Myth and Writing in Plato's *Phaedrus*

KYRIAKI GRAMMENOU

Abstract: The question of the origin of writing, as well as its relation to memory and wisdom, constitutes the theme of the myth of Theuth, which appears in the Platonic dialogue titled *Phaedrus*. This paper aims to investigate the elements that link the myth to certain critical keys in Plato's work, as well as to the individual dialogue. I will attempt to critically read the myth in order to present its plot in a way that, without exhausting it, aims to highlight some of its most interesting points. By exploring its place and function within the *Phaedrus*, I will inquire into its authenticity or traditional origin, link the notion of writing to those of time and death, and, last but rather most importantly I will question the alleged difference between *mythos* (myth) and *logos*.

Keywords: orality, rhetoric, myth vs logos, writing, deconstructive reading

Introduction

The question of the origin of writing, as well as its relation to memory and wisdom, constitutes the theme of the myth of Theuth, which appears in the Platonic dialogue titled *Phaedrus*. Of course, both the dialogue and the myth in question have been the subject of extensive and detailed research, so this paper does not aim at presenting their plot or narrative details. Rather, I am planning to investigate the elements that link the myth to certain critical keys in Plato's work, as well as to the individual dialogue. I will attempt to critically read the myth in order to present its plot in a way that, without exhausting it, aims to highlight some of its most interesting points. By exploring its place and function within the *Phaedrus*, I will study both the content and form of the myth, inquire into its authenticity or traditional origin, and, last but rather most importantly question the alleged difference between *mythos* (myth) and *logos*.

But, first of all, is it not paradoxical to speak of Plato's myths, that is, the myths produced by a thinker who is famous as their most fervent castigator? Are we obliged to understand this coexistence in terms of a contradiction, similar to the one in which, according to Plato, poets should be both honored and persecuted by the State? Is not myth the opposite of reason, that is, of dialectics – the most appropriate method for the quest for truth? Glenn Most suggests that

> It is not surprising that Plato's many readers have always been perplexed by the questions not only of Plato's attitude towards the traditional Greek myths but also of the place of muthos within Plato's own works. For no other Greek thinker attacked the traditional myths as violently as Plato did; and yet no other ancient philosopher has inserted so many striking and unforgettable myths into his own works as he did. How is such an apparent contradiction to be explained? (Most 13-14)

Although the opposition between myth and discourse has shaped the history of Western thought –moreover activating a chain of interconnected opposing dipoles– yet the boundaries between the two areas seem to be much more blurred than we are used to imagine.

If we attempt a definition of the concept of myth, we find that "the distinction between myth and logos was not as clear to the ancients as it is to us today. [...] For Plato, then, myths con-

Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics Vol. 47, No. 4, Winter 2024 [62-71]

tain elements of truth and therefore their opposition to reason is not absolute. There are many passages that testify to the fluid boundaries between myth and the rest of the logical corpus of Plato's dialogues" (Constantinidi). We are to return to the question of the relationship between myth and discourse later, not, of course, to examine it in general, but to watch its two parts intertwine in the context of the dialogue that is the subject of this article. For now, let us content ourselves with noting that the function of myth in Plato's work cannot be understood without taking into account the pedagogical dimension of his project. The philosopher is interested in psychologically converting his younger interlocutor and urging him to follow the philosophical way of life.

Myths "were intended not only to help to deter people who were making the wrong choice in life, but also to attract people who might yet make the right one" (Most 23). Particularly in the case we are studying here, we are dealing with a myth that is part of a mid-period dialogue. This is the period in which Plato's most pivotal theses are crystallized, and he turns to his auditors to persuade them; not, of course, in the manner of the sophists, but, instead, with the certainty of a speaker who knows both his subject and his audience; and, above all, he is not interested in prevailing in a debate or in training effective and erudite orators. His concern is to write, with real knowledge, into the souls of his pupils, and to teach them what is just, beautiful, and true. Consequently, "philosophical myth is protreptic; it helps to turn people towards the life of philosophy" (Morgan 164).

In other words, the philosophical myth is not a decorative element of the dialogue within which it is inscribed, but constitutes an organic part of and develops with it a relationship of mutual signification. For Plato, myth is far from what we now call by the same name: it is not a story that is merely a product of the imagination; or, at least, this is not its most defining quality: " 'myth' is much closer to what we currently call 'fiction' " (Karamanolis 129). But it is important to remember that "Plato may well be constructing a muthologia, but he is doing so within the horizon, and by the constraints, of logos" (Most 24). However, we will return to this issue later. For now, let us ask what are those elements that make a myth eminently Platonic.

The Platonic Elements of Myth and its Relation to Phaedrus

Scholars have traditionally attempted to propose a series of criteria that would allow the categorization of myths on the basis of their content and/or form. A more modern perspective, however, attempts to classify Platonic myths by taking into account the overall communicative context within which they emerge. Glenn Most, for example, finds that "Platonic myths are almost always monologic" and "are probably always recounted by an older speaker to younger listeners" (Most 16); they "go back to older, explicitly indicated or implied, real or fictional oral sources" and "always deal with objects and events that cannot be verified" (Most 17); they "generally derive their authority not from the speaker's personal experience but from the tradition", they "often have an explicitly asserted psychagogic effect", they "are never structured as dialectic but instead always as description or narration" and they "are always found either (a) at the beginning of an extended dialectical exposition or (b) at the end of one" (Most 18).

Which of the above criteria does the myth under consideration meet? The myth of Theuth is indeed monologic and is told by the elder Socrates to the young Phaedrus. It is introduced by the expressions "I have to say what I have heard from the old men" (274 c1) and "I have heard" (274 c5) and thus draws its origin from oral tradition. The heroes of the myth are the gods Theuth and Thamus; the object of the myth is the origin of the writing, which is a matter that does not really lend itself to verification; the aim of the narrative is entertainment, in the sense of converting the hearer and urging him to follow the path of wisdom. Finally, the myth is indeed presented as a narrative rather than a dialectic, and follows, as an organic part, a philosophical argument.

As in the case of the distinction between myth and discourse, however, compliance with these criteria is not absolute, in the sense that the fulfilment of some of the conditions remains open to interpretation. In other words, Plato's text seems to resist our demand for precision and insists on wavering and evading, i.e. playing around: for example, what kind of validity can be derived from the invocation of a tradition –forever lost–, which gets even further undermined by Socrates' rebuke, when he asks Phaedrus: "But you are perhaps interested in who says it and from what place it comes. Why do you not consider only this, whether the thing is so or otherwise" (275c)? And indeed, Morgan points out that "only a sophist cares to be precise in investigating the literal truth of a myth. Far more important is to investigate to what extent myths may be applied as ethical paradigms" (Morgan 160). At this point, however, we ought to be careful: the 20th century has taught us to be fascinated by the polysemy, ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy of the texts we study. And it has given us valuable tools to do so. We must keep in mind that "Plato's myths are a solid story" and

> if we are to write myths – and we must, Plato says, write new myths [...] – if we philosophers are to write literature, then we must write a literature that is very sure of itself, without contradictions and which also has a moral lesson. That doesn't sound very nice to us, we want polysemy, polymorphism, conflict and not a moral lesson from art, but Plato probably had that in mind (Kalfas).

Kathryn Morgan attempts a classification of myths in general, which aims to distinguish the Platonic ones from those that Plato considered inappropriate for the search for truth. "We can distinguish three classes", she writes. "Traditional myths such as those told by the poets, educational myths that are intended to exercise social control, and philosophical myths, which are tied to logical analysis" (Morgan 162). The distinction between philosophical and non-philosophical myths, moreover, illuminates the problem we addressed in the previous paragraph concerning our right to recognize ambiguity as an intentional Platonic strategy:

> An important characteristic of non-philosophical and pre-philosophical myth was its multiplicity and variety. Narratives existed in many (non-canonical) versions. The rise of a critical tradition marks the beginning of a hostility to such multiplicity. […] The notion of multiplicity has a deep and uncomfortable resonance for philosophers. Multiple versions of a myth, coupled with poetic unconcern for any principle of verification, are an implicit challenge to a philosophical discourse that aims to discover and communicate a univocal truth (Morgan 36).

Thus, a philosophical myth is to be distinguished "by its univocality. Designed to fit a particular philosophical context, it conveys one meaning and is not easily susceptible to extraction and reformulation in another version" (Morgan 36).

So we are dealing with a myth that meets most of Morgan's criteria, as well as Most's: it is a philosophical fable, monologic, narratively structured, delivered by an elder to a younger hearer and aimed at the education of his soul; it is linked to a fully developed philosophical argument that precedes it while preparing the ground for the contrast between philosophy and rhetoric – which follows; its object concerns persons and facts that do not lend themselves to verification, and derives its force from the appeal to an oral tradition, even if invented: "We have a narrative that is mythical in form, but plausibly transposed to the present, for Socrates' tendency in his commentary is not to talk about what was going on in Egypt, it is to use the occasion of the discovery of writing to talk about the present" (Kalfas, 2018). Moreover, despite the invocation of the past, the myth is created by Plato himself, i.e. it is not an elaborated version of an already existing narrative. Even more crucially, it is designed to convey a non-dogmatic, yet unambiguous message, which, while not prohibiting interpretation, nevertheless hides at its heart a clear and indisputable meaning.

The myth's subject may seem fragmented, or at least decentralized, insofar as it deals with a number of seemingly unrelated topics: love, rhetoric, dialectics, writing, beauty, playfulness, the soul, the gods, the sophists, art. It also seems structured around an unbridgeable breach:

while the first part consists of rhetorical discourses, the second part claims to set an example of dialectical quest. Moreover, the text seems haunted by a multiplicity of voices –and written texts– partaking in a variety of associations: each one imitates the other, reduplicates it, falsifies it, mocks it, replaces it, or even erases it – but only to retrieve its trace anew. Therefore, this polyphony should not mislead us: it is the same voice, always single, the one that weaves into unbreakable unity both the dialogue and the myth, as well as the relationship between them. The myth is designed so as to belong to a particular context, only within which it can acquire its true meaning.

> The reconstruction of the structure is particularly crucial for the interpretation of the dialogue. The myth of writing is linked to Isocrates' sibylline invocation on the last page of the text, but also to the episode that triggers the debate: Phaedrus' desire to recite Lysias' speech. This invocation provides the key to the interpretation of the text (Balla).

Similarly, "in the world of the dialogue, Lysias' written speech and the play it instigated are valuable only insofar as they lead to speech and discussion, and the play of the myth is valuable insofar as it prepares us for the discussion of dialectic" (Morgan 227). However baffled the reader may have felt by the odd pairing of the first and second part, we can now view the rhetorical speeches as practical examples, philosophical and otherwise, of rhetoric. We can also watch Phaedrus being transformed through the effect that the orality of the dialectic has on him. For economy's sake, I take it for granted that the reader is familiar with the dialogue's structure. I will now move on to the presentation of the myth's plot.

The Myth of Theuth or the Origin of Myth

The myth about the origin of writing appears towards the end of *Phaedrus*. It is, so to speak, the conclusion of the argument that precedes it, and runs from 274c to 277a. It is narrated by Socrates to young Phaedrus and concerns two deities: god Theuth –who has often been paralleled to Hermes[1]– and Thamus, known to the Greeks as Ammon. The myth begins by invoking oral tradition, but, as explicitly noted, its validity does not depend on it: the two interlocutors can, independently, judge whether its message is true. According to the myth, then, the god Theuth, depicted with a human body and the head of a sacred Ibis, addresses the god-king of Egypt and presents him with his seven arts. Plato does not mention the other six, only the invention of writing. Theuth insists that the dissemination of writing among all the king's subjects will prove extremely useful, inasmuch as it will help them to acquire a stronger memory as well as wisdom. The king subverts Theuth's claims by introducing a subtle but crucial distinction: one is capable of giving birth to an art, but another is competent to judge the potential benefit or harm it can cause. Thus, Theuth is indeed the father of the art of writing, but, as such, he cannot clearly see its impact. Instead of being a remedy for memory and wisdom, it will bring about oblivion, it will replace memory with recollection, it will disguise opinion as knowledge, and it will make its disciples unpleasant to interact with.

After the end of the myth, the dialogue goes on: the written word is doomed to remain unchanged through time, to constantly repeat itself regardless of the context in which it is read, to ignore the reader's questions, to address itself indiscriminately to the knowing and the unfit audience alike, to have no voice of its own as it is permanently dependent on the presence of the author-father; above all, to do nothing more than imitate its twin brother: the spoken word. This concept of inauthenticity, of plain imitation, lies at the root of rhetoric.

> Hence, rhetoric is an art that demonstrates propositions by means of likeness. The very plasticity of the concept of 'likeness' means that a case can be made that (virtually) anything is like (virtually) anything else". […] But the restriction of rhetorical demonstration to 'likenesses' (ὁμοιότητες) assures that rhetoric only establishes convictions in the minds of auditors and does not establish anything about true reality (Yunis 186).

Even so, however, the written word is not completely devalued, since Plato attempts a rather subversive move and acknowledges that a written text can prove useful on condition that it is imbued with the principles of philosophy, and that the pursuit of writing is certainly preferable to other entertainments: "The philosopher uses the written text as if he were playing a serious and beautiful game. The game of writing will help him to exercise his memory, to keep it alive. That is, written texts are personal notes, 'memos' – they are not a substitute for actual teaching, but they can help to organize and prepare it" (Kalfas & Zographidis).

It is worth noting that, although intended for a specific occasion, Plato's words foreshadow the criticism levelled against the technology of writing. Thus, in a text written only forty years ago, we read that "writing establishes what has been called 'context-free' language […] or 'autonomous' discourse […], discourse which cannot be directly questioned or contested as oral speech can be because written discourse has been detached from its author" (Ong 77). In his work *Orality and Literacy*, Ong reproduces the Platonic thesis that the written word is the mirror of the spoken word: a text "is a representation of an utterance, of words that someone says or is imagined to say" (Ong 83). But while the mirror may reflect an ever-changing image, written speech "says exactly the same thing as before", as "a text stating what the whole world knows is false will state falsehood forever, so long as the text exists" (Ong 78).

Thus, we may ask what kind of strategy allowed Plato himself to leave a written work. "Plato", writes Yunis, "had a personal stake: on the one hand, his massive literary achievement indicates the intensity of his engagement with the new medium of artistic prose aimed at a reading public; on the other hand, the model philosopher at the center of his literary work relies strictly on oral, face-to-face communication for the advancement of his philosophical activity" (Yunis 224). G.R.F. Ferrari offers three accounts for this contradiction: the first, and probably the most prevalent, reads the critique of writing as "as a serious and straightforward expression of Plato's distrust of the written word, his own writing included, and as an attempt nevertheless to annex a zone –legitimate, but of secondary value to that of the living word– in which to exercise his continuing urge to write" (Ferrari 206).

On the other hand, there is a reading that detects an ironic dimension in the text: "Plato mean[s] the contrary of what he has Socrates say" thus "claiming the highest place for his own peculiar mode of philosophic writing, the written imitation of spoken dialogue" (Ferrari 206). Finally, Ferrari presents the thesis supported by Derrida's text titled *Plato's Pharmacy*, which recognizes in the argument against writing "a serious attempt on Plato's part to argue the value of the spoken over the written word; an attempt which fails, however, for metaphysical reasons which go to the heart of Plato's whole philosophic enterprise, and which would cause any such attempt to undermine itself". Ferrari finds that "the critique of writing tries to be the epilogue to the *Phaedrus* but ends up, despite itself, as the theme" (Ferrari 207).

In this article I will dwell a little more on this third reading, precisely because its boldness makes it both fascinating and radical. Such a deconstructive reading has given rise to controversies that not only continue to be part of the philosophical debate today, but even more crucially, concern almost all human activity: knowledge, art, politics. Kakolyris studies Derrida's reading and suggests that "deconstructive reading treats the text as an 'undecidable' phenomenon" (The "Undecidable" Pharmakon 227) and concludes that "whenever the philosophical 'axe' will seek pure substances or meanings, i.e. islands of monosemy, it will necessarily be confronted with contradictions" (Plato's Encyclopedia). On the other hand, however, Yunis argues that if we adopt Derrida's reading, "gone not only is Plato the author, but along with him the possibility of receiving his messages, of understanding his arguments, and of appreciating his irony" (Yunis 30). In other words, if we fail to grasp the necessity that regulates the text and protects it from randomness, we will equate it with the deceitful writing of rhetoricians.

Writing, Time, and Death

What does it mean to read a text according to its letter and spirit? And, what is more, is such a reading possible and/or desirable? Let us first try to imagine what strategy would have determined the writing of Plato, a writer who was suspicious of the written word and who preferred living speech instead. "That is, if he believed that philosophy is communicated mainly orally to the right souls via the right method, and that writing, on the other hand, is indeed necessary, what kind of writing would bring a text closer to orality?" (Kalfas, Transcript). Kalfas points out that Plato's philosophical dialogue "is indeed a written discourse, it cannot substitute for the living one, but at least it is structured so as to retain powerful elements of orality, flexibility, defense, versatility, which typical philosophical [...] discourse does not possess" (Kalfas, Plato's Encyclopedia). Let us, then, linger over this contrast between dead letter and living voice and thus return to a question we addressed a little earlier, in the hope that it will shed light on the myth of Theuth.

Earlier, we read Ong suggest that "there is no way directly to refute a text. After absolutely total and devastating refutation, it says exactly the same thing as before. This is one reason why 'the book says' is popularly tantamount to 'it is true'" (Ong 78). Right after this assertion, Ong adds: "It is also one reason why books have been burnt" (Ong 78). The invocation of the burning of books offers Ong the opportunity to relate the written word to death, as opposed to living orality. He finds, then, that "one of the most startling paradoxes inherent in writing is its close association with death. This association is suggested in Plato's charge that writing is inhuman, thing-like, and that it destroys memory" (Ong 80).

At this point, let us turn to literature and attempt to juxtapose Theuth's myth to a modern text which, by reflecting the myth as in a mirror, may shed light on it. In a short essay titled "The Wall and the Books", Borges begins his narration not by citing something he heard, but something he read. He writes: "I read, in past days, that the man who ordered the construction of the nearly infinite Wall of China was that First Emperor, Shih Huang Ti, who likewise ordered the burning of all the books before him" (Borges). The author's goal is stated a few lines later: "That the two gigantic operations […] were issued from one person and were in a certain sense his attributes, inexplicably satisfied me and, at the same time, disturbed me. The object of this note is to investigate the reasons for that emotion" (Borges). Borges suggests a number of possible interpretations of the emperor's ambiguous act. One of them links writing to the dissolution and restart of time, i.e. immortality and rebirth:

> Shih Huang Ti, according to historians, forbade all mention of the word death and searched for the elixir of immortality and secluded himself in a figurative palace, which had as many rooms as the year has days; the data suggest that the wall in space and the fire in time were magic barriers intended to halt the advance of death. […]Perhaps the Emperor hoped to recreate the beginning of time and called himself The First, in order to be truly the first, and he named himself Huang Ti in order to be in some way Huang Ti, the legendary emperor who invented writing and the compass. The latter, according to the Book of Rites, gave things their true names; equally Shih Huang Ti boasted, in enduring inscriptions, that all things in his empire had the name they merited" (Borges).

And now, with Borges' myth in mind, we can return to Derrida and his reading of the myth. Derrida is concerned with writing's –both used as a medicine and a poison– polysemy. He investigates the function of the Greek term *pharmakon*, about which he writes:

> The pharmakon would be a substance –with all that that word can connote in terms of matter with occult virtues, cryptic depths refusing to submit their ambivalence to analysis, already paving the way for alchemy– if we didn't have eventually to come to recognize it as antisubstance itself: that which resists any philosopheme, indefinitely exceeding its bounds as nonidentity, nonessence, nonsubstance; granting philosophy by that very fact the inexhaustible adversity of what funds it and the infinite absence of what founds it (Derrida 70).

Derrida argues that

> in the Phaedrus, the god of writing is thus a subordinate character, a second, a technocrat without power of decision, an engineer, a clever, ingenious servant who has been granted an audience with the king of the gods. The king has been kind enough to admit him to his counsel. Theuth presents a tekhne and a pharmakon to the king, father, and god who speaks or commands with his sun-filled voice (Derrida 86).

This is the god Thamus, who "often calls himself the son of the god-king, the sun-god, Ammon-Ra (Derrida 87). Derrida notes that an accepted meaning of Ammon's name is "the hidden. Once again we encounter here a hidden sun, the father of all things, letting himself be represented by speech" (Derrida 87). The god Thamus, then, is presented with Theuth's invention, who, apart from being the god of writing –or rather because of it–, also "presides over the organization of death" (Derrida 92) and "records the weight of the heart-souls of the dead" (Derrida 92). "For it goes without saying", Derrida concludes, "that the god of writing must also be the god of death" (Derrida 91). His jurisdiction over death and consequently time, however, means that "the master of writing, numbers, and calculation does not merely write down the weight of dead souls; he first counts out the days of life, *enumerates* history" (Derrida 92) and he "keeps account of the years on a notched pole" (Derrida 91). Theuth, inventor of the lunar calendar is also an inverted mirror image of Borges' Chinese emperor – who inaugurated time by reduplicating it. Derrida offers an example that sheds light on Theuth's power over time.

> Nout[2], cursed by Ra, no longer disposed of a single date, a single day of the calendar on which she could give birth. Ra had blocked from her all time, all the days and periods there were for bringing a child into the world. Thoth, who also had a power of calculation over the institution of the calendar and the march of time, added the five epagomenic days. This supplementary time enabled Nout to produce five children (Derrida 89-90).

Of course, here my concern is not to explore the possible similarities between Borges' and Derrida's texts; however, I wish to highlight the analogies that might elucidate both the myth and its relation to the dialogue within which it is inscribed. We can now reread Yunis' preoccupation registered earlier, who warned that the Derridean reading disregards the logographic necessity that regulates *Phaedrus*, to the extent that Derrida "demonstrates his own freedom (which belongs to any reader) to discover significance in any aspect of the text in relation to any other aspect of the text or indeed of the world" (Yunis 30); at the same time, he stressed that "logographic necessity eliminates chance from artistic discourse and determines the form and content of a discourse down to the smallest detail" (Yunis 193). Derrida, however, seems to share the belief that the myth of Theuth, as narrated by Plato, does remain subject to a set of strict constraints. He writes: "Our intention here has only been to sow the idea that the spontaneity, freedom, and fantasy attributed to Plato in his legend of Theuth were actually supervised and limited by rigorous necessities. The organization of the myth conforms to powerful constraints" (Derrida 85). These constraints, however, ought not to be understood only in terms of content and form, but help us to identify other, more radical laws that impose them. After this literary parenthesis, we can now return to our starting point.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper I referred to the fact that the myth of Theuth is not drawn from tradition, even if it is invoked, but is an invention of Plato. Now, we may add –without negating the authenticity of the myth– that we are dealing with a peculiar loan:

> Plato has not simply borrowed, nor borrowed a simple element: the identity of a character, Thoth, the god of writing. One cannot, in fact, speak –and we don't really know what the word could mean here anyway– of a borrowing, that is, of an addition contingent and external to the text.

> Plato had to make his tale conform to structural laws. The most general of these, those that govern and articulate the oppositions speech/writing, life/death, […]master/servant, first/second, […]seriousness/play, […] also govern, and according to the same configurations, Egyptian, Babylonian, and Assyrian mythology (Derrida 85).

We have encountered some of these oppositional dipoles earlier: all of them seemed to reduplicate a founding or even archetypal opposition – that between myth and discourse. Therefore, we can now reflect on what, at the beginning of this paper, we implied about the ambiguity of the boundaries between them. Morgan, in fact, argues that this, supposedly radical, difference is "part of a process of philosophical self-definition and self-presentation" (Morgan 30), which allowed "the rise of philosophical self-consciousness" (Morgan 23). In other words, by inventing a breach between themselves and mythos, both logos and philosophy have managed to disguise their origin and present themselves as radically different from mythos.

If so, Plato does not write myths while submerged in an irresistible contradiction; According to Morgan, "Plato writes myths for precisely the same reason that he writes dialogues: to ward off certainty and keep the philosophical quest alive in terms that acknowledge its fragility" (Morgan 184). Moreover, for Plato myth assumes another function: it protects reason from arrogance and reminds it of the limitations of knowledge. In other words, "Plato's use of 'myth' is indicative of his negative response to the omnipotence of the dialectic, and in this sense it is important because it clarifies the limits as well as the relative value of the dialectic" (Karamanolis 123). This does not mean that we should understand the relationship between myth and discourse in terms of means and ends; "Fiction is not only a means of expression or fulfillment of philosophical ends, but is directly dictated by them and is a discourse congruent to them" (Karamanolis 146). Myth ought to be perceived as the sign of an insurmountable obstacle that is none other than the limitations of knowledge as imposed by the human condition itself. Thus, we can understand Ferrari who insists that, rather than striving to attribute coherence and unity to the *Phaedrus*, we should rather realize that "the seams are meant to show" (Ferrari 204). Similarly, Kalfas suggests that "Plato does not believe that real philosophy can ever take the form of a systematic dogma, that is, a rigid and definite system, even if this system is exposed orally and dialectically. The reason is twofold: on the one hand, language has an inherent inability to express the essence of things, and on the other hand, philosophy is always produced within the soul of the mentee, who is a specific person" (Kalfas, Plato's Encyclopedia).

Towards the end of his book, Ferrari makes another interesting point that helps us to rethink the pedagogical dimension of Plato's work, which I touched upon in the introduction. Referring to Lysias, whose written discourse is the opening point of the *Phaedrus*, he notes that Lysias was a metic and therefore had no right to speak in public:

> He was also not allowed to vote or hold a political position, nor […] could he appear in person to defend himself if summoned in a lawsuit, but required the good offices of a native patron, a prostates, who would represent him before the citizenry. Here we have a nice irony: Lysias the professional speechwriter, the hidden voice behind so many citizens' appearances in court - just as he is the voice concealed beneath Phaedrus' cloak - cannot appear in that forum even when the summons is directed at him in person" (Ferrari 228).

And even when he does speak, his voice "is no free and living voice" (Ferrari 228). Consequently, we realize that neither every written word is dead, then, nor is every voice alive. What guarantees their life, what literally animates and vivifies them is philosophy itself, as "constituted and conceived by the citizens within a community" (Karamanolis 117). Philosophy, then, aims at urging us to search for truth. It is precisely in this sense that the myth of Theuth is both protrpetic and psychagogic.

Let us turn for the last time to Ong's text on the relationship between orality and literacy. There, referring to a poem by Robert Browning, where some dried –commemorative– flowers

are kept within the pages of a book, he observes: "The dead flower, once alive, is the psychic equivalent of the verbal text. The paradox lies in the fact that the deadness of the text, its removal from the living human lifeworld, its rigid visual fixity, assures its endurance and its potential for being resurrected into limitless living contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers" (Ong 80). Thus, we are not dealing with texts that are dead – doomed to keep helplessly repeating their oral origins– but with texts that, like Theuth, enumerate history, and also, like Nout, can resurrect the dead.

In conclusion, let us think, one last time, about the relationship between myth and logos. The *Phaedrus* lends itself to an examination of this relationship, insofar as "it is a myth, and narrates the origins of myth" (Ferrari 216), that is, it explores the boundaries between myth and logos and attempts to reconcile them, not in the manner of the Sophists, but in that of the philosophers. "Mythos", Morgan writes, "marks out content as a narrative, literary, social construct. Its penetration of philosophical discourse reminds us that language is embedded in a real and concrete world. It freights language and emphasises its fragility: all language touches the sphere of mythos" (Morgan 288). If, as we have seen, the human condition forbids absolute knowledge of the just, the beautiful and the true, but only turns to them in search of traces of their absence, then "mythos is the condition of the world we inhabit" (Morgan 291).

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

Notes

1 Plato seems to ignore this correlation, which "became widespread only from the fourth century". See Harvey Yunis 227.

2 Nout or Nut, Nunut, Nent or Nuit is the goddess of the sky, stars, cosmos, mothers, astronomy, and the universe in the ancient Egyptian religion.

Works Cited

Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Wall and the Books". Translated by Gaither Stewart, https://southerncrossreview.org/54/borges-muralla.htm, 5/30/24.

Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson, The Athlone Press, 1981.

Ferrari, G.R.F. *Listening to the cicadas, A Study of Plato's Phaedrus*. Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Kakoliris, Gerasimos. *The "Undecidable" Pharmakon: Derrida's Reading of Plato's Phaedrus*, https://www.frenchphilosophy.gr/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Kakoliris-G.-The-Undecidable-Pharmakon.-Derridas-Reading-of-Platos-Phaedrus.pdf, 5/26/24.

Morgan, Kathryn. *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Most, Glenn W. "Plato's Exoteric Myths." *Plato and Myth. Studies on the Use and Status of Platonic Myths*. Edited by C. Collobert, P. Destrée, F. J. Gonzales, vol. 337. Brill, 2012, pp. 13-24.

Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy, The Technologizing of the Word*. Routledge, 2002.

Plato. *Phaedrus* (ed. Harvey Yunis) Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Κακολύρης, Γ. 2019. «Το ανεπίκριτο 'φάρμακον': Η ανάγνωση του Φαίδρου από τον Ζακ Ντερριντά στο Πλάτωνος Φαρμακεία», Δευκαλίων, τόμ. 33, αρ. 1-2, Δεκέμβριος. σσ. 112-131

Κακολύρης, Γ. χ.χ. «Αποδομιστικές αναγνώσεις του Πλάτωνα (Ντερριντά)». Η εγκυκλοπαίδεια του Πλάτωνα, http://n1.intelibility.com/ime/lyceum/?p=lemma&id=105&lang=1, 8/25/20.

Κάλφας, Β. χ.χ. «Γραφή και προφορικότητα στον Πλάτωνα». Η εγκυκλοπαίδεια του Πλάτωνα, http://n1.intelibility.com/ime/lyceum/?p=lemma&id=59&lang=1, 8/25/20.
Κάλφας, Β. 2018. «Φιλοσοφία: ΦΛΣ 3, Πλάτων. Απομαγνητοφώνηση από την ανοιχτή ομάδα φοιτητών του μαθήματος», https://mathesis.cup.gr/assets/courseware/v1/e1944c9b3659544dcc6968706dab6940/asset-v1:Philosophy+PHL3+18B+type@asset+block/W2_philosophy_%CE%911.pdf, 8/25/20.
Κάλφας, Β., Ζωγραφίδης, Γ. χ.χ. «Ο Πλάτων και η φιλοσοφική ακαδημία. Γραφή και προφορικότητα». Αρχαία ελληνική γλώσσα και γραμματεία, http://www.greek-language.gr/digitalResources/ancient_greek/history/filosofia/page_042.html?prev=true, 8/25/20.
Καραμανώλης, Γ. 2008. «Γιατί ο Πλάτωνας χρησιμοποιεί μύθους;», Νεύσις 17. pp. 115-149.
Κωνσταντινίδη, Ν. χ.χ. «Ο ρόλος του μύθου στο έργο του Πλάτωνα». Η Εγκυκλοπαίδεια του Πλάτωνα, http://n1.intelibility.com/ime/lyceum/?p=lemma&id=105&lang=1, 8/25/20.
Μπάλλα, Χ. Φαίδρος. χ.χ. Η Εγκυκλοπαίδεια του Πλάτωνα. Ανακτήθηκε από http://n1.intelibility.com/ime/lyceum/?p=lemma&id=213&lang=1, 8/25/20.

[Greek titles translated]

Kakoliris, Gerasimos. "The unpalatable 'pharmakon': Jacques Derrida's reading of Phaedrus in Plato's Pharmacia". *Deucalion*, vol. 33, no. 1-2, December 2019, pp. 112-131.
Kakolyris, Gerasimos. "Deconstructive readings of Plato (Derrida)". *Plato's Encyclopedia*, http://n1.intelibility.com/ime/lyceum/?p=lemma&id=105&lang=1, 8/25/20.
Kalfas, Vassilis. "Writing and orality in Plato". *Plato's Encyclopedia*, http://n1.intelibility.com/ime/lyceum/?p=lemma&id=59&lang=1, 8/25/20.
Kalfas, Vassilis. "Philosophy. A transcript by the course's students open group", https://mathesis.cup.gr/assets/courseware/v1/e1944c9b3659544dcc6968706dab6940/asset-v1:Philosophy+PHL3+18B+type@asset+block/W2_philosophy_%CE%911.pdf, 8/25/20.
Kalfas, Vassilis and George Zographidis. "Plato and the philosophical academy. Writing and orality". *Ancient Greek language and literature*, http://www.greek-language.gr/digitalResources/ancient_greek/history/filosofia/page_042.html?prev=true, 8/25/20.
Karamanolis, George. "Why does Plato use myths?" *Nevsis* 17. 2008, pp. 115-149.
Konstantinidi, Denny. "The role of myth in Plato's work". *Plato's Encyclopedia*, http://n1.intelibility.com/ime/lyceum/?p=lemma&id=105&lang=1, 15/8/20.
Balla, Chloe. "Phaedrus." *Plato's Encyclopedia*, http://n1.intelibility.com/ime/lyceum/?p=lemma&id=213&lang=1, 12/8/20.