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PLATO

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PHAEDRUS

AND

THE SEVENTH AND
EIGHTH LETTERS

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TRANSLATED WITH
INTRODUCTIONS BY
WALTER HAMILTON

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THE NECESSITY OF KNOWLEDGE FOR A
TRUE ART OF RHETORIC

Socrates sets out to convince Phaedrus that, contrary to the common opinion which Phaedrus shares, any genuine art of persuasion requires knowledge of the subject of which the speaker is treating. Even a speaker who wishes to mislead will only be successful in doing so in so far as he is not misled himself. The speech of Lysias, apart from its technical defects, fails because Lysias himself has no clear grasp of the meaning of the ambiguous word 'love'.

This treatment of rhetoric, expanded to include any form of argument, forensic, deliberative, or logical, which aims at producing conviction, should be compared with the treatment of the same subject in the Gorgias. That Plato means the reader to have this in mind is shown by the description of rhetoric at 260E as a 'knack which has nothing to do with art', a phrase which he has already employed in Gorgias 463B as a generic name for the practice of 'pandering' of which he there treats rhetoric as a sub-division. But, whereas in the Gorgias rhetoric is totally condemned as a bastard art, the Phaedrus is concerned to establish the possibility of a genuine art of persuasion which is based on knowledge.

SOCRATES: Well, if a speech is to be classed as excellent, does not that presuppose knowledge of the truth about the subject of the speech in the mind of the speaker?

PHAEDRUS: But I have been told, my dear Socrates, that what a budding orator needs to know is not what is really right, but what is likely to seem right in the eyes of the mass of people who are going to pass judgement: not what is really good or fine but what will seem so; and that it is this rather than truth that produces conviction. 260

SOCRATES: 'Not to be lightly regarded',¹ Phaedrus, is any word from the lips of the wise. On the contrary, we must see whether they may not be right, and in particular we must not dismiss what you have just said.

PHAEDRUS: Quite so.

1. Homer, *Iliad* 2.361.

SOCRATES: Let us look at it like this.

PHAEDRUS: How?

SOCRATES: Suppose I am trying to persuade you to buy a horse for service on a campaign. Neither of us knows exactly what a horse is, but I happen to know this much about you – Phaedrus believes a horse to be the longest-eared of the domestic animals.

PHAEDRUS: A ludicrous idea, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Wait a moment. Suppose that in a serious effort to persuade you I make use of a piece that I have composed in praise of the donkey. I call the donkey a horse, and tell you that the beast is highly serviceable both at home and in the field; you can use it to fight on, and to carry your baggage besides, and for many other purposes.

PHAEDRUS: That would be the height of absurdity.

SOCRATES: Isn't it better to be an absurd friend than a clever enemy?

PHAEDRUS: Of course.

SOCRATES: Well, when a speaker who does not know the difference between good and evil tries to convince a people as ignorant as himself, not by ascribing to a poor beast like a donkey the virtues of a horse, but by representing evil as in fact good, and so by a careful study of popular notions succeeds in persuading them to do evil instead of good, what kind of harvest do you think his rhetoric will reap from the seed he has sown?

PHAEDRUS: No very satisfactory harvest, I should say.

SOCRATES: But can it be, my friend, that we have treated the art of speech-making more roughly than we should? Perhaps she might reply: 'What nonsense is this, my good sirs? I do not insist on ignorance of truth as an essential qualification for the would-be speaker; for what my advice is worth I suggest that he should acquire that knowledge before embarking on me.¹ I do emphatically assert, however,

1. cf. *Gorgias* 460a, where Gorgias, though he has disclaimed responsibility for the use made by his pupils of his rhetorical teaching, admits that if a pupil came to him ignorant of the nature of right and wrong he would feel bound to teach him.

that without my assistance the man who knows the truth will make no progress in the art of persuasion.'

PHAEDRUS: If she says that, will she not be right?

SOCRATES: Yes, if the arguments that she still has to encounter support her claim to be an art. I think I hear some of them approaching and testifying that she is lying, and that she is not an art at all but a knack which has nothing to do with art. There is not nor ever shall be, as the Spartan said, a genuine art of speaking which is divorced from grasp of the truth.¹

PHAEDRUS: We need these arguments, Socrates. Bring them on and ask them what they mean. 261

SOCRATES: Come forward, noble creatures, and persuade Phaedrus, who begets such lovely children,² that unless he becomes an adequate philosopher he will never be an adequate speaker either on any subject. And let Phaedrus answer.

PHAEDRUS: Ask your questions.

SOCRATES: Well, to give a general definition, is not the art of rhetoric a method of influencing men's minds by means of words, whether the words are spoken in a court of law or before some other public body or in private conversation? And is not the same art involved whatever the importance of the subject under discussion, so that it is no more creditable to use it correctly on a serious matter than on a trifle? Is that what you have been told of its nature?

PHAEDRUS: Oh no, not quite that. Lectures and writings on rhetoric as an art generally confine themselves to forensic oratory, though sometimes the former include political oratory as well. I have never heard the term used in a wider sense than that.

SOCRATES: Can it be that you have heard only of the treatises on the art of speaking composed by Nestor and Odysseus

1. The apophthegm is probably Plato's own, but the Spartans were renowned both for apophthegms (hence our use of 'laconic') and for dislike of rhetoric.

2. An allusion to Phaedrus as the originator of speeches.

in their moments of leisure at Troy, and never of that of Palamedes?

PHAEDRUS: I have never heard even of that of Nestor, unless you are casting Gorgias for the part of Nestor, and Thrasymachus or Theodorus for that of Odysseus.¹

SOCRATES: Perhaps I am. But never mind them for the moment. Tell me, what is it that the opposing parties in a court of law engage in? Can we call it anything but a verbal contest?

PHAEDRUS: No, that is exactly what it is.

SOCRATES: About what is just and unjust?

PHAEDRUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then the man who follows the rules of the art will make the same jury think the same action just one moment and unjust the next, as he pleases?

PHAEDRUS: Of course.

SOCRATES: And in political speeches he will make his audience approve a course of action at one time and reject the same course at another?

PHAEDRUS: He will.

SOCRATES: But what about our Palamedes from Elea? Isn't it well known that he employs an art of speaking which makes his hearers think that the same objects are both like and unlike, both one and many, both at rest and in motion?²

PHAEDRUS: True.

SOCRATES: Then the art of controversy is not confined to

1. Nestor is the eloquent 'elder statesman' of the Iliad, and Gorgias resembled him in both eloquence and longevity. Odysseus is famous for subtlety and resource, but the exact point of the comparison with Thrasymachus or Theodorus is obscure. Palamedes, whose name signifies 'inventor' and who was famous for his discoveries, is generally identified with Zeno the Eleatic, whose method of argument was to draw contradictory conclusions from the same premise. Socrates' purpose is to emphasize that this kind of skill in argument is also to be included under the generic title of rhetoric.

For Thrasymachus and Theodorus cf. p. 82. n. 2.

2. Zeno's method is illustrated in Plato's *Parmenides*. cf. Cornford, F. M., *Plato and Parmenides*, pp. 57ff.

law or politics; every kind of discussion, it appears, is covered by one and the same art, if it is an art, and by means of it a man can make anything appear like anything else within the limits of possible comparison, and expose an opponent when he attempts to perform the same feat without being detected.

PHAEDRUS: What is all this leading to?

SOCRATES: We shall see, I think, if we ask the following question. Is a great or a slight difference between two things the more likely to be misleading?

PHAEDRUS: A slight difference.

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SOCRATES: So if you proceed by small degrees from one thing to its opposite you are more likely to escape detection than if you take big steps.

PHAEDRUS: Of course.

SOCRATES: Then a man who sets out to mislead without being misled himself must have an exact knowledge of the likenesses and unlikenesses between things.

PHAEDRUS: That is essential.

SOCRATES: If he does not know the true nature of any given thing, how can he discover in other things a likeness to what he does not know, and decide whether the resemblance is small or great?

PHAEDRUS: He cannot.

SOCRATES: Now, when people's opinions are inconsistent with fact and they are misled, plainly it is certain resemblances that are responsible for mistakes creeping into their minds.

PHAEDRUS: Yes, that is how it happens.

SOCRATES: Is it possible then for a man to be skilled in leading the minds of his hearers by small gradations of difference in any given instance from truth to its opposite, or to escape being misled himself, unless he is acquainted with the true nature of the thing in question?

PHAEDRUS: Quite impossible.

SOCRATES: It seems then, my friend, that the art of speaking displayed by a man who has gone hunting after opinions

instead of learning the truth will be a pretty ridiculous sort of art, in fact no art at all.

PHAEDRUS: It looks like it.

SOCRATES: Would you like us then to look at some examples of what we call genuine art and its opposite in the speech of Lysias which you are carrying and in the speeches which we delivered?

PHAEDRUS: There is nothing I should like better. At present we are arguing in the abstract for lack of suitable illustrations.

SOCRATES: Well, by a lucky accident the two speeches¹ provide an example of how a speaker who knows the truth can make fun of his hearers and lead them astray. My own belief, Phaedrus, is that the local divinities are responsible for this; or it may be the interpreters of the Muses, the sweet singers overhead, that have been kind enough to inspire us, since for my part I lay no claim to any proficiency in the art of speaking.

PHAEDRUS: Put it down to them if you like; only please explain your meaning.

SOCRATES: Read me again the opening of Lysias' speech.

PHAEDRUS: 'You know my situation, and you have heard how I think that it will be to our advantage for this to happen. I beg you not to reject my suit because I am not in love with you. Lovers repent -'

SOCRATES: That will do. Now where does Lysias go wrong and show absence of art? That is what we have to demonstrate, isn't it?

263 PHAEDRUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Well, is it not perfectly obvious that there are some words about which we are in agreement, and others about which we differ?

PHAEDRUS: I think I see your meaning, but amplify it, please.

1. It appears that Socrates is here speaking of Lysias' speech and his own *first* speech, or else that he is treating both his own speeches as one.

PHAEDRUS

SOCRATES: When someone uses the words 'iron' or 'silver' we all have the same idea in our minds, haven't we?

PHAEDRUS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: But suppose the words used are 'just' or 'good'. Don't we then go each his own way, and find ourselves in disagreement with ourselves as well as with each other?

PHAEDRUS: Undoubtedly.

SOCRATES: So in some cases we are in agreement and in others not.

PHAEDRUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: In which case are we more liable to be misled, and in which is the art of speaking more effective?

PHAEDRUS: When the meaning of the word is uncertain, obviously.

SOCRATES: Then the man who embarks on the search for an art of speaking must first of all make a methodical classification, and find a distinguishing mark for each of the two kinds of words, those which in popular usage are bound to be ambiguous and those which are not.

PHAEDRUS: The man who grasps that will have made a very fine discovery, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Next, when he has to deal with a given subject, it must be perfectly clear to him, without any possibility of mistake, to which class the subject of his speech belongs.

PHAEDRUS: Of course.

SOCRATES: What of love then? Is it to be classified as ambiguous or unambiguous?

PHAEDRUS: Ambiguous, obviously. Otherwise, how would it have been possible for you to describe it as you did just now as a curse to lover and loved alike, and then to turn round and assert that it is the greatest of blessings?

SOCRATES: An excellent point. But tell me - I've been so carried out of myself that I've quite forgotten - did I define love at the beginning of my speech?

PHAEDRUS: You did indeed, in the most emphatic manner conceivable.

SOCRATES: Dear me, by your account the nymphs of Ache-

lous and Pan the son of Hermes¹ are much greater experts in the art of speaking than Lysias the son of Cephalus. Or am I wrong, and did Lysias at the start of his encomium compel us to conceive of love as a definite thing on the meaning of which he had decided, and did he bring everything else in the whole course of his speech into conformity with that decision? Would you care to read his opening once more?

PHAEDRUS: As you please, but what you are looking for isn't there.

SOCRATES: Read it all the same, so that I can hear his own words.

264 PHAEDRUS: 'You know my situation, and you have heard how I think that it will be to our advantage for this to happen. I beg you not to reject my suit because I am not in love with you. Lovers repent the kindnesses they have shown when their passion abates.'

SOCRATES: You see how far Lysias is from doing what we are looking for. He is like a man swimming on his back, in reverse; his speech begins where it should have ended, and his opening words are what the lover should say to his darling when his speech is finished. Or am I mistaken, my dear Phaedrus?

PHAEDRUS: I grant you that what he is talking of is what one would expect to find in a peroration, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then again, don't the various parts of his speech give the impression of being thrown together at random? Do you see any intrinsic reason why the second topic, rather than any of the others, should be placed second? I am an ignoramus, of course, but it seemed to me that the writer showed a fine carelessness by saying whatever occurred to him. Can you point out any compelling rhetorical reason why he should have put his arguments together in the order he has?

PHAEDRUS: You do me too much honour if you suppose that I am capable of divining his motives so exactly.

1. The divinities by whom Socrates professes to be inspired.

SOCRATES: But I think you would agree that any speech ought to have its own organic shape, like a living being; it must not be without either head or feet; it must have a middle and extremities so composed as to fit one another and the work as a whole.

PHAEDRUS: Of course.

SOCRATES: Well, now look at your friend's speech and see whether it conforms to this criticism. You will find that it is no better than the epitaph said to have been inscribed on the tomb of Midas the Phrygian.

PHAEDRUS: What epitaph is that and what is the matter with it?

SOCRATES: It goes like this:

‘A girl of bronze on Midas’ tomb I stand,
As long as water flows and trees grow tall,
Remaining here on his lamented tomb,
I’ll tell to all who pass “Here Midas lies”’¹

You notice, I am sure, that it is of no consequence what order these lines are spoken in.

PHAEDRUS: You are making fun of our speech, Socrates.

THE SPEECHES OF SOCRATES ILLUSTRATE A NEW
PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD

The knowledge on which a true rhetoric must be based is of course knowledge of the eternal realities, the Forms and soul; there is for Plato no other knowledge worthy of the name. For the moment, however, Socrates concentrates on a single principle which he claims to have exemplified in his two speeches: the method of defining a topic for discussion by ‘collection’ and ‘division’ or as we should say, by genus and species. This method, to which he gives the name of dialectic, is announced by Socrates with the enthusiasm proper to a new discovery, and it plays a prominent part in dialogues later than the Phaedrus, notably the Sophist, Politicus, and Philebus. It has been suggested² that one of the main purposes of the dialogue is to announce this

1. This epigram was attributed by some in antiquity to Cleobulus of Lindus, who occurs in some lists of the Seven Sages.

2. Hackforth, *op cit.*, p. 134.

method, which must be distinguished from the dialectic sketched in the Republic. That was concerned with the ascent of the philosopher from sensible particulars to Forms and ultimately to the Form of Good, and the subsequent deduction of all truth from this single principle. Its culminating point is a mystical experience, which can be described only by analogies. The Phaedrus is here concerned with something much more practical, the use of definitions by genus and species as an aid to clarity and precision of thought.

The distinction between 'right-hand' and 'left-hand' love which Socrates is enabled to make by the application of this method explains the transition from the condemnation of love in his first speech to the eulogy in the second. But it is to be noted that in neither speech is the method employed with anything like the exactness specified in the present passage; it is only in the second that Socrates begins with the generic concept of madness, and even there there is no scheme of successive division; he proceeds from genus to infima species in a single step.

SOCRATES: Well, I don't want to vex you, so we will let it pass, although it seems to me to contain a number of features which an observer would profit by not attempting to imitate. Let us turn to the other speeches; they contained something, I think, worth the attention of the student of rhetoric.

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PHAEDRUS: What do you mean?

SOCRATES: They were, you remember, opposites; one maintained that a lover's desires should be gratified, and the other a non-lover's.

PHAEDRUS: And in both cases you argued like a man.

SOCRATES: I thought you were going to say like a madman, which would be no more than the truth. And that brings me to the very point I wished to make. We said that love was a kind of madness, didn't we?

PHAEDRUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And that there are two types of madness, one arising from human disease, the other when heaven sets us free from established convention.

PHAEDRUS: Agreed.

SOCRATES: And we distinguished four kinds of divine madness and ascribed them to four divinities,¹ the inspiration of the prophet to Apollo, that of the mystic to Dionysus, that of the poet to the Muses, and the fourth kind to Aphrodite and Love; and of the four we declared the last, the madness of the lover, to be the best. And in trying to tell what the emotion of love is like it may be that we hit upon some truth, though in some respects perhaps we went astray. Anyhow, the mixture resulted in a not entirely unconvincing speech, a mythical hymn which celebrates in suitably devotional language the praises of Love, who is your master and mine, Phaedrus, and the protector of the young and fair.

PHAEDRUS: I certainly took great pleasure in hearing it.

SOCRATES: Let us then concentrate our attention on this single point, the way in which the transition from blame to praise was effected.

PHAEDRUS: What do you mean to deduce from that?

SOCRATES: My view is that, though the rest of the speech was really no more than a *jeu d'esprit*, yet in its random utterances two methods of reasoning can be discerned, and that it would be no bad thing if one could get a clear scientific idea of their function.

PHAEDRUS: What are these methods?

SOCRATES: The first method is to take a synoptic view of many scattered particulars and collect them under a single generic term, so as to form a definition in each case and make clear the exact nature of the subject one proposes to expound. So in our recent speech on love we began by defining what love is. That definition may have been good or bad, but at least it enabled the argument to proceed with clearness and consistency.

1. This is not a wholly accurate recapitulation of the classification made at 244, in which Apollo was alluded to only by implication and Dionysus not mentioned at all.

PHAEDRUS: What is the other method you have in mind, Socrates?

266 SOCRATES: The ability to divide a genus into species again, observing the natural articulation, not mangling any of the parts, like an unskilful butcher. Take my two speeches just now. Both took irrationality as a generic notion. But just as in a single physical body there are pairs of organs with the same name but distinguished as left and right respectively, so in our two speeches: both postulated madness as a single generic form existing in us, but the first separated the left-hand part, as it were, and broke it down into further parts and did not give up till it detected among them what may be called a left-hand kind of love, which it very properly reprobated; whereas the second directed our attention to the types of madness on the right-hand side, and, finding there a kind of love which has the same name as the other but is divine, held it up before our eyes and eulogized it as the source of the greatest blessings that can fall to our lot.

PHAEDRUS: Perfectly true.

SOCRATES: Well, Phaedrus, I am a great lover of these methods of division and collection as instruments which enable me to speak and to think, and when I believe that I have found in anyone else the ability to discuss unity and plurality as they exist in the nature of things, I follow in his footsteps 'like the footsteps of god'.¹ Hitherto I have given those who possess this ability the title of dialecticians, though heaven knows if I am right to do so. It is for you now to tell me what one ought to call them if one takes yourself and Lysias for one's masters. Can it be that what I have been describing is precisely that art of rhetoric to which Thrasymachus² and the rest owe their ability not only to speak themselves but to make a good speaker of any-

1. An adaptation of a Homeric phrase.

2. Aristotle mentions Thrasymachus of Chalcedon as the second of a trio of early technical writers on rhetoric, the others being Tisias and Theodorus. He is best known from the first book of the *Republic*, where he is made to maintain, like Callicles in the *Gorgias*, that Might is Right.

one who is prepared to pay them tribute as if they were kings?

PHAEDRUS: They may behave like kings, but they are quite ignorant of the kind of knowledge you are asking about. You are quite right, I am sure, to give the name of dialectic to the method you have described, but I believe that the nature of rhetoric is still eluding us.

SOCRATES: How can that be? Is there anything worth having that can be systematically acquired if it is divorced from dialectic? If so, you and I should certainly not despise it. But what is rhetoric, what is left of it? That is the question that must be answered.

PHAEDRUS: There is a great deal left, Socrates, the whole contents, in fact, of the technical treatises on the subject.

A REVIEW OF THE DEVICES AND TECHNICAL
TERMS OF CONTEMPORARY RHETORIC

This review, to a modern reader perhaps the least attractive part of the dialogue, leads to the conclusion that what pass as the rules of rhetoric are in fact no more than preliminaries to the practice of the true art.

SOCRATES: Thank you for reminding me. The first point, I suppose, is that a speech must begin with an 'introduction'. That is the sort of thing you mean, isn't it, the technical refinements of composition?

PHAEDRUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Next must come a 'statement of the facts' supported by the evidence of witnesses; after that 'indirect evidence'; fourthly 'arguments from probability'; not to mention the 'proof' and 'supplementary proof' distinguished by that expert in rhetorical subtlety from Byzantium.

PHAEDRUS: Are you referring to the worthy Theodorus?

SOCRATES: Of course I am. And besides these one must include a 'refutation' and a 'subsidiary refutation', whether one is acting for the prosecution or the defence. And are we

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