuous whole. The vowels and consonants are always already together, discernible to the ear but only within the sounding of the whole syllable. Only in written speech are the elemental vowels and consonants discrete parts as independent letters. There is, then, no simple correspondence between a vocalized syllable and its written counterpart.

Moreover, in becoming discernible to the eye, these literary elements of the syllable are excluded from the perceptible mode of the syllable itself. We do not – *cannot* – hear the letters, we can hear only the syllable. If we want to claim that the syllable is braided together from the literary elements – as Socrates suggests in the *Theaetetus* – then we have a speakable braid woven from silent strands. And these letters cannot be sundered from their syllabic

sounding; clearly the consonants are unable to be either voiced or spoken, and even the vowels, though able to be voiced, will not be significant unless they undergo this strange transmutation and become a whole syllable, no longer a merely a letter. The way to know the whole – the syllable – and the way to know its parts – the letters – are completely exclusive.

But we must not forget that the syllable is itself a part of a word. What becomes of literary parts and their syllabic wholes when considered in the more capacious context of a word? What kind of whole is a word? It seems that there may be two ways to reckon the material of a word: two irreducible ways to take apart the same word, two systems of division that have no common measure. The word as spoken has as its smallest meaningful part the syllable. And in the word as written, the letter plays that elemental role. When speaking, you cannot cut up Theaetetus' name any finer than its four parts "The" - "ai" - "te" - and "tos." But as a name scratched or printed on a page, it clearly has ten parts (or nine, if you're counting in Greek).

Here we encounter another asymmetry between spoken and written speech. The syllabic parts of a whole multi-syllabic word correspond immediately to the spoken word. When we know each of the syllables of a word, we recognize the word. There is a continuity between the syllabic parts and the whole word; the way to know the syllabic parts is the same way to know the spoken word. But not so with the literary parts. When we analyze the word into its elemental letters, we make a break that cannot be so seamlessly mended. We have divided past what perception can put back together. We have new parts, parts of a different kind than their whole. Yet, what we know by the parts does not seem to increase our knowledge of the whole. Knowing the letters does not add to what we know by the syllables. In knowing how to aggregate letters we do not come to know anything more about their aggregate. Or, to return to our image of the line: picking out some points on the line does not tell us anything more about the line than what we got from encountering the line itself.

So what *do* we know when we know the parts proper to written speech? We do not gain knowledge of something perceivable about the word – that knowledge is exhausted by knowing its syllables. If not of something perceivable, then perhaps we gain knowledge of something intelligible, something strictly intelligible.

For all that a phonetic alphabet corresponds to significant sounds, I hope I have complicated the notion that the written word is an imitative repetition of the spoken word. There is a discontinuity between written and spoken

speech. Consider, again, consonants – when written, they gain an independence that was impossible for them when they were perceptible to the ear. But how? By what kind of act? This split through the being of spoken and written speech is accomplished by thinking. The consonants' independence is a theoretical one, a work of abstraction, the result of thinking now acting apart from perception.

Consider these two descriptions, again from Socrates in his conversation with Theaetetus: Socrates describes *thinking* as “soul... conversing, itself asking and answering itself” and this in silence and before oneself alone. He also gives a description of *speaking* as “what makes one's own thinking evident through sound with words and phrases, pressing his opinion into the stream through his mouth as into a mirror or water.” Spoken speech is an image of thinking shaped in the medium of what flows, as breath flows through our mouths, over our tongues, past our lips. The medium of the image is essential to the image: spoken speech expresses thinking as flowing, and flowing as a stream does. We can, in spoken speech, get ahead of ourselves. Our spoken sentences can run headlong, and sometimes on and on. It can even feel as if our spoken speech is outstripping the thinking it communicates. Spoken speech gives expression to the venturesome, precipitate, ecstatic character of thinking.

But Socrates' first description of thinking does not quite fit with this image. Thinking possesses another characteristic – one that cannot be captured with the image of a flowing stream, but perhaps is better imaged as an eddying whorl. Thinking can turn around on itself. It has the power to arrest the direction of its flow. It is capable of repose and riposte. Thinking as reflexive and recursive, as silent and self-considering – this is the activity of thinking uniquely exercised in written speech. In making written speech independent from spoken speech, thinking earns a kind of independence for itself.

In written speech, thinking separates what in sounded speech is inseparable, and in doing so it makes a place for this distinctive activity. The discontinuity between written and spoken speech arises from thinking making room for itself. Perhaps then it is not so surprising after all that written speech adds nothing to our knowledge of the word already perceived through spoken speech. Written speech is not an addendum to spoken speech, but an independent desmesne with its own mode of signifying. And the special significance that belongs to written speech shelters the soul's silent, self-concerned activity. With written speech, thinking makes for itself a home in

which it may return to itself, a place where it may freely play out its peculiar ability to turn around and face itself.

Perhaps you suspect that you are catching the bitter scent of solipsism. In focusing on the discontinuity of thinking, in describing written speech as thinking's self-made home, have I in fact locked thinking away in an isolated cage of its own making, condemning it to a frictionless spinning of self-concern? Has this interpretation of visible speech made the thinking therein opaque, impenetrable, impermeable and thus unable to be shared? No – at least, I hope not. But the path now open may be even more unsettling.

II

Let us begin again with another asymmetry: Spoken speech is to speaking *not* as written speech is to writing. I'll say that again: spoken speech is to the act that generates it *not* as written speech is to the act that generates it.

Of the first pair, speaking is primary. Speaking is the place of the speech's fullest being. Spoken speech apart from speaking – like a recording or a recitation – is a residue of the real thing, clearly derivative and diminished. Even the likes of Phaedo reporting so poignant a conversation as the one had on the day of Socrates' death cannot escape the loss of some of the living speech. And I think we can all recognize the loss of something essential when we listen to a recording of living speech – perhaps one reason why we do not allow anyone to record our seminars. Speaking belongs to a moment, a context, an occasion, and a *speaker*. The source of spoken speech's integrity and significance is in the speaking.

None of this is so for written speech and writing. Far from being primary, writing is a sort of antecedent accident to the written speech – merely the way to bring about what is the real thing. Written speech is no residue of the act of writing, its lingering after-image; written speech is the fulfillment of the writing. Writing is for the sake of having written, and written speech is in its very structure meant to be complete, to be whole. To borrow some terms from the study of grammar, we might say that while the progressive aspect is proper to spoken speech, written speech belongs in the perfect aspect. And under this perfect aspect, written speech is also capable of independence. The discontinuity we observed in its material parts – its letters – appears again in its form. Written speech is made to be apart from its writer. The generative activity of written speech is exhausted in its generation. And

because of this, it can bear being severed from its source. Once written, the speech includes all that it is to be, and thus bears its own integrity and significance.

Because written speech is bounded, definite, and meant to be definitive, it admits of revision. Because written speech is discontinuous with the act that produces it, a new, distinct act of writing can work upon the same written speech. And because it is independent of the acts that produced it, it can be returned to again and again. Once the written speech is set down, it abides. It abides for the writer: ready to be recast if necessary (and we all know from our own experiences with writing that revising is almost always necessary). And, if all goes well, it abides for the reader: ready to be taken up again and again. This repeatability is not the same hollow hearsay we get in a report of living speech; or the reedy playback of a recording of living speech. Written speech allows – *invites* – a repetition of a different kind, and an indefinite number of them.

By virtue of being separable and perfect in its separability, written speech can repeat in a way unavailable to spoken speech. Consider again Phaedo's repetition of Socrates' final day to Echecrates. Phaedo may affect Socrates' manner when reciting Socrates' words, but to Echecrates they are Phaedo's words in some ineliminable way. Consider now *reading* Plato's *Phaedo*: the signals of quoted speech (such as quotation marks and set phrases of "he said" and "he replied") bracket the speech itself, and we in turn can easily bracket them. That is, in written speech the quoted speech appears as the quoted speaker's; through written speech we can encounter the quoted speech more immediately. It seems difficult if not impossible for Phaedo to disappear into the speeches as he relates them to Echecrates. Whereas it is quite easy for us to completely lose sight of Phaedo when we read the *Phaedo*. It is even possible to – in fact, often, it is difficult not to – forget that Socrates' quoted speech and Phaedo's direct speech are in fact Plato's written speech.

We might debate fiercely (and likely fruitlessly) about just whose speech Plato's written speech really is – but to the extent that this debate would be gripping, it is predicated on our detecting in Platonic dialogue some lively source at work, some provocative origin of the speeches. It may belong peculiarly to Platonic dialogue to bring us into intimacy with that source as much as it bewilders us about its identity. But this repetition of that origin – a repetition that brings us closer to rather than reminding us of our distance from that source – is an essential, peculiar characteristic of written speech itself.

Written speech's power to remain, independent and perfect, means it also has the power to preserve. Xanthippe, being shooed out of her husband's cell, leaves with these parting words: "Socrates, now is the last time your companions will talk to you and you to them." Xanthippe's words are as penetrating as they are accurate. She is right. At least, we grant that she is right as far as Socrates' spoken speech goes. But many if not all of us feel, at least for a moment, that she is not wholly right. Socrates speaks to us still, our soul longs to claim, each time we read the *Phaedo*. There – in the written speech – a sliver of a soul remains alive, saved from the grasping reach of death. Whether that bit belongs to Socrates or Plato matters less than that it can belong to us again when we read.

In abiding, in remaining, the life of written speech is essentially an afterlife. Written speech, then, may seem to offer its writer a play for – and a play on – immortality. The story may go like this: a writer summons up speech from within her soul; she sets it down in writing; she picks it up again in rewriting; at last, she sends it away for whatever readers it may find. The speech, now affixed to parchment or paper, is free from her and also free from the death that will inevitably come for her. Her speech lives on in a new body – a repeatable body – and the original life it had in her may be relived for as long as it remains able to be read.

This is a lovely story, and one that writers may sing to themselves over and over to bring comfort in the often toilsome, taxing labor of writing. It is a lovely story for us readers too. When we pick up what an author has set down, we can for a moment share the writer's life, acquire an intimacy with her that overcomes the intervening time and space, which otherwise would be abysmal.

But perhaps this story is too lovely. For it seems that the writer's chance at an afterlife through writing depends on a reader reading. Perhaps it is truer to consider the living thought of the author as intermittently preserved in the written speech. That is, the written speech is an inert vessel, an embalmed body, keeping the living source in stasis until a reader comes along to quicken it. The reader then reanimates the written speech, makes it capable of speaking again, like the dead that drink of Odysseus' blood offering. And like Odysseus, we readers may have to sacrifice so that the speech can live again and its writer live on after a fashion. The written speech is then like a corpse or a shade; the afterlife it provides its writer is occasional – relying on the occasion of being read – but to the extent that it is still a kind of life, still a possibility for communion, this more sober story

is still a noble one.

That written speech relies on a reader prompted us to tell a more sober story. Thinking of written speech as a corpse more ennobles the reader's activity, which then becomes a kind of near-divine act of resurrection. But if the original speech is to keep its integrity, that is, if we are not to diffuse the integrity of the speech-corpse as we infuse it with our own spirit, then the written speech cannot be simply a dead body, no matter how well-preserved. As much as we want the writer to live on in her written speech, so much are we deterred from taking written speech to be dead.

Written speech as a shadowy imitation of the once-living helps with this unease. Our reading reanimates the written speech by setting in motion some residual morsel of the once-living soul that made the speech of itself. In reading, we call the imitation into a connection with its original and therewith assure ourselves somewhat that the written speech preserves the original thinking. We are brought to this middling position because we want written speech to grant continued life to its original source in such a way that preserves both its liveliness and its originality. We want the living speech of the writer to live again in us, but if the living speech is dormant until we take up the written speech, then the written speech without any reader is still dead.

Then again, how could it not be? If written speech is to preserve, it must stay the same – it cannot grow or adapt or give off new shoots. The difference between dead written speech and dormant living speech is supplied only by a reader. So what else is a reader to consider herself than a resurrector or a shade-summoner?

What else indeed. Let us ask again: how could written speech not be dead? Both the lovely and the sober story, show a lingering affection for and privileging of spoken speech – a return to the notion that written speech is only an imitation of spoken speech. If we want to say that in the written speech we hear the writer speaking to us, then we're modeling written speech off of spoken speech. Indeed, in our haste to secure for the writer/speaker a life in her written speech, we may be doing just what Socrates hopes to avoid on his final day. He advises Simmias and Cebes to care rather for the speech than for the speaker, lest he, Socrates, departs as a bee that has left its stinger behind. To insist on keeping the speech attached to the speaker is to keep the stinger even as the bee buzzes off, in fact, buzzes off now to die. Instead of securing life for the writer, we keep only a remnant – a shred of her shade or a crumb of her corpse.

In the stories I have just told, the writer's thinking escaped her own mortality by taking on a new body in the written speech. But here's a new story: a writer summons up speech from within her soul; she sets it down in writing; she picks it up again in rewriting; at last, she sends it away for whatever readers it may find. The speech now separated from the author's mortal coil is a working of the soul separated from a body. The written speech is no new body; it is a soul concentrated and separated in an act of articulated thinking. And what is it to separate the soul from the body? It is to die. And that song that authors might sing to themselves as they write? It is not a consolation for a death to come, but for the dying that makes written speech possible.

Now, this is unsettling, indeed, but let us not blink at it. If death is the separation of the soul from the body, then the result of death is two-fold: a corpse and a soul by itself. But as we saw with written letters, the decomposition of the whole does not conserve all of its parts. For the body-soul composite is lost as well; the particular self that lived all its life as this body-soul composite does not survive the separation. I will remain silent on whether this is the truth of our lives, but I do propose that it is true about written speech.

Writing is a practice of dying and being dead, and written speech is living thinking itself by itself. It does not grow or change or adapt, but that is *not* because it is dead. It endures precisely because it is always and only what it is. Writing separates thinking from the thinker, not as dead thoughts requiring resurrection, but as living thinking. In this separation, the thinker – the writer – is left behind. Far from being an expression of the writer, or a self-reported record of a thinker's thoughts – the working of the soul in written speech is separated not only from the body, but also from the writer's self.

The speech that seemed to be the writer's proves to be its own. Written speech annuls its own parentage: its genesis is accidental to its being. So the writer, in writing, becomes to the written speech a no one. The speech of the writer, as written speech, does outlive the writer, but at the cost of no longer belonging to the writer. Written speech separates the speech from the writer *finally* – this is the ground of the features we saw earlier: written speech's perfect aspect and its preservative power. Written speech does preserve its original source, its true parent. But written speech's true parent is not the writer; its truth birth and its everlasting life is in the thinking that never was anyone's.

And in this, written speech again proves a peculiar kinship to thinking. It is because *thinking* belongs to no one that written speech has this possibility. This is perhaps a less obvious feature of thinking than its recursive power. But when it exercises this power, when it delights in its own activity, thinking belongs only to itself. Thinking in its silent, self-concerned activity, thinking that commits itself to written speech is anonymous. The only self of significance is thinking's self, the self it discovers when concerned with its own activity. This is not to say that no thinker is required – as it cannot be said that no writer is required for there to be written speech. Rather, it is that *no particular thinker* is required. Whatever is thinkable is in principle thinkable by any thinker. Thinking may be contingent on the myriad of intricate details that go into making any one thinker just who she happens to be, but thinking in itself, thinking for itself, is unconcerned with its contingency. Thinking strains to be, and however it happens to come to be matters little to its being. Thinking is a concentration of the soul, the soul attending to its own activity – not as belonging to a particular body, not even as belonging to a individual self. Thinking is soul gathering itself to itself by separating itself from the self it is as jointly principle of thought and principle of a particular life.

This power of soul to gather itself apart from itself is marvelous, yes, but not extraordinary. That our sinews and bones may be so movable that by them we may both walk and sit, so affected that in them we may feel both pleasure and pain – this is an ordinary marvel too. The ordinary marvel of thinking is always ready to spring up. That real thinking is so rare and so difficult is not because thinking itself is scarce or shy. Thinking is difficult because it demands a bit of dying.

III

Perhaps you are yearning for that moment – some several minutes ago – when you were worrying about solipsism. Even the acrid odor of self-imprisoned thinking may smell sweet compared with the stench of thinking as dying. Or perhaps you are wistful for the moment – some fewer minutes ago – when you were entertaining that lovely story in which the writer and the reader are joined through the medium of graphically preserved thoughts, overcoming all manner of distance to commune: the generosity of the writer and the gratitude of the reader united in a beautiful moment of grace. This is indeed

a lovely story, and it is so because love seems to be at its heart.

Your preference for life and love can hardly be held against you. And you have experience on your side. As a devotee to the written word, you have likely experienced the feeling of some slumbering part of your soul thrilling to life when you track a thought through a thicket of written speech, or the feeling of warmth and solace when you discover a deep kinship with a writer. These are dear moments, and I would consider it a painful blow against the account just given if it is unable to support them.

Let me first address the stench of death: To say that thinking demands a bit of dying is not to say that thinking is death. Dying is the soul separating from its concern with the body, the soul grasping independence from the impingements of individual existence. This is not death as an irreversible state, but it is dying as an activity in which the agent, the thinker, is busy with becoming irrelevant to the act of thinking. This activity is not permanent, but intermittent. The kind of dying that thinking takes is an interruption of concerned being in the world as an unrepeatable individual, not the end of all possibilities for that individual. And this feature of discontinuity is mirrored in written speech.

So, likewise, to say that writing is a practice of dying and being dead is not to make it into some sinister ritual. The act of writing is also a feat of becoming irrelevant. The act of writing is the act of making the agent, the writer, irrelevant to the written speech. To be done writing is to be done making a difference to the written speech. Once the written speech is complete, that is, once it is living thinking itself by itself, it cares as little for the particularities of the writer as of its reader. This indifference of written speech grounds its power to be an occasion *for anyone* to think. On this account, to sense your soul sparking to life when you become absorbed in written speech is rather to detect thinking absolving itself of its concern with all the contingencies of your being.

You may still be unsettled about thinking as dying, but I hope the notion is no longer noxious. Yet, to the extent that this account has become less noxious, the status of love in it has become obnoxious. That is, it seems that there is simply no room for any intimacy between writer and reader if the written speech makes all their individuality obsolete. And lest any of you surmise that this is merely a romantic desire to keep kinship with the writers you love best, we must also consider that written speech itself has incorrigible particularity. Not only is it written in a particular language, but it is the particular arrangement of particular words. Those particularities are

constitutive of the written speech, even as the speech is supposed to mirror the anonymity of thinking. So how can we have both love and thinking, both particularity and anonymity, both individuality and ideality? This is the hard problem remaining to us, and to address it, I will turn to Plato's *Phaedrus*.

Socrates encounters young Phaedrus heading out of Athens' walls and accompanies him to the countryside, speaking of Phaedrus' recent rendezvous with Lysias. This Lysias has been giving speeches, and Phaedrus seems to have been captivated by them, in particular one about why you should give erotic favors to the one who does not love you rather than the one who does. In fact, Phaedrus is carrying a copy of this speech written down. After he reads it to Socrates, Socrates critiques Lysias's speech and offers his own version of the argument. Then Socrates critiques his own speech and makes another – a majestic palinode – vindicating the divine madness of *eros*. But before returning to Athens, Socrates takes up the subject of speech itself, concluding with a critique of written speech.

Even from this paltry synopsis it should be clear why the *Phaedrus* is a fitting dialogue to consider. Not only is love its great theme, but it also includes the most extended reflection on written speech that Socrates ever gives. As much as the *Phaedrus* is fitting, however, it is also potentially fatal to the account of written speech offered in this lecture. For Socrates' account of erotic love and of written speech seems to keep them forever apart. By Socrates' argument only living spoken speech, only dialogue is compatible with erotic love properly understood. To the extent that it is an image or imitation of dialectic, written speech may support a kind of loving friendship – *philia* – between the writer and the reader by sharing in common with the reader what is understood by the writer. But this is the only way written speech may be worthwhile. Speeches like Lysias' are a misguided use of written speech, just as misguided as Lysias' conception of erotic love.

And it must be granted that Lysias' speech *does* seem like it is an instance of written speech as I've described tonight. Although the speech is attributed to Lysias, the giver of the speech can be anyone and the speech can be given to anyone. The conceit of the speech is a non-lover persuading a non-beloved to take on the trappings of a lover/beloved relationship. But insofar as nothing but absence of love marks the writer, and nothing but absence of a relationship to the writer as a lover marks the audience, the speech by anyone to anyone is a speech of no one's. And this aspect of anonymity is most manifest in the speech as written. If we imagine the speech as spoken,

we must imagine it as spoken only as a set speech, only as a recitation of something already formed *and* formed in abstraction from any particular situation. If we try to imagine the speech as given from someone in particular to someone in particular, then the content of the speech belies its delivery. The particular giver of the speech, as the non-lover, could not have in mind any particular beloved as the addressee without calling into question his status as a non-lover – any particular affection on his part would undermine his claim to be a non-lover. This speech in praise of loving the non-lover is, and must be, utterly impersonal.

Its danger is two-fold: not only does it get erotic love spectacularly wrong, but it also seems to have a seductive power: the speech captivates Phaedrus, so much so that Socrates titles him a lover of speeches. Perhaps Phaedrus delights in it because it can become his as much as it began as Lysias'. Indeed, he first attempts to reproduce it in his own words before the written speech is spied out by Socrates. The impersonality of the speech, made concrete by its being written, is the source of the allure for this lover of speeches, even more than the impersonality of the suggested love relationship is supposedly alluring for the non-lover and non-beloved. Phaedrus is drawn to the speech because it is no one's, and the non-love is attractive because it cannot involve anyone in particular. But just as the ground for the allure of non-love is the promise of control, so also control is the ground for the allure of impersonal speech. Nothing of you is at stake, nothing of you needs to be entangled in an impersonal speech or a non-love affair – you simply get what you already know you want and you need suffer no affect. And on this understanding of love, to love *speech* is to collect it, confine it, freeze it in one's soul for memory to fish out at a whim.

As the danger is two-fold, so is Socrates' critique of Lysias' speech and Phaedrus' reception of it. Socrates first deals with the content of Lysias' speech, erotic love; and then he attends to Lysias' speech as speech, and particularly as written. Written speech plays no part in the rehabilitation of erotic love, and erotic love plays no part in the assessment of written speech. Given our interest in written speech, let us look to Socrates' second critique first.

Socrates' critique of written speech begins with a story about its genesis. Theuth, the Egyptian god of many a *techné*, presents to Thamus, the Egyptian god-king incarnation of Ammon, an array of inventions for Thamus' judgment, including his invention of letters. Upon submitting this invention for Thamus' appraisal, Theuth lauds it as a drug – a *pharmakon* – for mem-

ory. But Thamus responds to the invention as if it were a poison – again, *pharmakon* – written speech will weaken, he predicts, not strengthen memory. Written speech is helpful not for memory but for reminding, and the faith put in this recollection from without will enervate the power to recollect from within.

The supposed moral of this myth is that written speech is medicinal only for those who already know what is in the written speech and a poison dressed up as a drug for those who do not know. This pharmaceutical written speech, Socrates continues, can only say the same words over and over to whoever picks it up. That is, it cannot respond adequately to continued inquiry, it cannot discern between the reader it will help and the reader it will harm, and it cannot defend itself against malignant interpretation (nor, we must imagine, can it confirm just interpretation). The target of Socrates' critique is a insensitive, indiscriminate, and impotent written speech, a written speech that is strictly instrumental, a *technical* written speech.

And with it goes a technical way of reading. Technical reading adopts the posture of user to the written speech. Even the chilling term “consumer” is too lively for this kind of reader, inasmuch as consuming suggests at least the possibility of metabolizing the written speech. Technical reading carts written speech along as a tool to be leveraged. Even when that tool is carried within the soul, that is, even (or perhaps especially) when the written speech is memorized, the technical reader's relationship to it is wholly extrinsic. Technical reading may internalize the speech but only to the extent that it makes part of the soul external to the rest. Technical written speech is made for use, and technical reading makes of us users.

But from this wreckage of written speech, Socrates offers a glimmer of hope. There is, he says, a legitimate brother to the just-critiqued kind of writing: it is the written image of the living, breathing speech in the soul of the one who understands. This written speech, by virtue of the dialectical art that generated it, inscribes the living speech of the writer in the soul of the reader. The reader's soul is thus inscribable because he too has the capacity for the dialectical art. By virtue of the writer's kinship of soul with the reader, this written speech will plant seeds that flower and fruit perennially. The dialectical affinity between writer and reader allows written speech to overcome its defects; the capacity for true understanding shared by writer and reader allows written speech, despite its constitutive discontinuity, to be a method of communion. Socrates rescues written speech by making it the thing in common among friends, among those who are alike in their love

of wisdom. This noble written speech is the sort about which we told our loving, lovely story, and it alone, according to Socrates, is clear, perfect, and serious.

This written speech alone is clear – but clear like a transparent window; it is perfect – but perfect as knowledge is perfect and as learning is imperfect; and it is serious because it has a lofty function to fulfill. That is, the whole of written speech's redemption rests on the one who makes it and the one who takes it up – written speech itself is not redeemed. The critical difference between technical written speech and its legitimate brother is with respect to the father: if it is sired by one who has come to know through the dialectical art, then it can be used to reach others who need only reminding of that art to recover their own knowledge. And on this model, the *graphic* character of the speech is only ancillary – much like a mother is considered merely a receptacle for the formative seed of the father – the *written* speech is merely a medium and never the message.

Likewise, when the reader takes in the speech, he does not adopt the sons of this writer-father, but sires his own soul-sons. That is, what flowers and fruits in the soul of the reader is his own thoughts. The legitimate reader of the legitimate speech is reminded of what he already knows, brought to awareness of his slumbering knowledge by the scribblings of the legitimate writer. This recollection on the part of the reader is indeed from within, but the written speech remains wholly without. Thus legitimate written speech is just as much made for use as its bastard brother, and it just as much makes of us users, however nobler.

So here is Socrates' response to our riddle about written speech: We were in love with speeches in the wrong way. Because of our misguided love, we mistook written speech to be something worthy in itself, possessing its own unique relationship to thinking. The problem grew out of our misunderstanding of the nature of written speech; our mistake was in making it more than a tool for extending spoken speech. According to Socrates, written speech is at best a technique for uniting lovers of wisdom in friendship and at worst a seductive sham of wisdom itself. We can attain the best and avoid the worst, only if we recognize that the most written speech can be is a useful imitation of living, spoken speech.

That, I surmise, is Socrates' answer. But is it Plato's? Or rather, is it the *Phaedrus*'s answer? Within the dialogue, *eros* and written speech are accidentally thrown together in Lysias' speech. Socrates' effort throughout the dialogue is to separate them. But what Socrates attempts to divide

within the dialogue is ultimately and irrevocably united in the whole that is the dialogue itself. What is only accidental within the dialogue becomes necessary as constitutive of the written speech that is the dialogue itself. From within the dialogue, it seems only coincidence that Phaedrus meets Socrates, that Phaedrus happens to have just this speech of Lysias; but if not for these, there could be no *Phaedrus*, the dialogue we read. From within the dialogue, Socrates' speeches on *eros* and his treatment of written speeches are united only by Phaedrus' lingering interest in written speech; but were we to read only the one or the other, we would violate the integrity of the dialogue. That the dialogue is written speech accounts for its capacity to transform contingency to necessity and bind otherwise lonesome pieces into a genuine whole.

Socrates himself alludes to this capacity of written speech when he first critiques Lysias' writing. Before he launches his more comprehensive reproof of written speech, Socrates names some features of well-written speech that Lysias' speech lacks. But what Socrates identifies only as a sign of good style, I believe, is a possibility that discloses the perfection of written speech. This feature is *anagke logographike* or logographic necessity, which I would gloss as the necessity belonging to speech written thoughtfully. The *-ikos* ending indicates the art or science corresponding to the root word. So we have *logo* – speech – *graph* – as written – *ike* – in a way that belongs to a craft or a science, or, in a way dictated by thinking. When all the parts and particularities are put together by the rule of thinking, then the written speech possesses logographic necessity. Then there is nothing accidental, nothing extraneous, and nothing meaningless in written speech.

When every letter, every word, every relationship between every word, every relationship between every sentence is just as thinking demands, then the written speech becomes like a living creature – to use the image Socrates does. The likeness to a living creature holds not just with respect to the composition of the animal but also to the life of that animal. For animals have whatever head or feet they have arranged the way they are because of the kind of life the animal leads. The whole determines the part as an element organized for the living of the whole. Logographic necessity allows written speech to live. If written speech can attain logographic necessity, it need not be only an imitation of living speech as spoken. It has the possibility of life on its own terms, with as much a dignified relationship to thinking as spoken speech has.

Note that written speech lays claim to necessity not by scrubbing itself

clean of contingency, but by submitting every bit of its possible peculiarity to the bidding of thinking. Likewise for thinking. The anonymity of thinking is not the absence of personality, as if what is needed is to ignore your unique specificities. Thinking is not an abstraction from your contingency, but the concentration of your ownmost activity. Thinking absolving itself of its concern with all the contingencies of your being is at once you offering all your contingencies to be absolved. Thinking as an interruption of your concerned being in the world takes you being concerned with thinking. For just as much as thinking is no one's, no one can do it for you.

This paradox, that the absolution of identity demands absolute involvement of your most intimate self, is not only the paradox of written speech, not only of thinking; it is also the paradox of erotic love.

In his fabulous palinode, Socrates reveals that the true end of erotic love is not the premeditated possession of a body but a spontaneous striving for beauty. Its true character is an all-consuming madness that cannot be moderated without being negated. I will trace just one – one! – of the many mythic images Socrates enlists to wrangle the mystery of erotic love. The immortal human soul is originally and essentially a winged denizen of an intelligible hyper-heaven, but it is recurrently and inescapably dragged to the earthly plane and bound in gross flesh. When, thus bodily incarcerated, a person falls in love, the lover's attraction to the beloved is due to the soul's attraction to the divine ideas it left behind when it became captive to a body. The lover's captivation with the beloved frees the soul from its sclerotic seclusion in a body. The more the lover devotes himself to the beloved, the more his soul is nourished by what it strove after in its life apart from the body. The lover fully in love bears in his soul both a repetition of how it was before the lover was born and a presentiment of how it will be after the lover dies. The soul is transformed by this nourishment, returning to the winged form it had when it was most wholly itself, that is, when it was utterly detached from any of the particularities of the lover.

Yet, the love is begun and continues in the particularities of the lover and beloved. Their idiosyncracies are not a one-off instigation to the love, to be dismissed once the love is underway. They are the continual occasion for the love, recurring prompts to the soul to collect itself into anonymity. All these peculiarities of their persons are poured into the soul's striving to return to the ideas, to return to the place where peculiarities cannot be recalled. And in this way erotic striving is a rehearsal of dying.

Soul gathering itself to itself from the self it is in its individuality, soul

collecting itself into anonymity – I previously named this thinking. We see now that it can also bear the title *eros*. The wild spontaneity of self-concerned thinking *is* the divine madness of erotic love. And thinking and *eros* must be an undertaking of the whole self. All your unrepeatable particularity, the plenty of your contingency and complexity, every intricacy of your identity, all of this must be at stake for thinking to be love and love to be thinking.

Coda

As with all consummations in this corporeal plane, this one too is short-lived. We must eat; we must sleep; we must stretch our legs – and you will soon, very soon, I promise. And beyond the necessities of food and rest, we are subject to distraction by any manner of thing, diverted from even the most absorbing moments of love and its little deaths.

Nevertheless, if we can hold out a little longer, we have a few loose ends to tie off. In my rapturous rush to the height of love and thinking, I seem to have left written speech behind. Of course, in Socrates' story, spoken speech is the dialogical intercourse between the lover and beloved. But in my story, written speech is not the speech shared between lover and beloved – written speech is the beloved.

Here is a last story: The writer glimpses the written speech, a hint of an idea bearing a silent promise of a beautiful whole. The writer pursues the written speech, devoting herself to finding just the words required, to arranging the sentences and paragraphs or lines and stanzas just as the idea, the thinking, her love bids her do. In turn, the reader picks up the written speech and finds herself captured by an intimation of its beautiful wholeness. She strives after this whole, devoting her attention to the words, their arrangement in sentences or lines, and *their* arrangement in paragraphs or stanzas. In this ardent attention to even the smallest moment in the movement of the written speech, she is summoned into thinking. The written speech is not the common thing among friends, but the same beloved of two lovers. The writer and reader are bound in their loving and echo each other's dying. Their kinship is compelled by the written speech that arouses each soul into being what it was always to be: in love with and alive in thinking.