NIETZSCHE AND PLATO ON THE PHILOSOPHICAL TASK OF WRITING

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> The hermit does not believe that any philosopher . . . ever expressed his real and ultimate opinions in books: does one not write books precisely to conceal what one harbors? (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, hereafter *BGE*, 419)

> There does not exist, nor will there ever exist, any treatise of mine dealing [with the subjects which I seriously study]. . . . Every serious man in dealing with really serious subjects carefully avoids writing. (Plato, *Epistle VII*, 341c–344c)

Plato and Nietzsche seem to share the view that there are dangers to writing philosophy. Yet both write, and in unique manners. Plato writes dialogues, and Nietzsche for the most part writes aphorisms. Though both insist that their own views cannot be discovered directly in their writings, they are each often accused of precisely the positions they seem to take great pains to avoid. While Plato is often read as a dogmatist, Nietzsche is seen as a nihilist. What characteristics of their writing allow them to be misread in this manner? In this paper I will explore some of the reasons for which Plato and Nietzsche share similar views on writing. The forms in which they write, which are governed by their philosophical positions, allow for the possibility of gross misreading. Yet if we pay attention to the uniqueness of the forms in which they write, and read them accordingly, we can see that the concerns of the two philosophers, far from being opposite, are actually quite similar.

I. Plato on Writing

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates tells Phaedrus a myth about the origin of writing. In his myth, the god Theuth approaches Thamus, king of the Egyptians, with several arts which he has invented. One of these arts is writing. Theuth praises writing, saying that it is a branch of learning which "provides a recipe for memory and wisdom" (274e). Thamus, however, disagrees. He claims that far from improving memory, writing will "implant forgetfulness in their souls" (275a). Those who use writing will no longer need to exercise their memory because they will be

able to rely on the marks on the page, rather than on themselves. Writing will not teach wisdom, but only the appearance of wisdom. One who reads much and can repeat what she has read may sound as if she has great wisdom, even if she really understands nothing of which she speaks.

According to Socrates, the myth implies that those who write and expect their writings to provide something reliable and permanent are simpleminded. Written words can do no more than remind "one who knows that which the writing is concerned with" (275d), but cannot teach. Socrates points out that there are two major disadvantages of the written word when contrasted to live discourse. First, written words is unable to answer questions or respond to objections. He states: "They seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing for ever" (275d). Second, the written word has no control over whom it addresses: "It doesn't know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong." When it does address the wrong people and is wrongly used or understood, "It always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself" (275e).

It seems a wonder that Plato wrote at all when we consider the things he had Socrates say about writing. Yet Plato does write. Is there any indication that Plato believes writing can be valuable despite Socrates' claims?

Socrates tells Phaedrus the myth about writing in the middle of their discussion of the possibility of good speechwriting. Socrates had already claimed that there is nothing shameful in the mere writing of speeches; it is in "speaking and writing shamefully and badly, instead of as one should, that is where the shame comes in" (258d). Following the myth, Socrates points out that there is a type of discourse which is of unquestioned legitimacy, which is written in the soul of the learner, which knows to whom it should speak and to whom it should say nothing. He is referring to living speech. He claims that those who have knowledge of what is just, honorable, and good see writing as merely an enjoyable pastime, while their more serious pursuit is to find the right types of persons. Having found such a person, one "plants and sows words founded on knowledge, words which can defend both themselves and him who planted them" (276e).

What sort of words are "founded on knowledge"? The only example Plato gives of one who seriously pursues philosophy is Socrates himself, and Socrates not only claims to have no knowledge,

but also insists that he does not teach anything.[1] At the same time, it seems clear that Plato sees Socrates as an example of a just, honorable, and good man.[2] How does Socrates "plant and sow words founded on knowledge"?

Socrates does not teach anything. While he has his interlocutors present ideas for scrutiny, and usually guides the discussion himself, rarely are any of these ideas definitely affirmed to be true. What Socrates does do is find those who think they understand matters of justice and virtue and show them that they are not wise (*Apology* 23b). By doing this, he is able to educate the soul. By revealing the need of others to pursue philosophy, by inquiring with them into matters of justice, he does not simply give them knowledge of empty words, but gives them living words; that is, he shows them how to engage in the same activity.

To "plant and sow words founded on knowledge" is, then, not merely to convey information, but to introduce the learner to the same sort of experience out of which knowledge grows. In this case, it is to introduce the person to philosophy by pointing out and inquiring into the learner's essential problem: ignorance of matters of justice.

The words must be able to defend themselves. This implies first that the teacher must be able to consider and respond to objections. Also, if such words are properly taught, the learner must be able to do more than simply recite them, he must understand them thoroughly enough to respond and to see their possible applications outside of the original context of the discussion in which they originated. It is fairly clear that the living Socrates and some of his living interlocutors could have satisfied these demands, but what of the written Socrates? Do Plato's written dialogues fall prey to the criticisms of writing which Socrates advances in the *Phaedrus*? Do Plato's writings constitute a serious philosophical endeavor or would he have considered them merely an enjoyable pastime?

If there were a kind of writing which did not give its readers a false sense of wisdom, which could not simply be recited, but which demanded that for its proper understanding the reader actually go through the same sort of experience out of which the writing arose, such writing might avoid the objections of Socrates. Such writing would need to be able to defend itself somehow. Such writing would need to address only the proper audience.

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[1]Cf. *Apology* 33b.

[2]Elsewhere I have argued that it is precisely Socrates' inquiries into the good, honorable and just in which he reveals to his interlocutors their ignorance of such matters which constitutes his virtue.

Several scholars have argued that with dialogue, Plato has found such a form of writing.[3] Socrates seems to believe that writing makes men forget, that it can tell men many things and teach them nothing—and Plato does not teach anything with his dialogues. The ideas that are presented for scrutiny are never definitely affirmed to be true. It is the very nature of dialogue that the ideas which are introduced by one party and scrutinized by the other are never complete, since another objection is always possible. Since nothing is taught in the dialogues, there is nothing for the readers to spout off as if it were their own wisdom, and there is nothing for readers to forget. Because Plato's dialogues present several interlocutors with various points of view, they do actually respond to several possible objections. Careful reading of a dialogue does not reveal some absolute doctrine, but does indicate some of the ways in which one can inquire into a problem.

In the *Seventh Epistle,* Plato writes that "there does not exist, nor will there ever exist, any treatise of mine dealing with [the subjects which I seriously study]" (341c). He does not wish to cast these subjects "as a prey to the envy and stupidity of the public" (344c). By writing dialogue, he attempts not to display the results of his inquiries directly, but to hold up an image of what we as readers would have to do in order that we too might begin to study these "serious subjects," that we too might engage in philosophy and concern ourselves with justice and virtue. He does not wish to set himself up as a wise teacher of virtue and establish a doctrine that those who have not gone through his own experiences might recite. Rather, he wishes to show Socrates, the lover engaged in his seduction of truth. He wants this image to conjure up wings in the souls of his readers, to show them the necessity and instill in them the desire to engage in philosophy also, so that they might become, like Socrates and Plato, lovers of wisdom.

Before we leave Plato's views on writing, it is important to deal with what seems to be an obvious case of misreading Plato: that of Nietzsche himself. While Nietzsche obviously admires both Socrates and

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[3]See Curran, Fisher, Griswold, Hyland, and Krentz. Although each hold different positions regarding the extent to which Plato, by writing dialogues, can escape the criticisms of writing he attributes to Socrates, all agree that the major reasons Plato did not write philosophical treatises are essentially those which Socrates presents in the *Phaedrus,* and which Plato himself presents in the *Seventh Epistle* (which is, paradoxically, a treatise of sorts).

Plato,[4] he often attacks both men vehemently for being responsible for what he considers the most dangerous error up to now—the "invention of the pure spirit and the good as such" (*BGE* 193). Yet if what we have said about Plato's writing is correct, that it does not teach a doctrine, but rather attempts to convince its readers to inquire into the important problems themselves, then neither Plato nor Socrates is directly responsible for the error to which Nietzsche refers. Rather, the error arises from a misreading of Plato, from the attempt to read doctrine where Plato offers only dialogue.

Several scholars have attempted to resolve the problem of Nietzsche's relation to Socrates (see Freydberk, Kaufmann, Kofman, Tejera, and Vincenzo). Victorino Tejera, in *Nietzsche and Greek Thought*, analyzes Nietzsche's attitude toward the Greeks in terms of his (Nietzsche's) views on the use of intellectual history which he sets forth in "On the Use and Abuse of History." He points out that while Nietzsche did have some insights regarding Socrates, he was unable to get an accurate portrait of Socrates because of his pedagogic environment. He did not see that Socrates' project was essentially similar to his own because he believed Socrates to be essentially what Nietzsche's contemporaries viewed him as—the avid proponent of (what was for Nietzsche) a decadent morality. Because he did not read Plato dialogically, he was not fully aware of the essential irony of Socrates' positive claims (about "pure spirit" and the "good-in-itself"). Tejera's reading of Nietzsche, however, does not take adequate account of Nietzsche's claims about history: Nietzsche wishes to present a critical history, that is, a history whose orientation towards the past is governed by the need to live towards the future. He does not deem important the task of discovering the actual "historical Socrates" so as to point the accusing finger at him, but he critiques the Socrates who has been handed down, the Socrates of the tradition, and shows the advantages and disadvantages of *this* Socrates for life.

While Nietzsche's fascination with Plato and Socrates may arise from his recognition that there is more to the Platonic dialogues than what the traditional readings had ascribed to them, his primary concern is not to discover the "real" Plato and Socrates, but to point to problems which

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[4]In "The Struggle between Science and Wisdom," Nietzsche writes, "Socrates is so close to me that I am almost continually fighting him" (as cited in Kofman 7). In the preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, he calls Plato "the most beautiful growth of antiquity" and asks whether Socrates is responsible for his errors.

have arisen out of the Platonic tradition. Yet what is it about Plato's writing which allows this type of misreading, misreading which his form of writing sought to prevent? I will deal with this question in the last section of this essay, where I will also examine a similar possibility in Nietzsche's writings.

II. Nietzsche on Writing

When Nietzsche expresses doubts about the possibility of a preface bringing its reader closer to the experiences of the book in his preface to *The Gay Science* (32), he seems to be concerned with the same problem that bothered Socrates about writing. Genuine philosophical knowledge demands that one *experience* its "truth" and not simply memorize it as a proposition. "Ultimately," claims Nietzsche, "nobody can get more out of things, including books, than he already knows" (*Ecce Homo,* hereafter *EH,* 717). So what is the value of writing for one who has not had the essential experience?

We have seen that for Plato, dialogues can serve as an introduction of sorts to the proper experience—that of practicing philosophy. Nietzsche also believes that the proper experience is necessary to understanding his insights. "What a philosopher is," he writes, "is hard to learn because it cannot be taught: one must 'know' it, from experience" (*BGE* 329). What sort of writing might allow initiation into the proper experience? Nietzsche, like Plato, believes that the style of writing is of the utmost importance to its educational value. In *Ecce Homo,* he writes: "To communicate a state, an inward tension of pathos, by means of signs . . . that is the meaning of every style . . . . *Good* is any style that really communicates an inward state" (721). With Nietzsche we cannot separate form from content—the content (the proper state) is determined by the form or style.

However, when writing, Nietzsche does not simply attempt to make his experiences understandable to anyone. In the *Gay Science* he writes:

> One does not only wish to be understood when one writes: one wishes just as surely *not* to be understood. It is not by any means necessarily an objection to a book when anyone finds it impossible to understand: perhaps that was part of the author's intention—he did not want to be understood by just "anybody." All the nobler spirits and tastes select their audience when they wish to communicate. (As cited in Risser 370)

Like Plato, Nietzsche recognizes that not everyone is prepared for his insights. In order to select the proper readers, Nietzsche writes in a way that prevents the simpleminded from understanding. Like Plato, who feared casting his words "as a prey to the envy and stupidity of the public" (344c), Nietzsche recognizes that some of his "highest insights must—and should—sound like follies and sometimes like crimes when they are heard without permission by those who are not predisposed and predestined for them" (*BGE* 232).

Because of the danger of having one's real insights misunderstood, claims Nietzsche, "whatever is profound loves masks" (*BGE* 240). Not only do the profound feel the need to conceal themselves with masks of sorts, they cannot help but do so, since the commonly shallow interpretations of their work offered by others mask their insights. In the face of such shallow interpretation, states Nietzsche, "one does well to grant them from the outset some leeway and romping place for misunderstanding" (*BGE* 230). Nietzsche believes it to be useful to allow, through one's manner of writing, for the possibility of a basically harmless misinterpretation. In her article "Nietzsche's View of Philosophical Style," Kathleen Higgins points out that for Nietzsche, the problem with univocal discourse, such as writing, for the communication of philosophy is that it employs universal terms yet attempts to communicate individual insights. Because words by their very nature are incapable of reflecting the uniqueness of the particular experience which their writer attempts to convey, they are in a certain sense inadequate. "Words and consciousness are," she writes, "therefore only superficially related to the mental life of the individual" (69). Nietzsche does not conclude from this, however, that writing is worthless. "For Nietzsche, the question is not whether one should speak [of one's unique experiences], but rather *how* one should speak of them" (71).

The mode of writing philosophy cannot, however, be absolutely defined for Nietzsche. As we have seen, a style is good which communicates to its reader the proper state. Nietzsche sheds light on what a proper form of discourse, capable of doing justice to individual human experience, might be like in *Human, All-Too-Human*:

> Private conversation is the perfect conversation, because everything that one person says receives its particular coloring, its tone, and its accompanying gestures *out of strict consideration for the other person* engaged in the conversation. . . . But how is it when there are two or three or even more persons conversing with one? Conversation then necessarily loses something of its individualising

> subtlety, different considerations thwart and neutralize each other. (As cited in Higgins 72)

The perfect form of communication must pay attention to individualizing subtleties. This view is similar to that which Plato has Socrates express in *Alcibiades I.* Alcibiades, who plans to counsel the Assembly at Athens, tells Socrates that he is afraid he will be unable to persuade him. Socrates tells him, however, to imagine that he were the people in the Assembly. Even there, he would have to persuade each man singly (137). In fact, it seems clear from Socrates' practice that he believed it necessary to persuade each man of his errors on his own terms. Yet how is such individualization possible in writing?

For Nietzsche, such individualization requires both the right kind of reader and the right kind of writer. He, Nietzsche, who is both "a decadent" and "a beginning" (*EH* 678), who has gone through a long period of sickness and suffering and is beginning to convalesce (cf. Preface to *The Gay Science*), is the perfect writer. The perfect reader must have "the most delicate fingers as well as the bravest fists" (*EH* 720). Nietzsche's writing does not allow the proper reader to become complacent. Nietzsche writes: "A single word from me drives all his bad instincts into a man's face" (720). In reading Nietzsche we read about ourselves. Our responses to Nietzsche's words—which are often intended to offend—tell us more about our own prejudices than about Nietzsche. While a philosophical treatise might seduce its reader into believing that knowledge of a problem is sufficient, Nietzsche's writing is concerned with self-knowledge—which demands action.

III. The Philosophical Task

Both Nietzsche and Plato are concerned, not with instruction or indoctrination, but with teaching their (proper) readers to live the life of the philosopher by seeking self-knowledge. In the *Phaedrus,* Socrates attempts to do this with the young Phaedrus by persuading him to be a lover of wisdom rather than simply a lover of words, while in *Thus Spake Zarathustra,* Nietzsche recounts a narrative of Zarathustra's attempts to find his children by teaching men the Overman and the eternal recurrence.

In the *Phaedrus,* Socrates indicates to Phaedrus ways in which rhetoric can be rehabilitated. He speaks of a true rhetoric which, unlike the rhetoric of Lysias that Phaedrus admires, demands more than skill at the art of persuasion, a rhetoric that demands that the rhetorician actually

grasp the truth of that about which she speaks. To grasp the truth, the soul of the true rhetorician must be in harmony; while it is guided by reason, it is impelled to seek the truth by an erotic desire.[5]

As Plato attempts to show how rhetoric might be redeemed from its fallen state, he also shows how the redemption of Phaedrus, the lover of rhetoric, can take place. In fact, since for Plato true philosophy cannot simply convey knowledge, but must involve education of the soul, to talk philosophically about the redemption of rhetoric and to redeem the rhetorician are essentially the same thing. Socrates uses his own rhetoric strategically in order to teach Phaedrus of his (Phaedrus's) need for redemption, his need to practice philosophy. Socrates does not simply tell Phaedrus that rhetoric is a waste of time, but shows him, by giving a false speech, that the lover of wisdom can deliver better speeches than the rhetorician. Socrates then proceeds to indicate to Phaedrus why this is so by recounting a myth of the soul and of its ability to recollect beauty.

In *Thus Spake Zarathustra,* we find Zarathustra making several attempts to teach men. In part I, he goes down to men in the market-place and preaches. In the process he gains disciples. He recognizes, however, that to the extent that his disciples see him as master, they will not be able to appropriate what he has taught as their own; that is, they will not become creators of new values, but will rely on the new values which he teaches, which will subsequently become old. In order to preclude this, he leaves them and tells them to reject him.

Throughout the rest of the dialogue, we see Zarathustra concerned with how to teach what he has to teach in such a way that it will be taken up properly by those who learn. In order to understand Zarathustra's teachings, we must be aware of his distress, and observe how this relates to what he says. Zarathustra, who proclaims the Overman and is the teacher of eternal recurrence (*Zarathustra* 332), fears deeply the necessity of teaching the eternal recurrence. He fears, it seems, the possibility of misunderstanding. Of Zarathustra, Martin Heidegger writes, "One who has not previously and does not constantly perceive

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[5]Compare the vivid image of the soul as a chariot in *Phaedrus* 246a–256e with Socrates' claim that "heaven sent madness" is superior to "man-made sanity" (244d). The true art of rhetoric involves both the madness of erotic desire and the careful scrutiny of dialectic. These allow the rhetorician to both "list the various natures among his prospective audiences" and "divide things into their kinds and embrace each individual thing under a single form" (273d–e).

the horror in all the discourses—seemingly arrogant and often ecstatically conducted as they are—will never know who Zarathustra is" (66).

Similarly, one who is not constantly aware of the ignorance that Socrates insists is essential to self-knowledge can easily be misled by Socrates' seemingly arrogant and flowery proclamations about love, the immortality of the soul and recollection—and will never discover who Socrates is. To understand Nietzsche's and Plato's work without attributing false positions to them, one must be capable of feeling the mood out of which their work was engendered.

Both Socrates and Zarathustra (and consequently Plato and Nietzsche) want to teach, not to indoctrinate, but to educate the souls of those whom they teach. Yet both see the impossibility of straightforward communication in teaching the way they would like. In order to avoid this, Plato writes dialogues and Nietzsche writes aphorisms (or, in the case of *Zarathustra,* an aphoristic narrative). According to Arthur Krentz, Plato's dialogues "appear designed to lead an interpreter to think through a philosophical issue for himself, rather than to provide him with an explicit account of Plato's doctrines" (34). Similarly, in aphorism 188 of *Human, All-Too-Human,* Nietzsche claims that modern thinkers write badly because they tell us not only their thoughts, but also the thinking of their thoughts. Referring to Goethe, but offering remarks which would apply equally well to his own writings, Nietzsche says that his writings do not solve problems, but rather point to trouble spots—which must then be analyzed by the reader.

Plato's and Nietzsche's very methods of writing also seem to allow for the possibility of uncareful readings. Because Plato's own beliefs are never explicitly given in the dialogues, often scholars attempt to recreate dogmatic systems and call them Platonic doctrines. Often such systems are problematic, such as the theory of the forms which, although generally held to be untenable, is nevertheless consistently attributed to Plato. Also, because Nietzsche writes aphoristically, his writings on any given subject are often disjointed and at times even contradictory. It is often difficult to make sense of what he really means. This difficulty sometimes leads to readings based on isolated texts that sometimes appear to indicate that Nietzsche's views are nihilistic. Neither of these characterizations is accurate, however. Both writers attempt by their very manner of writing to avoid the claim to any absolute positive (or negative) doctrine.

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