

Observations on the Writing Profession in The Republic by Plato

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Questioning of the Writing Profession Plato's The Republic

For all the time today's students spend learning to write well, Plato is skeptical of those who spend their lives crafting words. In the tenth chapter of *The Republic*, Socrates condemns poets as imitators. In the dialogue that bears his name, [Phaedrus](#) wonders whether words in the constructed rhythms of speech or poetry will obscure Truth, the philosopher's ultimate goal. Speech-writing is just the clever use of rhetorical device, poetry is faulty [imitation](#), and both empty voices can deceive us. Eventually, though, Socrates admits that the work of words deserves our effort. Because he is a writer himself, Plato's criticism of the writing profession rings hollow: "It's not speaking or writing well that's shameful; what's really shameful is to engage in either of them . . . badly," says Socrates (*Republic* 69A).¹ Writing never ceases to be an imitation. Bad writing and speeches always threaten philosophy. Yet Plato's own work reflects the constant questioning of philosophical dialogue. It passes Socrates's test for good writing.

When he refers to writing, Socrates means speech writing. Philosophers judge the written

against the spoken—what Phaedrus calls the "living, breathing discourse" (276A). For the philosopher, the spoken word is superior to the written one. Composition takes on meaning when an audience hears it; even Homer's merits as a poet come from the speeches his characters give. Socrates asks: "Have you only [heard](#) of the rhetorical treatises of Nestor and Odysseus—those they wrote in their spare time in Troy?" (261B). Good writing is a tool for talk; The Iliad is better heard than read. Socrates has no use for silence. Writing is meant to be read, a...

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... philosophical conversation. But by his very existence as a writer, and by the form his writing takes, Plato satisfies the doubt, perhaps his own, that writing's risks are worth it. His written words are careful in their sound and sense, but they keep in mind the eternal search for truth. Plato's dialogues clarify only by confounding; his work preserves, but does not simplify. In its echoing, spontaneous polyphony, dialogue achieves all the truth that writing ever can. We are readers but hear their voices in our heads.

Works Cited

- 1) Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: HaperCollins Publishers, 1968).
- 2) Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Sonnets from the Portuguese: Illuminated by the Brownings' Love Letters* (New Jersey: Ecco Press, 1996).
- 3) William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*, fourth ed. (London: Allyn and Bacon, 2000).

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