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Painting, Writing and Voice: The Phaedrus *between Levinas and Derrida*

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Abstract

The relationship between orality and writing, especially with respect to their ability to express otherness, was one of the most debated topics in the colloquium between Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. To address it, both philosophers could not but independently confront the Platonic *Phaedrus*, the text that founds this problem within Western philosophical tradition. Both authors' exegeses focus on the connection determined by Socrates with a third expressive language, the artistic-figurative one, and on the relationship that written speech establishes with its author's signifying intentionality. Nevertheless, their interpretative outcomes are very distant from each other: this essay aims to keep track of this hermeneutical distance in order to (1) evaluate the dialogue that they autonomously developed with the *Phaedrus* and (2) let emerge the reason why Levinas' and Derrida's thoughts, despite being so kindred, choose two antithetical paths when dealing with this fundamental issue.

Keywords

Levinas, Derrida, Plato, Orality, Writing

1. *Levinas and Derrida on Written and Oral Speech: A Brief Synopsis*

The dialogue between Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida was one of the most animated and fruitful in contemporary French philosophy. Among the contexts where the two directly debated, Derrida's essay *Violence and Metaphysics* plays a central role. Here, Derrida condemns Levinas' attempt to describe a fully transcendent horizon as illusory and deficient: to begin with, in Derrida's eyes, a profound incompatibility would arise between a face that is always present as an "οὐσία" (Derrida 2001, p. 125) and the claim that it would be able to breach the horizon of the phenomenon.[2] Such a shortcoming appears even more evidently if one considers that Levinas, as he reiterates on several occasions, thinks of a face that chooses oral speech as its eminent manifestation while giving

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[2] The impact of this Derrida's critique on Levinas is particularly discussed by Étienne Feron (Feron 1992, p. 52) and Ernst Wolff (Wolff 2007, pp. 225-227).

writing a secondary status (Derrida 2001, pp. 126-127). In other terms, despite the alleged intention to overcome the ontological domination of Western philosophy, Levinas would fully fall into this tradition, and would do so first and foremost by adhering to the *phonocentrism* of the West: after all, even Levinas downgrades written speech to a merely auxiliary function, reducing it to a simple "translator of a full speech that is fully *present* (present to itself, to its signified, to the other, the very condition of the theme of presence in general)" (Derrida 1976, p. 8, slightly modified).

Very significantly, while debating on this topic, the two thinkers cannot but autonomously deal with Plato's *Phaedrus*, a text in which the relationship between orality and writing is thematised for the first time in the Western philosophical tradition. This Platonic dialogue is crucial in Derrida's *Plato's Pharmacy*, originally published in 1968 and then incorporated in *The Dissemination* (Derrida 1981, pp. 61-171), but it also has great relevance in the less-known *L'écrit et l'oral* (Levinas 2009, pp. 203-230), a speech delivered by Levinas in 1952 at the Collège philosophique. Moreover, while discussing Levinas' preference for orality over writing, Derrida explicitly mentions the *Phaedrus* (Derrida 2001, pp. 126-127), wondering whether writing would not have fit better into a pure Levinasian metaphysical horizon. This is particularly true – Derrida adds – if one considers the philosophical emphasis that Levinas gives to the notion of 'trace', so much so that it was borrowed by Derrida himself, as he confirms in *Différance* (Derrida 1982, p. 21).[3]

Nevertheless, the two authors' interpretations of this ancient text maintain a considerable distance: analysing such a dissimilarity will allow, in the first place, to identify the relationship that each of them establishes with this Platonic text; but even more importantly, it will highlight the reasons why two thoughts that are so similar in so many ways end up taking two distinct directions at this fundamental crossroads.

2. *Ut Pictura*

In the dialogue named after him, Phaedrus is told by Socrates

[3] Here, Derrida recognises that his "the thought of *différance* implies the entire critique of ontology undertaken by Levinas. And the concept of trace like that of *différance* thereby organizes […] the network which reassembles and traverses our 'era' as the limitation of the ontology of presence" (*ibid.*). In Levinas, the trace is the way through which the Face signifies the absolute Absent dimension whence it comes, shattering the phenomenical order without ever appearing (see Levinas 1967, p. 199).

a well-known Egyptian myth (*Phdr.* 274c-275b):[4] on the banks of the Nile, the ancient god Theuth, inventor of writing, decided to gift this technique to Thamus, ruler of Egypt, promising that it would make its inhabitants wiser and reinvigorate their memory; in response, the king rejected the offer of the god, arguing that writing would rather lead to opposite effects, tricking citizens with an illusory wisdom.

One of the conceptual issues addressed by both Derrida and Levinas concerns the parallel that, shortly after this tale, Plato establishes between γραφή and a third expressive dimension, which goes beyond the binomial orality-writing: painting. Socrates tells Phaedrus:

> Yes, because there's something odd (δεινόν) about writing, Phaedrus, which makes it exactly like painting (ζωγραφίᾳ). The offspring of painting stand there as if alive, but if you ask them a question they maintain an aloof silence. It's the same with written words: you might think they were speaking as if they had some intelligence, but if you want an explanation of any of the things they're saying and you ask them about it, they just go on and on for ever giving the same single piece of information (*Phdr.* 275d).

The first crucial aspect in Plato's argumentation refers to the irredeemable fixity which painted figures and written discourse allegedly share. Such a parallel is not exclusively Platonic[5] and these images are largely employed in the debate between oral and written speech, which gained primary importance over the 5th and the 4th centuries B.C., after the gradual spread of writing in Greek society.[6] Nevertheless, Platonic argumentative and lexical choices reveal a peculiar poignancy: the comparison between writing and painting is in fact indicated through the term ζωγραφία, which, as Bruno Centrone (Plato 1998b, p. 170) and Marie-Pierre Noël (Noël 2010, p. 96) remark, is made up of the noun ζῷον, indicating both the living being and the painted figure, and the root *γραφ- which, in its realisation in the noun γραφή, expresses the gesture of tracing a sign of any kind, either alphabetical or pictorial.

This parallel strongly suggests the idea that both painting and writing, despite trying to transfer living vividness to graphic strokes, always fail to capture it. In this Platonic passage, such a comparison is articulated through the juxtaposition between the irredeemable

[4] From now on, Robin Waterfield's translation will be used (Plato 2002).

[5] For a complete overview of these *loci*, see Noël 2010, pp. 91-107 and Palumbo 2008, p. 212.

[6] The most evident example is the resemblance with Alcidamas' oration *On the Authors of Written Speeches or on the Sophists*. On the relation between Plato and Alcidamas, see Avezzù 1982, O'Sullivan 1992, pp. 42-62, Piazza 2020.

silence of paintings and the inability of written texts to answer additional questions: while, for pictorial art, this rigidity manifests itself as a solemn mutism, written texts would do so by repeating the same words over and over again. To put it shortly, both writing and painting are constitutively unfit to lend themselves to an authentically dialogical situation.

The Platonic argumentation is taken up in a rather punctual manner by Levinas, who, in the aforementioned conference *L'écrit et l'oral*, evokes Plato's *Phaedrus* on several occasions (Levinas 2009, pp. 204, 213, 214, 215). In particular, he mentions the same passage quoted above and observes that "Plato compares writing to painting, which seems to be able to respond but does not" (Levinas 2009, p. 209, my transl.).[7] Such an insufficiency – he continues – is made even more obnoxious by the fact that not only does writing fail to answer the questions that it is asked – just like art – but it does not even raise any new ones, abandoning itself "to a silent rapture" (Levinas 2009, p. 210). Exactly like Plato, Levinas approximates art and writing by equalising the silence of art with the inability of written speech to reply: art and writing "speak as to themselves" (*ibid*.) without ever showing a willingness to communicate with whoever challenges them; they do not respond, and thus withdraw from that responsive dimension of language that, in Levinas' view, would constitute the essential horizon for an asymmetrical relationship with an authentic Other.

The mutism of art and its similarity with writing[8] had already been addressed by Levinas in two other previous works, namely *Reality and its Shadow* (1948) and *The Transcendence of Words* (1949), both originally published in *Les temps moderne*s (see Levinas 1987a and Levinas 1987b). A strong Platonic echo permeates both texts. In this first one, the notion of 'meanwhile' or *entretemps* is presented (Levinas 1987a, p. 137): an artist – he says – can only give his or her creations a "lifeless life […], a caricature of life" to be lived in an "instant [that] endures infinitely" where they eternally wait in a "congealed position" (Levinas 1987a, p. 138). Such immobilism does not exclusively concern figurative arts, but involves also music and literature, even though their structure and motifs give an illusory impression of fluidity. The philosopher particularly dwells on the case of literature, maybe the most paradoxical one: in novels characters remain, so to speak, 'imprisoned' within an only fictitious existence, stuck in the infinite repetition of themselves.

[7] From now on, the translation of Levinas' *L'écrit et l'oral* (Levinas 2009) are to be intended as mine.

[8] On Levinas' aesthetics and theory of art see Cohen-Levinas 2010.

The majority of books describe grotesque existences between two petrified moments chosen as a beginning and end, and their characters show a tendency towards fixity no different from the rigidity presented by any sculpture or picture. In this way, they end up being actually "shut up" (Levinas 1987a, p. 139).

In the second essay, Levinas analogously argues that, *just like art*, writing crystallises the living word, depriving it of the vitality that it has in its oral dimension: in written speeches, "words are disfigured or frozen" and "language is transformed into documents and vestiges" (Levinas 1987b, p. 148). He more directly alludes to the profound tie of writing with figurative arts when he states that, in texts, "word […] is an image and already a picturesque sign" (*ibid*.). On the contrary, oral speech – alive, mutable, and never really retractable – can express the Other in its whole otherness and makes it impossible for the Same to maintain its own isolation and its undisputed subjective power.

The core of Plato's thesis – the muteness and the rigidity of art as analogous to the irresponsiveness of a written speech that is always repeating itself – seems thus to be shared almost entirely by Levinas. In a certain way, though, he adds a twist to it: writing incompatibility with a true dialogical situation also reveals its unresponsive nature or, better to say, its *irresponsibility*. Thus, through this sort of conceptual leap – from considering it as unsuitable for an authentic dialogical moment to deeming it unable to establish an authentic face-to-face relationship – Levinas translates Plato's position into ethical terms:[9] ultimately, art and writing are irresponsive and therefore irresponsible, given that, as Étienne Feron brilliantly points out, every answer due to the Other entails "at the same time responding to and responding of" (Feron 1992, p. 83, my transl.).[10]

Needless to say, this intersection of themes receives ample attention in *Plato's Pharmacy*, too. Indeed, the Egyptian tale of the *Phaedrus* is the speculative core of Derridean commentary on Plato, for it represents the context *par excellence* where Western tradition disqualifies writing and reduces it to a mere reproduction of the more authentic oral speech. The French philosopher takes up the Platonic adage by commenting that the gloomy silence shared by pictures and writing arises from the insufficiency that they both show when questioned "before the tribunal of λόγος" (Derrida 1981, p. 136). Actually – he adds – the insufficiency of writing

[9] As Wolff remarks, there is profound continuity between the linguistic and the ethical dimension in Levinas' thought (Wolff 2007, p. 228).

[10] The connection between the act of answering and responsibility is underlined also by Derrida in his *Adieu* (Derrida 1999, p. 5)

is even more blameful: in fact, while the silence of painting and sculpture is "normal", the trickery of writing is all the subtler because it imitates what is supposed to break the silence by definition, namely the oral word (Derrida 1981, p. 137). As reiterated several times, the creeping silence of writing expresses itself in the form of repetition. Derrida writes:

> Writing would be pure repetition, dead repetition that might always be repeating nothing, or be unable to *spontaneously* repeat itself, which also means unable to repeat anything *but* itself: a hollow, cast-off repetition. This pure repetition, this "bad" reissue, would thus be tautological. Written λόγοι "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 forever (ἕν τι σημαίνει μόνον ταὐτὸν ἀεί)" (275d). Pure repetition, absolute self-repetition, repetition of a self which is already reference and repetition, repetition of the signifier, repetition which is null or annulling, repetition of death – it's all one. Writing is not the living repetition of the living (Derrida 1981, pp. 135-136).

As already remarked by Levinas, writing incapacity to answer condemns it to perpetually repeat itself, without any chance to grow or develop. In Derrida's analysis, however, these notions – tautology, repetition, iterability – allude to a very specific hermeneutical and semantical field, employed by the philosopher in many other works.[11] As he clearly states in *Signature Event Context* (Derrida 1982, p. 315), the fact that writing cannot but always repeat itself represents its deepest structure.[12] Nonetheless, from a phonocentric point of view, this acts as evidence of the weakness of writing: by repeating itself, it only reaffirms its in-authentic and subsidiary nature, for it can just showcase the repetition of the "supplement" in the heteronomy of its *standing-for*. In Derrida's eyes, Plato condemns this kind of repetition because it creates doubles and non-original reflections which, freed from their model, can multiply, deploy confusing games of references, scatter, deteriorate and, in short, produce *différance*. In this vicious circle, writing ultimately proves to be mimetic and phantasmatic.

To further explain his position, Derrida resumes the comparison with painting. After likening writing to ζωγραφία – he remarks – Plato defines it by using another term belonging to the semantic

[11] The idea of repetition is especially thematised in *The Post Card. From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (Derrida 1987), particularly in the light of Freudian psychoanalysis (see Dooley 2006, pp. 67-106). On this, see also Bearn 2000, Daylight 2012 and Possati 2013, pp. 55-67.

[12] As is well known, the notion of iterability represented the core of the 1972 debate between Derrida and David Searle, initially stimulated by Searle' *Reiterating Differences. A Reply to Derrida* (Searle 1977, p. 198-208). For a reconstruction of this debate see Moati 2007.

field of image, εἴδωλον (*Phdr*. 276a): written discourse is defined as a mere *image* of the one produced through voice. In another well-known Platonic passage from the *Cratylus* (*Crat*. 432b-c), Socrates makes an interesting point on the status of images: an image must under no circumstances reproduce all the characteristics possessed by that of which it is an image; otherwise, two identical entities will be produced, and neither of the two would be more image than the other. Rather, an image indicates its model while keeping a certain distance from it: to use Patrizia Laspia's words, "an image […] represents the original, but does so through a series of deformations that define an image as such" (Laspia 2011, p. 113, my transl.). On the basis of similar considerations, Derrida can conclude that what painting and writing really have in common is precisely their mimetic status: they resemble each other because they resemble their model.[13] What they really share is "resemblance itself" (Derrida 1981, p. 137) or, better to say, their dissimilar resemblance.

As an image, written discourse is *necessarily* deforming and transforming and, every time it is repeated, it also repeats its deformation[14] and its transformation. Writing "is *doubled* as soon as it appears, as soon as it presents itself" and its repetition is "the very movement of non-truth: the presence of what is gets lost" (Derrida 1981, p. 168). To put it bluntly, iterability causes immediate alteration[15] and, paradoxically, tautology results in alterity.

At this point, Derrida feels the need to introduce a last paradoxical element of clarification: in a subtle interplay of contrasts, the philosopher notes that repetition, despite producing alteration, is also essential to ground identity, holding the key to both deformation and ideal affirmation, *at the same time*. Somehow, by repeating the identical in its stability, the movement of iterability establishes and affirms the ideal: "the εἶδος is that which can be repeated as the same, being the same", in its steadiness and preserving recursion (*ibid*., slightly adapted). The very ideality of the εἶδος coincides "with the possibility to be repeated as such" (*ibid*.): it is only through repetition that ideality can assert itself and subsume the particulars in its archetypal grip. Accordingly, in order to respect this mirroring of opposites, the first movement of repetition is played out by writing, whereas the second

[13] This comparison appears also in *The Double Session* (Derrida 1981, pp. 188): "But painting and writing can only be images of each other to the extent that they are both interpreted as images, reproductions, representations or repetitions of something alive." On this, see Neel 1988, p. 162.

[14] See also Botter 2015, pp. 20-22.

[15] In *Signature Event Context* (Derrida 1982, p. 315), the philosopher explicitly links the possibility of repetition to the idea of alteration via the etymological reconstruction of the term 'iterability', linked to 'itara', the Sanskrit word for 'other'. On this, see Bearn 2000, p. 450.

is exclusively guaranteed by voice: in this case, repetition is "repetition of life" and tautology "is life only going out of itself to come home to itself. Keeping close to itself through [...] φωνή" (*ibid.*). One year earlier, Derrida had already highlighted that idealisation is precisely the movement by which sensitive exteriority, represented here by a voice which auto-affects the speaking subject, submits itself to his or her "power of *repetition*" (Derrida 1976, p. 166, my emphasis): in this extreme proximity to conscience, the oral word can be pronounced again and again without changing its meaning – "speech and conscience of speech" (*ibid.*) which collapse into the claim of pure ideality and absolute dominion over the (in)variability of meaning. This is why, to come back to the 1968 work, in its last pages (Derrida 1981, pp. 169-171), Derrida imagines a troubled Plato who, after closing his pharmacy, tries to distinguish and distill the two repetitions in his φάρμακον, the deadly from the life-giving one, without ever succeeding. Nevertheless, it should be asked if this is a correct portrayal of Plato's intention.

Back in the section where Derrida comments on it (Derrida 1981, p. 136), he appropriately mentions two other contexts – *Ep*. VII. 342a-344d and *Prot*. 328e-329a – where Plato directs similar criticism to writing. In the latter, Socrates compares a certain type of orators to books: just like books, those who allegedly possess great eloquence cannot reply when prompted to better explain their thesis. On closer inspection, the situation described generates a curious game of cross-references: here, it is the oral speech that happens to be, in a certain sense, the reproduction of a written one, which, as explained, is a reproduction of vocal discourse in its turn. It is legitimate to infer, then, that the plain and simple restoration of written discourse to orality is not enough and does not provide, for Plato, a way to redeem it. On the contrary, it seems that even those oral speeches that present analogous repetitiveness and rigidity receive the same anathema as writing. Moreover, in the very same passage from *Protagoras*, Socrates complains that, as soon as they have the opportunity, some orators resume their long monologues without ever giving the floor to others or letting them speak. This description partially contrasts with Derrida's hypothesis: as a matter of fact, in this case, the pacified soliloquy of the speaker who understands his word in the purity of self-affection does not constitute a model to pursue at all, but represents the very reason why Plato attacks rigidity and inflexibility in writing and rhetoric.[16]

That is why, on the one hand, it could be legitimate to state

[16] On Plato's disapproval towards the rigidity of rhetoricians, poets, and legislators' (oral) speeches see Cerri, pp. 102-103.

that Derrida thinks of an excessively dogmatic and too little aporetic Plato: as Franco Trabattoni observes, in a certain sense, λόγος is, *par excellence*, that which opens up to reformulation and, "by its intrinsic nature, refers its judgment (precisely in the sense of Derridean referral)" (Trabattoni 2004, p. 555, my transl.). In some cases, Plato criticises written texts – or any other communicative form that imitates it – precisely because they are irreformable or, to use Giovanni Cerri's fitting expression, "structured" (Cerri 1991, pp. 93-117). To a certain extent, then, Derrida neglects the properly destructuring and *deconstructive* value of the Socratic διαλέγεσθαι, portraying Plato merely as the philosopher who "gags his ears […] the better to hear-himself-speak" (Derrida 1981, p. 170), while overlooking that he is also the one who attacks rhetoricians and sophists for withdrawing from dialogue.[17]

On the other hand, one should not risk anachronistically attributing a sort of modern hermeneutical relativism to Plato:[18] indeed, as Ernst Heitsch suggests, the only antidote to this fixity consists in a "nachholen" ("resuming") which implies the possibility of "dasselbe anders sagen" ("saying the same thing otherwise", Heitsch 1987, p. 39, my transl.): the resumption (or repetition?) granted by oral speech implies the *oral* possibility of repeating the same otherwise, formulating the same theses differently or adding further arguments to support one's position.[19] To quote Trabattoni again, Plato's knowledge "cannot manifest itself except through the experience of responding, and therefore it cannot be thematised; but it is also true that, behind it, there must be the metempirical truth that governs it and determines the ability to respond" (Trabattoni 1993 p. 99, my transl.). To put it simply, oral discourse allows us to say the same thing differently,[20] whereas, precisely because of their inflexibility, written texts run the risk of suggesting something different by using the very same words. In some conditions, it is this last repetition that Plato would like to avoid, as it will be soon highlighted.

The analysis of the double interpretation of the Platonic com-

[17] While discussing Derridas' notions of phonocentrism, Walter Ong stresses a similar point, with a particular focus on poetry. In Plato, the relationship between orality and writing is more nuanced than in Derrida's reconstruction: Plato did criticise writing in the *Phaedrus*, but "in his *Republic*, he [also] proscribed poets […] because they stood for the old oral, mnemonic world of imitation" (Ong 2002, pp. 163-164). This point was first made by Havelock: the "poetical and oral state of mind" of Greek audience is "for Plato the arch-enemy", for it hinders the autonomous and dialectic analyses of philosophical rationalism (Havelock, pp. 46-47).

[18] On this, see Trabattoni 1993, pp. 95-99.

[19] The same thesis can be found in Heitsch 1988, p. 222.

[20] See also Szlezák's position (Szlezák 1985, p. 11).

parison with painting given by Levinas and Derrida has been fully examined. As it has been shown, on the one hand, Levinas seems to fully accept Plato's criticism towards the fixity of writing and its inability to manifest the living presence of the Other. On the other, Derrida only focuses on Plato's rejection of second-degree devices of signification, reducing his position to the simple pursuit of a metaphysical reign of pure meanings; by doing so, however, he neglects the potential that oral dialogue has – even in Plato – to enter into contact with an authentic otherness, even when in a conflictual way.

Nevertheless, the profound implications of Platonic discourse and the transformative power of the repetitiveness of writing seem to elude Levinas. This exegetical short-sightedness also manifests itself when, in the aforementioned *L'écrit et l'oral*, he adds that the repetitiveness of written speech could only be redeemed by "deciphering" (Levinas 2009, p. 209) the text or, to put it differently, by interpreting it. The final section will discuss why this correction is not applicable from a Platonic perspective.

3. *In the Name of the Father*

The debate between Levinas and Derrida extensively dwells on the relationship between the text and its author. Again, the confrontation with the *Phaedrus* will serve as a fundamental acid test. In the following lines of the dialogue, a further problem is addressed, that refers to the consequences deriving from the material nature of written speeches: texts have the chance to spread, circulate, and survive to their context of production. Written discourses can be separated from their author, or, to use the exact expression of the dialogue, from their *father* (see *Phdr.* 257b). It might be useful to read Plato's own words:

> Once any account has been written down, you will find it all over the place, hobnobbing with completely inappropriate people no less than with those who understand it, and completely failing to know who it should and shouldn't talk to. And faced with rudeness and unfair abuse it always needs its father to come to its assistance, since it is incapable of defending or helping itself (*Phdr.* 275d-e).

When it circulates, a text cannot choose whom to address and is likely to fall into the hands of those who cannot understand it. Abandoned in a dimension of complete exteriority, written discourse constantly runs the risk of being attacked for no reason and, ultimately, misunderstood. Only the author, its father, its

source and principle, is able to defend it, in a way that presupposes his presence.

Derrida dedicates an in-depth analysis to the figure of the father in his *Plato's Pharmacy*: by "questioning the metaphors" of the dialogue (Derrida 1981, p. 78, slightly modified), he points out that the *Phaedrus* manifests a recurring pattern in Western tradition, which consists in assigning "the origin and power of speech, precisely of λόγος, to the paternal position" (Derrida 1981, p. 76). The peculiarity of writing consists precisely in the relationship that it maintains with its father's *absence*. This relationship – Derrida adds – has a covertly ambiguous nature: for sure, the author's absence represents a weak spot for the written discourse, which causes, in Derrida's words, the "orphan" to be pitied (Derrida 1981, p. 77). As Vincenzo Costa points out, signs and written speeches become bearers of an "extreme danger" that lies precisely in the risk of miscommunication, misinterpretation, and, ultimately, "in the oblivion of the original author's intention […], which the sign was only supposed to transmit, without any alteration" (Costa 2010, p. 162, my transl.).

Nevertheless, writing can continue to exist *precisely* because of this lack and because of its independence from its author: according to Derrida, then, while pitying writing as an orphan, "one also makes an accusation against him […] for claiming to do away with the father" (Derrida 1981, p. 77) and finally committing a proper "patricide"(Derrida 1981, pp. 145-146). The autonomy of written speech primarily results in its freedom from the *vouloir-dire* of the author. The main characteristic of a sign – Derrida adds in *Signature Event Context* (Derrida 1982, p. 317) – is possessing a "force of breaking" with respect to its original horizon, which includes, above all, "the intention, the meaning which at a given moment would animate his [i.e., the author's] inscription". Writing is such – and that is its original sin in Plato's eyes – precisely because it can outlast its own context of production and remain readable even if the author's original intention fades away.

It remains to be asked whether this is the case for Levinas as well. In *L'écrit e l'oral* this issue is explicitly addressed by quoting the very passage from the *Phaedrus* mentioned before: "Plato ultimately established the essence – and the weakness – of writing with an emblematic formula: 'discourse that cannot help itself'" (Levinas 2009, p. 201). A few lines afterwards, the philosopher resumes the same words, adding that the "author is not there to answer the questions that the text raises" (Levinas 2009, p. 213). One would expect, then, that the help evoked by Levinas is the father's and

that bringing assistance to a text means anchoring its meaning to the author's intention, defending his or her theses, even when the text presents reticence or gaps. Levinas' indications partially go in this direction: "faced with this absence of the author in writing", we take care to report him or her, at least vicariously, within the text, and we do so by adapting it and making it consistent with the historical figure of the author. With this gesture – Levinas further points out – "philology begins" (*ibid.*).

Surprisingly, however, the outcome of this operation is not positive at all in Levinas' eyes, who very evidently takes a different path from Plato on this: with philology, the reader does not listen to the text anymore and starts to reconstruct a work which is already silenced, now relegated to an unmeaningful past. According to Levinas, perceiving the author's absence implies the *risk* of explaining a text in the light of his or her personal biography or historical-cultural context. Ultimately, the reader is led to seek the most authentic meaning of the text not in the text itself, but in the author's personality: in this way, a text is definitively suppressed, surpassed, and its truth has become relativistic. Levinas explains:

> Reading ceases to be the disposition of one who listens and becomes the reconstruction of a dumb text. Thereafter, the absent author himself becomes one of the elements of this reconstruction. We are no longer interested in him, in his reality of thing in itself that expresses itself, but in the phenomenality of an empirical being who works, writes<,> has a biography<,> has been influenced<,> and is entirely made up of adjectives and properties […]. The text is passed over and thrown back into the past, into the horizon of its author, its discourse is not looked at in the face, but from the side. It is read insofar as it refers back to an author and to this author's surpassed horizon (Levinas 2009, pp. 213-214).

In Levinas' perspective, a thought satisfied with writings is profoundly relativistic because the truth of writing, at least when understood in a philological sense, is still modeled on vision: meaning is reduced to a phenomenon that can be grasped only because it appears as a part of a (phenomenological) horizon. This attitude would bring with it an even more serious consequence: while in oral speeches the Other is impermeable to any risk of appropriation or violence by the Same, the act of the philologist precisely consists in turning the author into an object of knowledge, completely captured in the modality of understanding. The reader is left alone to think by himself or herself, in his or her complete self-referentiality. The interlocutor becomes, at most, "a curious, picturesque foreigner" or "a barbarian that is watched while speaking but not listened to" (Levinas 2009, p. 214). The Other is eventually thematised and reduced to a mere answer to

the questions "who?" and "what?", which constitute the most urgent interrogations of the ontological language of the Said (Levinas 1991, p. 24). When the text is completely overcome, the reader ends up "believing as little in the truth that it enunciates as an archaeologist who exhumes a prehistoric ax but does not think even for a moment to use it" (Levinas 2009, p. 214.).

Ultimately, it is with this philological attitude that written speech falls silent and is condemned to repeat the same thing forever, as Plato said, imprisoned in its context of production, now definitively over, and unable to produce novelty: in other words, it is precisely the claim to bind it to its father's original intention that which causes the text to lose its voice and die. The remoteness of the father is dangerous not because the written discourse could fall into the wrong hands and be misunderstood, but because the author's absence could cause the reader's attempt to restore it in a fictitious way, making both the text and its author an antique devoid of any vitality. Levinas' game is thus unmasked: while using Plato's words, he makes a profoundly anti-Platonic gesture,[21] which demonstrates instead great harmony with Derrida's reflections. Confronting a text and questioning it does not mean bringing it back to the intention of an archaeologically reconstructed author, but, on the contrary, freeing it from its author's ghost and finally letting it *speak*: it is by this *transcending* (see Levinas 2009, p. 208) the author's intention and sprouting potency-to-say of texts, that "I find myself again in a dialogue-situation" (Levinas 2009, p. 209).

4. *A Final Face-to-Face*

The final stages of this interpretative path have eventually been reached. Derrida's and Levinas' figures confront each other in a mirrored image: as already mentioned, on the one hand, in Plato's argumentation Levinas correctly grasps and appreciates the openness granted by oral speech and the fact that it allows the encounter with an authentic Other, whose reply is always updatable and therefore never completely predictable. On the contrary, Derrida underestimates the deconstructive value of an authentically dialogic situation and reduces the Platonic dialogue to a disguised soliloquy. On the other hand, he correctly identifies the mimetic, distorting, and therefore dangerous value that Plato assigns to writing, in a way that Levinas does not seem to see. Above all, this distorting power is

[21] On this, see Chardel 2002, p. 95.

expressed in the bracketing of the author's signifying intention, which Plato deprecates and Levinas, in contrast, identifies as the only way to establish an authentic relationship with the text. While Derrida's Plato is excessively dogmatic, Levinas' is excessively hermeneutic, and yet the general impression conveyed by this exegetical comparison is that the former brings forth the deep motivations and implicit assumptions of the Platonic text in a more legitimate way.

In a wholly paradoxical sense, however, it is Levinas' hermeneutical operation, much more than Derrida's, the one that cuts ties with that tradition that sees the text as inseparable from the signifying intention of its author and accepts the risk of misunderstanding, even when it is enormous: in short, Levinas is the one who, while reading Plato, gets definitively rid of him.

In this double rendering of the exegesis of the *Phaedrus*, the difference between the hermeneutical paths traveled by the two authors is played out: on the one hand, Derrida's approach understands interpretation as a game that is iterable, but still delimitated by rules – those provided by the network of continuously diverging signs; on the other, Levinas' method not only thinks of an *infinitely* interpretable text, in which the potency-to-say always exceeds the will-to-say, but wants the hermeneutical gesture to be unrelated, external and transcendent with respect to any horizon. Thus, if, for Derrida, *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, for Levinas it is precisely the text-context that limits interpretation.

This is also the reason why, on closer inspection, Levinas argues that whoever interprets the text authentically returns to in the situation of orality: once more, if for Derrida, every appearance of signs and meanings falls *already* within the text (*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*!), for Levinas any hermeneutical act *already* brings the text back to voice and dialogue, precisely because it lets the context behind it collapse.

Perhaps, then, it is in the mutual effort of somebody who lends an ear to the other, but hears nothing, and somebody who takes a look at the other's words, but finds nothing to read, that the misunderstandings of the colloquium between Levinas and Derrida must be comprehended.

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