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The Rule of the Game

On the Difficulty of Learning philosophy

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POIËSIS
(or of game I)

A book never begins with the first line and never ends with the last one. If you had to begin with the first line, no one would be able to write (Where would you begin? Where would you find the strength?). A book always begins before it has begun or after it has finished, it is always ahead of itself or behind itself. It begins before it has started, without anyone —and least of all the person writing it— knowing it has started. Generally speaking, philosophy books all begin on the same day: the day after the death of Socrates. It is difficult to calculate the time between the death of Socrates and the writing of Plato's first dialogue, the place where philosophy was born, but when Plato makes Socrates the protagonist of that first written dialogue, it means that that book, the birthplace of philosophy, had already begun before it began to be written, when Socrates was still alive or had just died. Since then, there has been no answer to the debate whether or not writing distorts —and how much— that experience prior to it which constitutes its unnoticed point of beginning, the experience which can be identified as “the death of Socrates”.¹

¹ This particular book begins one evening when an ill wind was blowing. It was one of those winds which, in some towns, they use to explain what is wrong with certain of their inhabitants, saying that they were “left” like that *by a breeze*. I was far away from home, and in a gesture that I cannot recall without a certain feeling of perplexity, and a certain sense of the ridiculous — like someone who phones his own number knowing he will not get any reply — from time to time I would dial my home number to listen to the messages on the automatic answering machine, if there were any. That day there was one message, but repeated three or four times: it was a wrong number (a call for someone else), and you could hear a snippet of some background music almost all the time, in which Frank and Nancy Sinatra were singing *Something Stupid*. A few minutes before, I had heard on the radio about the death of a man, one of the best poets of our time. During his last days, the man had been writing a book. It was a book which he always carried around with him, which he knew would be his last, and of which only death would decide — as it did decide — which would be the last page, although the man always said that his book did not have a last page, and that not even his death would be able to finish it and turn it into a book. So it could be said that this book begins with the death of a man, even though that day I did not know I had started it. Just the same as people, books, when they begin, are, as they say

But a book always finishes before it is over, because if you had to end with the last line, no one would dare to write it, and the book would be infinite. A book always ends after it has finished, without anyone —and certainly not the person who is reading it— knowing it is over. So, too, do all philosophy books end on the same day: the day before the death of Aristotle (when he was perhaps already breathing his last). It is impossible to determine how much time passed exactly from that day to the first commentary where “philosophy” becomes a firmly fixed *corpus* of technical terminology, but it is certain that when this happens, wherever it happens and as long as it happens, philosophy books will no longer have readers and will only have guardians, guardians who keep up an interminable dispute over their custodial right over what they hold. Philosophy books, therefore, are extremely fragile: they begin before it has been even minimally decided what can be called “philosophy”, and they end a moment before everyone really knows the meaning of that word.

For a book only capable of beginning with the death of a man, and not of being a police novel or a ghost story, seems rather a cause for sadness. Writing often seems like that, because of the impression it gives that it betrays the very thing it wishes to express and that always, necessarily, precedes it. As if writing came late (in the evening, at the moment of sunset), when what is being attempted to be caught has already passed, as though it referred to an earlier time which it indicates, but which it can never be there to welcome. For philosophy books, this is not just any old observation, because since philosophy was born as a certain practice of writing —the type that occurs in Plato’s *Dialogues*— it seems perfectly inseparable from writing.

FIRST APORIA OF LEARNING, OR OF READING AND WRITING²

Love was such an easy game to play ...

rather cynically, “full of possibilities”. The day the first line is written down those possibilities begin to be restricted, and the day the last line is written, there are no longer any possibilities, the book cannot be any book other than the book it is, the book it “has been”. And so, just as people often talk about “the anguish of the blank page”, they could also talk about the anguish of the black page, of all the possible pages that have been thrown into the waste paper basket so that that particular page could be real. The night that came after that evening was very gloomy, as though all the possible *black pages* were piled up in the thickets of the landscape, beyond the circle of white light that came out of my balcony. As I could not know then that it was the forest of a book that was beginning, I saw in that *summa* of dark papers the remains of a book already written, the ashes of an earlier book. I did not even imagine that, in those cast aside pages of a finished book, I had begun another book.

² This book is a kind of “serial novel” —which, like everything written in instalments, contains frequent repetitions by way of recapitulation of what “has happened”— in which the topic of the subtitle, *the difficulty of learning*, is developed. By the way, I must start with the warning that it will be immediately necessary to set aside all prejudice. What has been read up to this point and what comes afterwards could lead one to think that, whether this is a book about “ancient philosophy”, or about “Greek philosophy”, or about “Plato and Aristotle”, although sooner or later it will become obvious that this is not the case, it is a good idea to admit right from the start that this claims to be quite simply a book “about philosophy”. Also, that the insistent mention of Plato and Aristotle is only due to the fact that their writings show the true story of what we might understand under that name and which it is our duty to make visible to all those who read and write today.

Regarding certain Platonic dialogues, it is often customary to say that they are *aporetic* (in other words, that they present a difficulty they are not able to overcome). But the really curious thing is that experts have been able to find one of them, here and there, that is not. This is because it is almost inevitable to notice the paradox represented by the fact that a dialogue, being basically the living, informal word, should be written down. A *written* dialogue —it could be said— is a false dialogue, a refutation of its very title. Some scholars have taken this suspicion to the point of supposing that what Plato holds in a “literary” format is the residue — both refined and degraded at the same time, and, in any case, already “culturalized” and wiped clean of its original strength —of what was once the living practice of knowledge among the Greeks. The Platonic text would be the real death sentence of this practice, the conversion of philosophy into “literature”. At the other extreme there are those who, in order to get away from the difficulty, say that for what they contain of dialogue, Plato’s *Dialogues* are a work of fiction (as are the dialogues that we might find today written in any novel). However, this is only a veneer external to Plato’s texts, a rhetorical artifice or poetic licence, while their “theoretical” content is affected by an indisputable pretension to the truth, and the reader interested in philosophy— and not in literature— must detach himself from literary fiction and concentrate on the theoretical speech. This second hypothesis, no doubt more calming, is, however, completely unsustainable. Firstly, because if it were a mere veneer with no relation to the content, the slowness and parsimony with which Plato sets out his arguments and identifies his characters would be somewhat implausible. Secondly, and above all, because Plato could never have proposed to “wrap up” theoretical philosophy in literary attire for the simple reason that, before he wrote, nothing existed that could fill the expression “theoretical philosophy” with precise meaning (or “philosophy” on its own, or, besides, anything that could be called “literature” in the sense that we give this term nowadays). Thirdly, in short, because any reader of Plato can experience for himself the absolute impossibility of separating the *form* of philosophical expression as set down in his *Dialogues*, from the real *content* of what is expressed there. So the first hypothesis appears to be the best, the idea that a degradation of archaic knowledge has occurred. The problem with this hypothesis is not the impossibility of justifying it— which would only be possible in the aforementioned sense that Plato could not turn philosophy into literature because, when he began writing, there was not yet anything unequivocally designable as “philosophy” and, when he finished writing, there was still nothing anything like “literature” in the modern sense of the expression— but rather the fact that, on the contrary, it is *too credible*. So much so that it is the same hypothesis that we often find in Plato’s texts themselves, the hypothesis of an ancient, tenacious wisdom that writing might have come to corrupt, causing it to be forgotten, and thus giving rise to the aforementioned suspicion that philosophy is based on the denial of its origins. Reading one of these Dialogues especially, *Phaedrus*, in which Plato expresses himself forcefully *against* writing and seems to declare it as guilty of the loss of collective memory in society, of the cultural heritage bequeathed by antiquity, some thinkers have come to take this speech as an indication that all philosophy is under suspicion, that its very claim to truth, as it is written down, works against itself and discredits it, in the same way that Penelope pulled apart every night all that she had woven during the day.

FROM THE IMPOSSIBLE ...

Hey, you've got to hide your love away

Is it possible to write against writing without falling into a glaringly obvious contradiction? The ancient Greeks —someone might say as an excuse— were fond of *aporia* and paradox, even of word games and enigmas. But if these Greeks we are referring to are Plato and Aristotle (and their sources), as they doubtless are, then it would be necessary to admit that their fondness is not for *aporiai* in general, but for *one* *aporia* which, for some reason, for them seems to constitute the model and focus of *all* intellectual difficulties,³ as well as the fundamental *motive* for doing what, because of them, we have come to refer to as *philosophy*. We could call this problem *the impossibility of learning*. Although formally (for example in the argument in which Meno presents it in the Platonic dialogue which bears his name) the impossibility in question is formulated without reference to any particular kind of learning,⁴ the vast majority of the contexts of its appearance (beginning with Meno himself) allows us to see clearly that the difficulty arises when it comes to explaining how it is possible to learn (and, therefore, to teach) *virtue*, whatever the meaning of this word may be (and surely this is serves to formulate a tautology for, in these contexts, “learning” as always learning virtue, or learning to do something *well*, which, always in these same contexts, is simply synonymous with “learning to do something”, which is what actually is summed up by saying just “learning”, for “learning” is not possible unless it is “learning to do *something*”).

And it is a question, naturally, of controversial contexts, in which Socrates questions precisely the competence of those who call themselves *masters of virtue* (in other words, those capable of teaching virtue), who are, quite by chance, the same ones who are specialized in *writing* speeches. Let it be noted, then, that the topic is convoluted: the same people who put themselves forward as able to teach, formulate the impossibility of learning. And, in order to complicate things even further, it seems as if Socrates, who we imagine to be diametrically opposed to the sophists, were allying himself with them and were

³ “The very mystery of origin, of beginning, shows through at the same time, with differences that must not hide the unity of their sources, in some lines by Pindar, a Classical *aporia* of sophistry and the Aristotelian distinction between act and potentiality. How to become what one is not? How to learn what is not known? The problem of the beginning first struck the Greeks in the shape of that astonishment at the most concrete of human experiences: that of growth, and more precisely of spiritual growth or *mathesis*. At the root of the problem of origin there is what we can call existential anguish when faced with a beginning. It is not a question of knowing how movement in general is possible, but of knowing whether, and how, I can move my body, move my little finger, go from Athens to Megara, catch up with and overtake the tortoise and, simply, start walking. How can I grow in knowledge, in practical ability, in virtue? Greek thought will never entirely escape from this difficulty, from this fundamental *aporia* of beginning, which stops movement, prohibits progress, immobilizes thought in interminably inchoative stagnation” (Aubenque, Pierre, *Le problème de l'être chez Aristote*, Paris, P.U.F., 1962, p. 445).

⁴ As is known, the argument would develop schematically as follows:

It is impossible to learn what is not known, precisely because *it is not known what is to be learnt*.

But it is equally impossible to learn what is known, since it is already known.

Therefore learning is totally impossible.

Expressed like this, it seems a not terribly brilliant play on words, but the constant work that Plato and Aristotle expend on it —if they actually do any other work— proves that, at least for them, it hides a dimension that is not only serious, but even tragic.

defending the impossibility of teaching, at least and above all —as we shall see— the impossibility of teaching philosophy. However, the aforesaid argument has no reflective character for the sophists: without the slightest sense of shame, they declare themselves *able to do the impossible* (in other words, to teach virtue) and, furthermore, do it in a short time for very little money. Socrates does not go so far; you might say that he takes the aporia more seriously than his competitors, seriously enough to try to get away from it.

In *Meno*, Socrates tries hard to overcome the sophistic argument —and, therefore, virtually to stand up to those who proclaim themselves “masters of virtue” —setting against this alleged “mastery” of the sophists nothing less than *memory*. As spokesman he takes a slave —that is, one who has no reason to know how to *write*— and he shows that in order to learn one does not have to come into contact with something completely unknown (because, in such a case, as the sophistic argument goes, learning would be impossible) neither does one have to be content with what is already known (for in this case, as the sophistic argument also goes, there would be no learning at all), but simply *remember* something which one already knew, but did not know that one knew. Teaching would be, in that case, helping others to make explicit some knowledge which they already possess implicitly. The “solution” to the impossibility lies in the fact that it is only possible to learn (explicitly) *because one already knew* (implicitly). There is no transition possible —for in the very idea of that transition lies the impossibility or the contradiction— from ignorance to knowledge, just as there is no transition from nothingness to being. So those who claim to be able to “teach virtue”, as though teaching were putting something into the soul which was not previously there (the unknown), are condemned to failure, because there is no step from nothingness (from knowing) to being (knowledgeable): virtue is known by *memory* or not known at all. Even more: those who state that they teach virtue by writing speeches, apart from failing and precisely because they fail, are deceiving those who hire their services. Socrates’ repeated obstinacy in declaring that there are no masters of virtue could be translated into contemporary terms more accurately by saying that there are no *experts* in virtue, that in certain things (like virtue or wisdom in general, whatever that may be) there can be no professionals or specialists (only amateurs, lovers of wisdom, *philo-sophoi*) and that, therefore, those who say they are cannot be anything other than frauds.

The negative side of the same argument, in which we can see the relationship with writing more clearly, is the one which appears in *Phaedrus*. There, the young man whose name the dialogue bears, accompanies Socrates on one of the rare excursions he makes beyond the city walls (230 c-d), and the relationship between the two of them, which is that of disciple and master, will appear in many parts of the text as an analogue of the relationship between the lover and his beloved. *Hidden under his cloak* (228 d), Phaedrus carries a text that contains the doctrine of a certain Lysias *regarding love*, which gives rise to the conversation. For Lysias’ speech to be carried by Phaedrus in *writing* is perfectly coherent with the fact that Lysias was a professional speechwriter, a *logographer*, one of those who also specialize in writing legal pleas and selling them to private individuals to be used in the courts of justice. Some years after this scene, Lysias would attempt to sell Socrates one of his speeches so that he could defend himself from those who wanted to have him tried in the courts in

Athens; Socrates would not accept the offer: to put it this way, he would consider —as he had always considered— that it was ridiculous and absurd for someone required by a court to speak the truth not to be able to tell the truth *by heart* and have to bear a written speech in order to respond to the accusations. For this reason, a written text seems shameful, like something that has to be carried hidden under a cloak, because it betrays a lamentable lack of memory of the truth.

As is the case with all the products of sophistry, Lysias' speech is a *practical* speech. It is not a (theoretical) treatise on love, but an *art of loving*, directed towards efficiency (to the winning of favours from the loved one on the part of the lover). Here, as can be seen from Phaedrus' reading, the author defends the idea that the one who pursues the favours of someone with whom he is not in love (or at least with whom he is not madly and passionately in love) is more fortunate in love (and holds on to his public reputation better). Immediately after reading this, Socrates hurries to emulate Lysias (with no need for written "reminders"), but he does it with his face covered so that his shame —the same shame that caused Phaedrus to carry his speech hidden under his cloak— will not cause him to be stricken dumb (237 a). Which tells us, already so early on, that the shameful thing is not the writing in itself, but rather a certain way of writing. And although this speech of Socrates' is apparently very similar (in its arguments) to the one Phaedrus has read, in it he demonstrates how shameful and unspeakable Lysias' art is (however much it is the implicit rule by means of which most free adult males are able to practice the game of love with the young men in the *polis*): what gives good results in the pursuit of the loved one is not not being in love, but *pretending* not to be in love (237 b), because the one who declares his love immediately becomes vulnerable to his beloved, as, indeed, anyone can understand. So, more than rivalling Lysias, Socrates has made the rules of a game explicit; rules which until then were totally implicit. And, as often happens, when what is implicit becomes explicit it takes on an untenable aspect. And consequently a moment may come when Socrates' *daimon* will prevent him from continuing with this comedy and will force him to uncover his face (243 b): he can no longer be in agreement with Lysias' game after he has laid it bare.

There is a film by Claude Goretta, *L'invitation*, which begins with a sequence in which we meet the different workers in an office, all at their workstations and more or less engrossed in their work. In this company they play a game with explicit rules (the mercantile activity performed by the office); but Goretta immediately makes it obvious that, apart from that explicit game, the workers and the boss play a game with implicit rules. This game is made up of love affairs, professional jealousy, unspoken or unspeakable emotions, ambitions, expectations and resentment, a more or less secret game (but because of that, sacred to the community made up of the players) whose existence is revealed by the film director using the procedure of introducing a *foreigner* among the locals. This person is a secretary new to the office, whose bewilderment and "clumsiness" bring to light (for her and for the spectator) that subtle, secret, underground game whose rules she gradually uncovers and learns *from the others*, whom time has forced to become masters in the implicit game. The decisive test which is to establish the foreigner as a native, that is to say, which will decide her inclusion in or exclusion from the game, is the invitation which

gives the film its title, an invitation which the boss always makes to his workers on his birthday, for them to go to his home to celebrate his birthday with his family. After the meal (and plenty of drink), they play charades: each worker has to portray a particular profession with mime, and the others (without explicit questions or answers being allowed) have to *guess what it is*. The game is played as usual (each worker mimes the same profession as he mimed at the previous year's birthday party, and the others hesitate, laugh, and in the end, they *guess* because they *remember*), until it is the new secretary's turn. Uninhibited because of overindulgence in alcohol, she begins to make provocative movements, swinging her hips and showing herself off in a very *suggestive* manner, to the perplexity of her boss and her other workmates, who, naturally, are unable to *guess* the job she is miming. Tired of giving more and more clues in her mime, the newcomer asks: "Can't you guess?" and they reply anxiously, "No!"; and so she gives the *explicit* answer (which means losing in this game), taking off her sweater and standing half-naked as she says, solving the enigma, "Stripper!" The next sequence in the film—which is the last—is once again a shot of the office with the workers, all in their places, more or less engrossed in their work, except for the new girl, whose place is empty and has been taken over by a substitute. This gives us the idea that these games with implicit rules are not necessarily so because the players do not know writing, but because the rules could not be written (as they are unspeakable), because if they were it is possible they might commit some crime *explicitly* classified by explicit laws or, in the best case, as often happens to implicit things that are made explicit, that they mean absolutely nothing. This is, of course, the effect that Socrates often seems to bring about on his listeners: that what they thought (implicitly) they were sure of, suddenly (when it is the object of explicit questioning) becomes nonsense.

But, when it is Socrates who uncovers himself, the example he gives to retract what he said is very illustrative: the poet Stesichorus was blinded because he spoke ill of Helen (for whom he had invented a poem). Unlike Homer, who did not know the reason for his blindness, Stesichorus discovered it—having spoken ill of Helen—and he composed a Palinode to take back his words, after which the gods gave him back his sight (243 a-b). In this way, Socrates indicates that what was in Lysias' speech and in his first presentation was, then, *slander*, speaking ill of love (and that caused both Lysias and Socrates to be hidden under the cloak, as blind as Stesichorus). Since we have heard so often that Plato considered as true only those things that "coincided" with whatever hyper-things located in a supra-celestial world, we believe that Socrates is saying that, when the poet Stesichorus speaks ill, it is because his words are not appropriate for a super-Helen, who would exist in that ideal cosmos; but listening more carefully, it turns out that Socrates does not say that. Of course the poet's words make Helen visible, but not because there might be a "visible Helen" prior to the poet's words, about whom the poet might have to copy his words (How would he do that? How to make a copy in words of a visible thing?). No, the poet sees nothing (Homer was blind), the poet *divines* (Tyresias the seer was also blind) and *remembers* (Homer had to have a prodigious memory to be able to recite the *Iliad*). He is not a sportsman competing in an archery contest, with the target standing clearly before him so that he can hit the bull's-eye with his skill. He is a hunter in the forest ("beyond the city limits") who has to guess where his prey is without being able to see it, and shoot his words and hit dead centre. The

visibility of what is said does not pre-exist as evidence of the poet's words. It is the words (when they are on target, when they "speak well") which make what is said visible, and they make it visible like something previous to his words—something remembered— just like the good hunter's arrow which makes the prey visible at the very moment it strikes (for everyone else it was invisible, but when it leaps into view in an attempt to avoid the arrow, everyone *witnesses* it, struck by the arrow, like something that was already there before the archer fired his arrow). A bad poet is one who cannot see or "make others see", not in the sense that he is blind (although there is some ill-will towards Homer, on Plato's part, who often accuses Homer of "not speaking exactly well"), not in the sense that he cannot see, but in the sense that he cannot *divine* (or guess the exact word that will make what he is talking about visible). Using the wrong word is to lose one's inner sight rather than one's physical sight, to lose the ability to guess, to miss the mark. The shame that makes Socrates hide his face (and which should force Lysias to go about incognito, hidden under his cloak) is the shame at not having spoken well (of love) and, therefore, not having been able to see it or make it visible to others.

The association cannot be clearer: he who does not *say something well* (what it is), cannot *see it*, and does not hit the mark or make clear what he is talking about, or *divine* it. This proves that, right from the start of this dialogue, what is under discussion are the ways of *expressing* love, precisely because that is where its being is, because he who expresses love well (love or anything else) says *what it is* (love or anything else), making it appear or be present, and he says it as if it were what it is even before anyone said it (like those who see the prey appear already struck by the hunter's arrow see it appear as if had been there before the hunter caught it). The "seeing" of the blind poet is "pre-seeing", like his words are "pre-words"; the poet does not say what he sees, but divines what he pre-says, just as the hunter divines the future (the future place where his arrow will hit the prey) when he shoots at a moving target. To do this he has to aim into the future, at the place where the prey is not *yet*, and where it will take exactly that tiny amount of time to reach as the arrow is moving from the bow, that tiny —and at the same time infinite— amount of space that separates Achilles from the tortoise. Speeches like that of Lysias are bad speeches, like the shots that do not strike the target are bad shots, failures of the *imagination*. To the question about how the blind poet can *divine* the being of things with his words, we can reply the same as to the question how, in general, the hunter can strike the prey he wishes to hunt: because he *remembers* (he remembers what it means to *be* a hunter). So failures of imagination are also failures of *memory*: they betray forgetfulness of what it means to be a hunter, that is to say, of the virtue that qualifies a hunter as such, a virtue that consists of nothing other than the practical exhibition of his ability to hunt, of his *knowledge* how to hunt or of his *being able* to hunt. Although, pursuant to the metaphor, we said a moment ago that the Sophist's speech —that is, the speech which is born of a lack of memory of what it is (love, hunting, or anything else)— pursues efficiency, now it becomes obvious that only a speech that possesses the truth (that is, the memory of the thing it speaks about, whether it be loving, hunting or any other thing) can achieve efficiency, even though this knowledge may only be held afterwards and when the knowledge in question is tested, that is to say, when an arrow is fired (or a word is said) and the target is hit or missed. But is writing the cause or necessary agent of failure, of forgetfulness, of blindness?

After telling the anecdote about the poet regaining his sight, Socrates applies himself to making love *visible* by means of his eulogy of precisely what Lysias hated: love as madness, as delirium, as possession, as passion, and to defending inspired *speech* as opposed to mere verbal technique:

But he who without the divine madness comes to the doors of the Muses, confident that he will be a good poet by art, meets with no success, and the poetry of the sane man vanishes into nothingness before that of inspired madmen.⁵

Being in love and speaking well of love are one and the same thing: just as it is not possible to learn without learning *something*, and it is not possible to learn something if that thing is not learned *well*, so too speaking (well) of love is not something an “individual” can do (whether he be a poet or not) by putting the words together in a more or less fortunate manner, but something (being said, being declared, being made visible) that love itself does with those whom it possesses, with no need for those possessed to declare it with their words. And for that very reason it seems that we have come up against a virtue that could not be learned (it is a question of possession, not of art) or taught (it does not seem to be “mathematical” in the etymological sense), which could be connected with “inspiration”, that is to say, to a kind of *game*, whose implicit rules cannot be made explicit in the same way as Socrates did with Lysias’ game. If the rules become explicit (that is, if one wishes to turn the art of loving into a collection of explicit rules which could be “instilled” in the mind of a disciple), the game is ruined: but not, as in the case of Lysias, because something became public that until then had the nature of a private secret shared only by those involved, but because what by its very nature cannot be made explicit without being degraded to the condition of a sophistic speech has been made explicit. However, and herein lies the difficulty, no one is born with the memory of what loving, or hunting, or anything else *is*, but everyone *has to learn it*.

Everything that is learned *by heart* is learned, in effect, *by contagion* (we learn to cook with a good cook, or to paint with a good painter, etc.), looking at ourselves in the Other (the cook, the painter) as if in a mirror. A good cook *teaches* us to cook (he shows us how to cook), he does not give us an instruction manual, he transmits the art. A good lover (“since the lover is not feigning, but is really in love”, 255 a) *teaches* us to love (shows us how to love), he does not give us an instruction booklet, he transmits love, he exhibits his love like a madman (instead of hiding it like a cunning hunter), that is to say, he *ensnares* us. When transmission takes place, then one knows how to love or cook (by heart), and now knows how much salt “a pinch” is, one knows what a “spoonful of sugar” means in practice or “stir carefully” (things which an instruction booklet cannot explain, having to limit itself to saying explicitly: *add 5cl of water* or *175g of ham, wait 15 minutes*, etc.), one knows it implicitly, by heart, without knowing that one does and without knowing that now one knows how to cook. In the same way a beloved really loves when the lover’s love is transmitted, not knowing that he loves and not knowing what it is he loves: *he neither knows what is happening to him nor can he express it*, writes Plato. He is mad with happiness because the dishes he cooks, suddenly, *come out well* (as if suddenly he had remembered something he never knew). Socrates compares him with the nymphs in the fountain of Zeus: he is *a maddened friend of love*,

⁵ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245 a-b.

an enthusiast, a disturbed person. It might seem that, once this “transmission” had been achieved, love would be fulfilled in the lover’s embrace of his beloved, in which those who were previously *two* would become *one*. However, Socrates doubly rejects this “solution”: *firstly*, while telling the myth of the winged horses, at the moment when the horse that is pulling madly at the reins in order to possess his beloved sees something that causes him to fall to his knees in terror and stop his headlong rush; *later*, when the beloved, once conquered by the lover, gives himself up to his desires and gives himself up unconditionally, and then, incomprehensibly, the lover rejects his embrace. What do these strange *halts* in movement mean? Are they not the dramatization of an insurmountable difficulty?

... TO THE REALLY DIFFICULT

[There’s] nothing you can say but you can learn how to play the game ...

The word of poets, as has been known since long ago, has a secret relationship with music and, through music, with arithmetic. Poetry is a precision art carried out with words weighed, measured, counted with rigorous accuracy, in such a way that the poem achieved is one that gives the impression that it could not be modified even in a single comma, or even in a blank space, without being totally destroyed. A poem, like an arithmetical formula, like an *aria*, is an exercise of supreme clarity, it is the best way in which something can be said, a perfect form, perfectly closed in upon itself. Therefore there is no sense in asking a poet for explanations about what such and such a poem means: he has already found the best way to say it, and any attempt at saying it in another manner would only lead to making it worse. When given requests for explanations, the only thing that can be said is what Rimbaud answered his distressed mother, when she asked him what he had meant in *A Season in Hell*: “Exactly and literally what it says.” Therefore, too, it is so difficult to translate poetry: as happens with theorems or melodies, a poem can only be translated by changing it into another poem, in the same way as a mathematical formula can be expressed by another formula or a piece of music by another (varying the tone, speed, timbre or the temporal distances between the notes). On one occasion, the philosopher Fichte complained about plagiarism; he said, then, that he had nothing against his ideas being copied, because they were not his, since ideas are part of the universal patrimony of humanity. What bothered him was that people copied his *manner* of expressing his ideas, which was the only thing that belonged to him. In the case of poetry, the manner of saying something is the heart of the matter, because it is a question of saying something which as soon as it is said is used up in its way of being said, which is nothing other than a way of saying something or something being said. For that reason, great poetry can only be plagiarised (repeated), but not imitated.

That is the reason, in short, for the difficulty of the poet’s profession, and once again the suspicion that it may be an unteachable art. No notes can be made at all, one cannot try hard to say this or that, one can do nothing but wait. In silence. Wait for that onrush of spirit in which a moment in the world becomes

word, just as one waits for a child to become a man or for some fruit to ripen. It is not possible to accelerate the process however much hurry one may be in for that word, and with the constant fear that the whole thing may turn out badly, but with a much greater dose of luck, because here one never knows beforehand what to expect, because it is necessary to learn, as old Heraclitus of Ephesus suggested, to expect the unexpected. When the unexpected arrives, one must be nevertheless implacable; again: like an arithmetical formula, like a precision mechanism, like a figure which, even though it is a product of the wind, once drawn it is then immutable, necessary and invariable as the equations of relativity or the *Goldberg Variations*. Then, it can only be repeated, with no explanations being asked. The poet has been left blinded by that implacable vision, and the poem is expressed without the poet (or the reader, when the formula takes effect on him) being able then to retrace his steps to the instant before the moment that perfect form materialised, to the state of the world before the poem. And so, each poem must be like a corridor down which the poet runs into the depths of that blindness; a blindness, like that of seers, pregnant with words.

And all the poems I have written
come back to me at night.
They reveal
their darkest secrets to me.
They lead me
down slow corridors
of slow shadow towards what dark kingdom
unknown to all.
And when I can no longer
go back, they give me the key to the enigma
in the unanswered question itself
that makes the light come alive in my blind pupils.⁶

You have to be crazy —possessed by the *imagination*— to shoot blindly, but you have to be inspired by the gods – in other words, you have to have *memory*— to do it and strike true (or well: you have to be crazy to take the risk and say the first word, but you have to be inspired by the gods for that word to strike true). How can something like that be learned? The fact is that we possess knowledge of this kind: we know how to walk by putting one foot after the other, as we know when it is time to laugh and when it is not time to laugh, to cry or to cheer someone up, when to speak and when to be silent, what to say in each situation and with which words. We cannot give explanations as to why we know those things (like the poet, according to Socrates, *does not know what he says*), as we cannot explain why we walk by placing one foot after the other, or why we know when it is time or not to laugh or cry, etc. (although it is evident that we were not born knowing how to walk or any of those other things, and that we have had to learn them). How could you explain that to someone who does not know something like that – something that has to do with “taste”, with “touch”, with “sensitivity”? These things seem natural to us because we do not remember having learned any doctrine on which they are based (we learned how to dress

⁶ “Y todos los poemas que he escrito/ vuelven a mí nocturnos. Me revelan/ sus más turbios secretos. Me conducen/ por lentos corredores/ de lenta sombra hacia qué reino oscuro/ por nadie conocido./ Y cuando ya no puedo/ volver, me dan la clave del enigma/ en la pregunta misma sin respuesta/ que hace nacer la luz de mis pupilas ciegas” (J.A. Valente, *Fragmentos de un libro futuro*, Barcelona, Galaxia Gutenberg/Círculo de Lectores, 2001).

ourselves when we were learning how to get dressed, we learned to speak at the same time as we were learning what it is that has to be said in each situation, we learned how to walk when we were learning to walk, etc.), even though they may be techniques. To express this condition, Socrates talks, for example in the *Sophist*, about a *divine* technique which is distinguished from human technique, that is to say, a certain way of things *being* or *being made*, about a certain frame or framework beyond which it is impossible to pass because, if one gets past it, those things do not exist (love is no longer love). It is a technique that no human technique can imitate or feign without becoming (like Stesichorus) ridiculous and speaking ill, without losing (like Lysias) one's memory and the power to divine. The wise poets, "custodians of that technique" (masters of speaking well, of saying what "sounds right" to us, what "makes us see"), are not theoretical (a poem is not a theory), but they are examples (a poem is a paradigm) of all that cannot be feigned; when one tries to pretend, we say these are "lifeless" imitations, or imitations that lack spirit, like bad poems.

So it would be easy to add: *that which cannot be written about* (a little like the way people often repeat that "there's no accounting for people's tastes"), it cannot be written what each one of us is, written instructions cannot be provided for one "to be who one is" or "what one is", for there is no need (as Socrates does not need the speech written by Lysias to remember the truth that he has to tell before the court): one is and that is that. The same happens with love. It does not come from birth, but it is *divined* through inspiration. As it is divined where the prey is going to appear before it appears there, as a good dancer divines what the next movement of his partner will be *and is already there* ("Why did you make that move?" "I don't know, I just *knew* I had to make it, don't ask me how"). No, the poet, the artisan, the lover, the dancer, *do not know what they are doing or what they are saying*, but they do know how to do it and say it perfectly (which is prodigious, and can only be understood as being due to madness and inspiration or divine technique). If someone wants to learn to dance, he has to place himself in the hands of an exemplary dancer, you cannot learn with a *written* booklet of instructions or, as we might say today, a *correspondence* course. You learn to dance by dancing ... with a good dancer.

"Written booklets of instructions about how to behave when you are in love": this is what most *arts of loving* are. Those of the Greeks and ours too. (*Are you a good lover? Are you losing your partner? How to get your partner back. How to live with a hypochondriac. How to win the philosophy professor of your dreams. How to learn to seduce a girl. What is the first thing to do when someone comes up to you in a disco? Do you want to use Internet dating? ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT INTERNET DATING*, and so many more titles that fill the shelves about the "art of loving", even though they do not call it by that name these days). This, of course, according to Socrates, is a shameful thing which one should bear if possible *under one's cloak* (it would be inappropriate if you opened your briefcase and people saw a self-help manual about "how to win your partner back", or "how to fight frigidity", or "instructions for your first date", or "how to combat premature ejaculation"). Yes, these are things to be embarrassed about, things which authors and readers should write, say and read *with their faces covered*, like Socrates in his first speech in *Phaedrus*.

The words of Thamus at the end of the dialogue are unequivocal: writing, far from preserving memory, corrupts it and encourages forgetfulness. But these words – and the criticism of writing they form – only seem contradictory (that is, it only seems contradictory for someone to write against writing) if they are not put in the context of the beginning of the dialogue and with its antecedents (that is to say, with the difficulty of learning virtue and the possibility of teaching people to love). What Socrates wishes to *remind* Phaedrus of at the *end*, quoting Thamus' diatribe against writing, is the same thing he thought he had *divined* when, at the *beginning*, he criticised Lysias' writing on the art of loving. This is, namely, that he who does not know *by heart* – *by memory*— what virtue is, will not be able to learn it from any text written by any *logographer*. Virtue is only learned by practising it, by being virtuous. Knowledge about virtue which does not consist of being virtuous by oneself is not knowledge worthy of being called knowledge, just as he who does not love *by memory* (by heart) will not learn to love however much he reads what Lysias wrote.

However, this is not all that Socrates says (he does not limit himself to criticising the sophists or bad poets): he also has to explain why his speeches— which he repeatedly refers to as “ridiculous”— have become credible (how can someone credit those who state that they can do the impossible?) and, therefore, dangerous. Socrates *condemns* those who sell instruction manuals because, instead of dispensing medicines for the memory, what they do is to market a poison which makes us lose our memory even more (because we hope to get by without need of it, as if someone wanted to learn to love from a book); without that *ancient wisdom* there is nothing to be done. But – and this is the point about which Plato seems to have spoken so well that he has seduced and deceived his historians – it is not a matter, then, of an “earlier time” (earlier than writing, than the city), but of something even older, something which stands before all that we can remember, like having learned to walk with shoes on, or to speak any language, or to smile the way we smile, or to raise our eyebrows the way we raise them. It is the memory of what it means to be what we are, writers, readers, blacksmiths, singers or poets. So, when Socrates says that *we have lost our memory*, that the “ancient time” when *everyone knew what it meant to be* (to be a blacksmith, singer, poet, weaver, student, etc.) is no longer our time (because we live in the city, and not in the “outside” where wise men and poets lived), he is not giving clues to researchers to carry out archaeological digs in the oral culture of ancient Greece or expressing his nostalgia for the golden age of his ancestors. Rather, he is referring back to a past time whose loss is linked to birth, to the very fact of having been born or, in other words, being mortal, having to learn.

So, in Plato's criticism of writing, it is not a question of any past time whose loss needs to be lamented, nor for that matter is it in Plato's reminiscence a matter of remembering an earlier life of the soul in other bodies, nor is it in his appeals to virtue a question of being faithful to a pre-existing model that should be copied. The memory that we lost when we were born is nothing more —nor less— than the memory of what we are. The idea that no one learns except what he already knew (just as Meno's slave, having been “taught” geometry by Socrates, will only learn *after* what he already knew *before*) allows an escape from the sophist impossibility only to present a difficulty which is no less

surprising: that one may remember something one has never perceived or can hold the memory of a past time that is no “earlier time”. With regard to memory, the immediate temptation —at least for a modern reader— is to *compare*: if what there is *now* (what is remembered now) coincides with what there was *before* (with what was experienced before), then the memory is true and trustworthy. The whole question moves, then, towards the *before*: one would have to go to that *unknown past* in order to contrast what is *remembered now* with what was *experienced then* and thus one would be able to make a pronouncement regarding the quality of the memory. *But that is precisely what cannot be done*. It cannot be done, to begin with, for a general reason: what is past, precisely because it is past, only exists as something remembered or recalled, it is not possible —it is not credible⁷— “to travel” into the past because the past *no longer is*, it is definitively lost or it is irreversibly past. There is no going back, and, besides, memory is not going back, but only something that always takes place (like everything else) in the present. But, above all, the comparison cannot be made in this case for a particular reason that we have just indicated: the fact is that the *before* that Socrates’ use of memory refers to is not the time of an experience gone through previously, but, strictly speaking, something that has *never* been experienced (since the beginning of life is already, irreversibly, the beginning of forgetfulness of that *before*) and, therefore, something that is not even in time, if by “being-in-time” we mean standing in one of those instants that occur one after the other, forming a series of dates on the calendar. If we had a “time machine”, like the one imagined by H. G. Wells and then so exploited by science fiction, one of those machines that allow us to go back minute by minute, second by second, until any *date* (that is, until any instant) that we may choose in the chronological series, it still would not be possible to reach that past time required by Plato. Impossible to corroborate and absent from time, is it a question perhaps of a fantasy even more fantastic than the most incredible fiction? What sense is there in invoking something that is, because of its very concept, beyond all reach?

Stated in this way, one might come to think that this is “a Plato problem”, one vexed by Plato’s disproportionate imagination and his well-known custom of getting away from the world of the flesh and heading for the astral peaks of eternity. However, it is not Plato who has a problem, but we ourselves, when we have to explain, as the question occurs in the first part of *Phaedrus*, what it is to love someone. Here is where the *aporia of learning* shines, or what Aubenque called a few pages back “the mystery of origin”. Any answer provided for the question “When did I begin to love?” in terms of some assignable moment in the time series (“On 27th October, 1993 at 19:46”, for example) will necessarily be, as the “teachings” of the sophists are according to Socrates, absolutely ridiculous. And, on the other hand, the only way to avoid being ridiculous would be to say something similar to what lovers often say, namely that they did not begin to love each other on the day they declared their love, but that they had already begun to love each other before, even before they realised that they loved each other, without it being possible to locate that beginning in a series of temporal moments (and something similar happens, obviously, with beginning to talk, or write, or with learning). The *turn* the situation takes when love is declared possesses the lover in such a complete and perfect way that he can no longer

⁷Regarding this clarification see below, the seventh *aporia* of learning, or of telling stories.

conceive of himself *before* he loved the one he loves, and for that reason he tends to express this impossibility by saying that his love is “eternal” (*I’ve always loved you and I always will*, etc.), in spite of the fact that quite clearly he knows he has had to “learn” at some point. In the same way, someone who breaks into speech in a language cannot conceive of himself when he did not know how to speak it. It seems to him that it has been his language *all his life*, even though he has no doubt that there was a time when he did not yet know how to speak any language and that he had to spend his time learning one. What in those expressions is called more or less correctly “eternity”, “always”, or something similar, is not an order situated in time (an earlier historic time), nor is it beyond time either, in a mythical before (although the mythical before may serve him in a privileged manner as an image). More simply, it is an experience of time that does not allow itself to be thought of as a series of instants, of hours or of dates in the calendar, and on which is, moreover, the time of all the things that matter, such as virtue, learning or loving. And it is the memory *of that time* that Socrates invokes when he speaks of “reminiscence”, which would be needed to answer his questions and which the manner of writing of the sophists prevents and devastates. This allows us, at least, to have an idea of the gigantic size of the difficulty that learning philosophy implies.

Writing *always* presents this problem: why is it necessary to learn to read and write a language that *we already know how to speak*? Is that not exactly the equivalent of learning something what we already knew? And having to learn (to write and read) what we know (to speak and hear), is that not a way of rejecting (or at least standing apart from) what we already knew, of being able to see what we know, in the same way as the maddened horse in Plato’s myth suddenly halts before the object of his desires or as the lover rejects the embrace of the beloved? What we have forgotten – better: that of which we *are* the forgetfulness – is not lost or wiped off the map, but remains tucked away oblivion itself, latent in that oblivion which we are, which all our behaviour is. Having forgotten what we are is, for us mortals, an essential condition of our way of existence. *We do not know how we do it* (we have forgotten the place, the day and the manner that we learned it), *but we do it*. That is why, when Socrates asks us what “to love” means, when he invites us to say *what it is* which, veiled by forgetfulness, continues to direct our steps, we are left as perplexed and silent as the dancer who is asked what dancing consists of, and no less than the schoolboy who suddenly has to learn the spelling and grammar of the language he already uses competently. One could not learn to read and write if one did not first know how to speak, but 1) only when we learn to read and write do we realise that we already knew how to speak, even though we do not remember ever having learned to do so in any school, and 2) only then do we realise what we still need in order to know how to speak (in other words, in order to know also how to read and write) well. Writing does not “translate” (and neither, therefore, can it betray) a preceding spoken language, but rather, to put it like that, it *completes* it, perfects or finishes it.

So then, sounds agree with the afflictions of the soul, and writing agrees with sounds (Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, 16 a).⁸

⁸ In accordance with the reasons of Franco Lo Piparo (*Aristotele e il linguaggio. Cosa fa di una lingua una lingua*, Rome/Bari, Laterza, 2003), we do not translate *symbola* by “symbols”, as has been usual in modern editions, in order not to contaminate Aristotle’s intentions (in whose

What Thamus criticises at the end of *Phaedrus* is not so much writing as a certain manner of writing which leads to the impossibility of reading, or in other words, of understanding what has been written. And it is that very thing that Socrates criticises at the beginning of the dialogue about Lysias' speech: the impossibility of understanding from it what love *is*, the impossibility of *reading* love in that text. "Speaking or writing well" is something that only those who *understand* (about) what they are speaking or writing can do, who know what they are talking about. And once again, this "understanding" does not mean contemplating mystically some hyper-things located beyond Olympus, but having a *memory* of what is being written about, knowing what is being spoken about. This is a *writing lesson* which modern historians have had to learn from Plato, urgently and against time, under the celebrated and ambiguous title of *hermeneutics*: for texts —for example, the documents preserved in the archives — do not guarantee any meaning unless they are *read*, and this (reading with understanding) is only possible if one *remembers* the meaning of what one is to read, thus producing the aforementioned difficulty —parallel to the one that you can only learn what you already know— that one can *remember* something that one has not experienced and does not yet know, and will only know later, when one has understood the text to its end. But not because it is difficult does it stop being a fact that it is only possible for a text to have meaning for the person who reads it if the reader provides it with a meaning that it does not yet have, which it will only have *later* (just as a loan is given on credit in expectation of later receiving compensation with interest), and that such an act of anticipation (without which there would be no meaning at all in texts), it would not be crazy to call prediction (which is another name that Plato uses for that ancient wisdom that existed before writing began). And only by means of a kind of miracle — therein lies the difficulty — can it happen that the meaning that we have put forward for the text we are reading may end up being, *later*, the meaning it already had *before*, when it seemed to us that it had none, sunk in the terrible silence of what is written down which Socrates evokes so harshly (*forgetfulness is what letters will produce in the souls of those who learn them*). For that reason, in *Phaedrus*, Plato also makes a defence of prediction, invoking the intimate relationship between *mania* and *mantica*. Falling in love with an unknown person is only possible because that person is not entirely unknown, because we *remember* them even though we may not know when or where from (we met them in our dreams), and only because of that pre-knowing, which seems completely unlikely, can the miracle occur, one no less incredible for the fact that the choice of beloved, maddened and fortuitous, may turn out to be an act of prediction of the twin soul, that is to say, it may turn out well or be a love that is returned. For the same reason, a good text about love is one which permits us at the same time to *divine* and *remember* what love *is*: we divine it because we remember it (no one could recognize love in a text, however well it were written, if he had no memory of what love *is*), and we remember it because we divine it (only because what is written tells us what love *is* can we

language "symbol" denotes an agreement between two "complementary" aspects of the same thing or two dimensions of a single reality) with the contemporary meaning of what is "symbolic", where what symbolizes and what is symbolized maintain different kinds of relationships. The choice of "agreement" indicates, therefore, that writing "complements" spoken language (and vice versa), but does not "symbolize" it or "represent" it in the modern sense.

realise that we had already felt it before, without knowing that we were feeling it, for divination operates by means of *pre-feelings*).

So, one learns to love, as one learns to sing or to dance, as all the games whose rules are implicit are learned, that is to say, by practising them until we know them *by heart*. And as he does not set out with a list of written, explicit instructions, the learner has to *divine* the rules in practice, in the practice of the Other. The lover has to concentrate on the beloved even in his most minute movements, he has to *learn his beloved by heart*, because that person —the beloved, the Other— is the rule and is the one who provides the rule, without the lover being left with the least ability to question it. The good lover predicts the desires of his beloved before they are even named and remembers his beloved's tastes without them ever having been explained to him. In the same way as the good dancer foretells the movements of his partner, divines his steps, remembers his habits and gets there first, and *knows* (implicitly) when he has to move quickly and when he has to wait, knowing intuitively *before* what will come *after* without his partner having to *say* anything (explicitly) and without him being able to *explain* why he knows, how he can divine or how he can remember, since he has never *asked*. This impossibility of explanation is what the myths and allegories rife in Plato's literature point out, and, therefore, they should never be taken as explanations. The slave who has learned geometry without knowing how he did it (in other words, by practising it) can only understand something so surprising by invoking a *previousness* (he already knew it beforehand, even though he did not know that he knew), a previousness which, figuratively, is presented in the dialogue as an (unlikely) "earlier life of the soul in an earlier time". But, in its own sense (likely), the *before* that the previousness refers to *is not* — and hence the persistence of the aporia — *no preceding time*, not even something that might be "before time" or outside of it (something like eternity, or like some supposed intellectual models situated in the "world of Ideas", or like some alleged archetypes of the unconscious collective mind, images which are just so many more myths and allegories, but not explanations), even though neither is it exactly "in time" nor, therefore, can it be susceptible to any kind of memory in the ordinary meaning of the term. The *idea* of love — the one we divine in the beloved or the one that makes us remember love in an inspired text, in the sense that in both cases we can *get an idea* of what love is — must be *before*, so that we may divine it or remember it, but its previousness is the previousness of the Other— of that Other that is the rule and who is always before us, as the lover is before him for the beloved and as Socrates is before Plato. In order to learn and to love, therefore, we have to take the Other as a master and submit ourselves unconditionally to his authority. This, and not some inclination towards "literature" on the part of Plato, is what explains the irreplaceable character of the Other and the need for the form of *dialogue*.

Without that capacity for memory and anticipation it would not be possible to speak or write or listen or read, since we can only understand a sentence — spoken or written— because we *anticipate* its conclusion when we listen to its beginning, and because as we hear its end we still *remember* its beginning. And Socrates calls that capacity *inspiration* when he points out the superiority of inspired poets, of delirious seers or of lovers in love over the pathetic imitators who attempt to substitute with "human" art (*téchne*) what does not emerge from

their soul, putting up for sale what cannot be the object of commerce or founding schools of something for which there are no masters. The aporia of writing is also not overcome, then, but it is moved in the sense that we remembered more at the beginning, going from being impossible to being difficult. Writing that claims to “start from zero”, writing or reading as though there were no *before*, as though there were no Other, as though there were no implicit rule but one could be invented explicitly and out of nothingness, without a memory of *what is being written about* (and which necessarily precedes it), the writing of those who claim to write about virtue without remembering what virtue was, or about love without any idea of what kind of thing love is, which claims to be *only* writing and desires to *invent* love or virtue, disdaining that shell or frame outside of which things are no longer what they are and we are no longer who we are, is necessarily unintelligible and useless, as well as impossible and ridiculous, like those silent letters that so offend Thamus or like the *logographies* that Socrates disdains. Writing that has no *before*, which does not write about something that precedes it, also has no *after* (it cannot be read and understood). Because that writing that claims to start from zero (teaching people to love who do not remember or divine what love is, giving instructions to someone for falling in love) wants the impossible (precisely the thing whose impossibility is shown by the sophists in their games): to play a game whose rules are all explicit. And no one can begin to read or write, to speak or listen, unless they start out from an implicit meaning, remembered or divined, known intuitively or in reminiscence, however unlikely it may be (like the tale of the lovers who met in their dreams), because otherwise—if one had to explain the meaning of each word one says, or if the lovers had to agree on a marriage arrangement before falling in love—no one would ever be able to understand what the other said, or he himself, or read what the other or he himself wrote, since the explanation of the meaning of a word is always another word whose meaning one has to explain (and that, definitively, is what the first *aporia of learning* consists of), and so on ad infinitum. Because the infinite is that: what never gets to start.

Above all, it is necessary not to mix up Socrates’ supposed “complaints” against writing with the speech which, later, has been repeated over and over again whenever a certain technical apparatus has made its appearance in history: the Gutenberg press, photography, the cinema or the computer; that speech that opposes “mechanical” things to “spiritual” things and which led Baudelaire to denigrate the camera and Bergson to vilify cinematography. As Walter Benjamin famously noted, in that disdain of “mechanical”, “easy” things (and in support of “spiritual”, “difficult” things) often lies a supposedly aristocratic disdain of the masses (and not in vain are photography and the cinema mass arts, as are also the newspapers and printed books as opposed to the elitism of manuscripts) on the part of those who attempt to use “fine arts” techniques as signs of social distinction.⁹ For example, when Baudelaire expressed his complaints against

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu expressed it in baldest terms: “The network of oppositions between high (...) and low (...), spiritual and material, fine (...) and coarse (...) is the matrix of all the commonplaces which find such ready acceptance because behind them lies the whole social order. The network has its ultimate source in the opposition between the “elite” of the dominant and the “mass” of the dominated. These mythic roots only have to be allowed to take their course in order to generate, at will, one or another of the tirelessly repeated themes of the eternal sociodicy, such as apocalyptic denunciations of all forms of “levelling”, “trivialization” or

the camera, he did so using the magic word that has always served to denigrate the “mechanical arts” as opposed to the “spiritual arts”: *reproduction*; photography would limit itself to “reproducing” nature and, in accordance with the most firmly-established principles of beauty, the spirit (and what it adds to nature) is the only source of beauty, for things, once deprived of that gaze that elevates them and gives them more spirituality which they lack because of their origin, cannot be objects of art. Something similar has often been said about writing. It is curious how little neither —photography nor writing— has rebelled against that status as a minor art, with merely reproductive intention (and not productive or creative), how well they have submitted to that name-tag and how agreeably they have adapted to their inferiority. Or, rather, it would be curious if we did not understand that it is from that alleged “lack of prestige” that they take, in reality, all their prestige. If photography has no artistic pretensions at all, if it claims to add nothing to nature and not to contaminate the spirit of what is portrayed, if its ambition is not to produce but only to reproduce, then it can pass for a representation of reality, *completely faithful*, identical to reality itself and, therefore, virtually non-representative (but, at most, being an extension or approximation). Plato’s admonition regarding writing was made to combat that “illusion of reproduction”: those who believe that writing something is a way of preserving their spirit or memory in order to be able to reproduce it at will do not know what they are saying: “He who thinks, then, that he has left behind him any art in writing, and he who receives it in the belief that anything in writing will be clear and certain, would be an utterly simple person (...). [The creatures of writing] stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence (...) if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing” (275 c-e). Very often this statement by Plato has been interpreted as “dismissive” of writing, when actually it is a description of what encourages it most: what is written says nothing and remains in silence, but it does not manifest a defect or lack because of that, since it simply exhibits itself as a faithful guarantee of its own truth.¹⁰ This is what Plato warned about when he tried to “disillusion” his contemporaries: that writing does not *imitate* what is real and neither does it attempt to *reproduce it*, but rather it aspires —and herein lies its amazing and terrible nature— to *substitute it*. The silence of letters, to which Socrates alludes time and again in *Phaedrus*, is no doubt linked to the silence of real things: real things do not say anything, they simply *are*

“massification” which identify the decline of societies with the decadence of bourgeois houses, i.e., a fall into the homogeneous, the undifferentiated, and betray an obsessive fear of number, of undifferentiated hordes indifferent to difference and constantly threatening to submerge the private spaces of bourgeois exclusiveness” (*Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 468).

¹⁰ In the dominion of the word, for a long time writing has monopolised the register of trustworthiness (as is proved by the fact that, even today, agreements between private persons have to be raised to the level of written *deeds* to attain a legal rank), and that is for reasons that go back to the obvious links sealed between Writing and Faith (both with capital letters), but which continue with the idea of *document* which underlies *historiographic* methodology—writing is sufficient, on its own, to define the underlying parts which separate taxatively the “historic” from the “pre-historic” or “primitive”— and, virtually, all the social or human sciences, not to mention the fact that the *signature* (which cannot be anything but written) or an inscription “hand-written” are sufficient to authenticate a document as an original and, therefore, as irrefutably valid as *proof*, wherever people are attempting to issue a true sentence (a ver-dict): writing ended up being decisive for any words to be true, as though, mysteriously, the written word were valid as a justification of its own truth.

there, with the solidity and obstinacy of facts, and in the same way, writing presents itself, to the point that the bundle of texts that hold the details of a court case is often referred to as “the facts”. Photography is, on a visual level, the same as writing is on a word level. What, in effect, does a photo say when it is not I who have taken it and do not recognise the scene or the figures, when I can tell nothing about it? We have, whichever way you look at it, the feeling that it does not *say* anything, because we have the feeling that it simply reproduces what is real, with nothing added (while saying is always adding something: a predicate to a subject, to start with). But —and this is the question— that impression of reproductive faithfulness is not based on prior knowledge of the bare reality which, when we compare it to the photograph, is the result of their total coincidence, but on the fact that our own perception of reality is photographic perception, that it is photographs that make our visual reality “real”, and therein lies their hold over our gaze: we do not observe photos as “representations” of reality, but as that very reality, and that is why we find them so similar to it. What is photographed is, on the vast majority of occasions, already a photograph, something which had become a photograph before it was exposed to the camera lens. Like letters, photos are not content to reflect a reality, but attempt to supplant it.¹¹ “It is written” is an expression that is often used to designate a kind of infallibility which can only be compared with what seems to accompany someone who has a photo of what is under dispute. Having something in writing, like having something photographed, is the equivalent of having *proof* of it. There lies the naivety and “lack of inspiration” of that kind of writing-fraud which, instead of making something visible, prevents it from being seen.

And all this would seem to mean —just like Socrates’ stubborn habit of showing those who say they are wise or masters of virtue that in fact *they do not know what it is* that they are talking about— that philosophy (as a writing genre) would be precisely that “inspired writing”, endowed with excellent memory, psychic and, therefore, wise. But we note that the aporia has not been resolved, only displaced, as we realise that Socrates —who, precisely, *does not write*— rejects again and again the title of wise man and, when he is not being controversial with *logographers* or sophists, but talking positively with those he loves and with the common aim of *learning*, again and again he frustrates the possibility of achieving that wisdom which, from what can be seen, can be *loved* but not *possessed*, and he does it precisely lamenting that he (he himself, not his adversaries in the agora, in the gymnasium or in the law courts) has also lost his memory and his ability to divine, as if that wisdom that no one better than he has been able to make us feel intuitively were, for himself (and, therefore, more rightly, for us, who come later), something that it is only possible to miss. There are so many dialogues in which Socrates undercuts the aspirations of his listeners (and of Plato’s readers) when they think they are about to achieve —to take in and learn— that wisdom!¹² There are so many dialogues that seem really ruined!¹³

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze, whose writings are frequently enlivened by Platonic inspiration, wrote that photography, even instant photography, has a completely different aim than to represent, illustrate or recount: “it claims to *reign over vision*” (Deleuze, G, *Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation*, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 8).

¹² See F. Martínez Marzoa, *Ser y diálogo*, Madrid, Istmo, 1996.

¹³ Socrates did not write, in effect, but Plato did. Socrates is before Plato (it is he whom Plato writes about), but we have only found out later (because Plato wrote about him) who Socrates

was. We can guess (because we do not really know) who Socrates was only because Plato remembers. And perhaps we remember who Plato was because Socrates already divined him when he was still alive and could converse with him. Philosophy, as a writing genre, does not set out from zero (although in a certain way it has its origins in the tragic *zero* of the death of Socrates) but always from *one*, one there was before, according to what we found out later (for which reason that *one*, for us, will always be *another*). Herein lies another difficulty for philosophy becoming *first*, as it is said both Plato and Aristotle wished: that it always comes after, in second place, when the wise men who preserved the memory of virtue are already history, when all that was left of the inspired poets was ashes, i.e. poems. The philosopher is no longer that *one* who, like Pythagoras, preserved memory through all seasons, generations and corruptions or could, like Thales of Miletus, predict eclipses; and although he may act as a gadfly to those who pretend to be wise and write contrived speeches, he is not more capable than they of wisdom or inspiration. So, should we lament that the Athenians condemned Socrates by confusing him with a sophist? Was that – the identification between philosophy and sophism – not the most widespread concept among Socrates' contemporaries, as seems to be suggested in a short conversation between Crito and an anonymous speaker at the end of *Euthydemos* ("Well, what did they show forth to you? Merely the sort of stuff, he said, that you may hear such people babbling about at any time – making an inconsequent ado about matters of no consequence (...). The fact is, Crito (...) the business itself and the people who follow it are worthless and ridiculous" [304 e – 305 a].)? Does it not happen that philosophy has serious problems in aspiring to be, not the *first* but even *one* – and not only because it is *many*, as we are insistently reminded every time it is repeated that there is not one philosophy by many philosophies, but first and foremost because it is not even one, because it is *none* or, as the person talking to Crito said, it is *inconsequential*? If there are no masters of virtue, and philosophers are not either, why are the teachings of the sophists ridiculous and those of the Academy or the Lyceum not? Would it not be that inconsequentiality which prevented Socrates from *writing*?