Introduction

Plato’s *Phaedrus* depicts Socrates in a conversation with Phaedrus, a young acquaintance in thrall to the power of composed speeches. Socrates, aware of this zeal, worries about Phaedrus’ indiscriminate appreciation of composed speeches and his hopes for his own future in speech-composition. Harnessing Phaedrus’ eagerness for talk, Socrates aims to bring Phaedrus to gain some critical facility as both a listener and a writer. This involves trying to help him become a better *conversationalist* (one who engages in *dialegesthai* (269b6), “thorough talking”).

It is in the context of Socrates’ hope that Phaedrus will come to talk well with others that he tells him what we now call the Myth of Theuth (274c5-275b2). In this story, near the end of the dialogue, the Egyptian god is said to have brought seven discoveries to the god-king Thamos for his dissemination to the Egyptian people. The last of these discoveries is *grammata*, what we might call scripts, prepared compositions, or writings. Theuth lauds this discovery as a boon to wisdom and memory. Thamos disagrees. He predicts that this discovery will instead generate the mere pretense of wisdom, cause the dereliction of memory, and make people difficult to associate with. *Grammata* may at best help people remember what they already know. Finished with the story, Socrates soon extends its criticism, and concludes that, were a knowledgeable person to choose to write, he would do so only playfully, storing up a treasury of reminders for forgetful old age and for those following his track, providing himself with alternatives to sympotic or related amusements (276d1-8).

Though it is the most direct discussion of composition, the Myth of Theuth is only one of many in the dialogue. The topic of writing’s value arose explicitly first when, in his first remark after Socrates’ great charioteer speech, Phaedrus observed that his idol Lysias had been harangued as being a “speech-writer” (*logographon*: 257c6), and that, accordingly, he had been worrying that writing speeches might always be shameful (d6), earning one the name sophist (d8). Socrates dissuades Phaedrus from this view: by reminding him of the pride public people have in composing long-lasting documents (i.e., laws), Socrates gets Phaedrus to accept that only some,
not all, instances of speech-writing (to graphein logous) are considered shameful (258d1-2). This partial amnesty allows them to discuss what might make (written) speeches good and acceptable. They inquire specifically into what might make them beneficial to the city, persuasive, and properly technical. By the time Socrates says that they are now to turn to the topic of writing’s appropriateness (euprepeias... graphês: 274b6)—or, as Socrates rephrases it, what is most gratifying to the god with respect to making or talking about speeches (logon peri prattôn ê legôn: b9)—the topic of speech-writing has already been long discussed.

Yet the Theuth story doesn’t simply put a vibrant literary twist on the previous criticisms. What’s new about Thamos’ judgment is its shift from assessing the quality of a speech and the success of its speaker to considering how to prepare to speak. This is a surprising shift, from what one says to how one becomes able to say it. Why Socrates needs this novel criticism and voices it as a story is the key question of this paper. The trouble with compositions, we come to see, comes not so much from the practices of reading, writing, and memorizing themselves but from the assumption that those suffice one to teach and learn, to give and receive advice. That writing allows one to prepare in advance does not exhaust the kinds of preparation one needs to be good. One needs the preparation necessary for good conversation: befriending one’s interlocutors, coming up with pertinent questions, and practicing giving sincere and precise answers. Phaedrus’ taste for composition risks ignoring the role of conversation and these other kinds of preparation.

Across the extant writings about Socrates, Socrates shows that reading is vindicated only in conversation.¹ Telling the myth of Theuth is part of Socrates’ strategy in the Phaedrus. To show this I start by discussing Phaedrus’ character and the aims of Socrates’ conversation with him. This gives some context for a closer reading of the Myth of Theuth. Assessing its claims about “memory” and “wisdom” shows why Socrates presents the Myth to his friend.

The Grammatophilic Phaedrus

The Phaedrus opens with a discussion of Phaedrus’ script-immersed morning. Phaedrus had been trying to memorize Lysias’ laboriously-prepared (228a1), refined (227c7), and paradoxical (c8) speech. He was doing this by listening repeatedly to Lysias reciting it, reading to himself the

¹ Cf. most explicitly at X. Mem. IV.ii.
scroll (biblion) on which it was written, and practicing reciting it (228a8-b6). When Socrates guesses correctly that this is what he had been doing—a guess surely based on his familiarity with Phaedrus’ preexisting passion for written speeches—Phaedrus denies knowing Lysias’ speech verbatim (ta ge rhêmata ouk exemathon: 228d2, cf. exepistamenos: b8), and so asks to summarize the script. Socrates refuses, requesting that Phaedrus read from the text itself instead (ton logon auton: d7-8). Why Socrates wants to hear the speech straight through is hard to say. He may want to remind Phaedrus that complete memorization of the script is just like reciting the script, his memorization adding nothing but the false appearance of spontaneity (243c2). Or he may want Phaedrus, able to reread and rehear the script, to remain a spectator of it, so that Socrates may later draw his attention to his uncritical reactions (234c6-d9). Or he may want a composed speech to talk about later (262d8-264e6). Whichever it is, it is clear that Phaedrus takes pride in this prepared document, and Socrates wants to draw Phaedrus’ attention to his fancy.

These early clues about Phaedrus’ deep interest in Lysias’ prepared speech are corroborated by his sensitivity to the charges of logographia already cited (257c8-d2). He notes that many people seem ashamed to write speeches and to leave compositions behind (suggramma: d6-7, cf. e7-8). (Phaedrus may have already acknowledged this shame when he hides the book in his cloak and goes outside the city walls to practice.) But because proposed laws are a kind of composition, as Phaedrus acknowledges, and people aren’t ashamed to propose laws—in fact they hope for immortality through adopted laws—then not all composition can be shameful. Consistent with his emphasis on compositions and speech-writing in this passage (a6, 8, 9, b4, 4, c2, 5, 8, d2), Socrates makes clear that it is not the fact of a composition’s durability that matters (though that quality was used as part of his argument: c2), but its having been composed. This is clear from his indiscriminate mention of “speaking and writing” (258d4-5, 259e2) and “speaking” in place of “writing” (259e4-6).

A third symptom of Phaedrus’ interest in the composition of speeches is his having read lots of rhetorical handbooks (technai: 266d5, cf. 271c1). Such books, which Socrates has also read and is glad Phaedrus has reminded them to talk about (hupennēsas: 266d7), are about the technical production of speeches, which Socrates glosses as “refinement” (kompsa: 266d9, cf. 227c7).
Rhetorical handbooks are written, read, and memorized to allow future writing, reading, and memorizing, the activities of rhetorical practice, just as medical handbooks allow future medical practice.

Given this evidence that Phaedrus loves composition, we can speculate about what exactly Socrates judges Phaedrus really eager for. Technical handbooks identify and systematize language’s resources. Writing—spending time on drafts—allows one to pack in and deploy the most resources—rhetorical devices—into a speech. Socrates identifies the contrast to technical preparation when he says that he himself gives only casually improvised speeches (idiötês autoschediazôn: 236d5; Phaedrus calls this being “possessed by fluency,” euroia tis se eilêphen: 238c7-8). Language has its mysterious and powerful effects on people, in its most exceptional cases like a doctor’s drug, acting on a passive audience. Like the distiller of naturally-occurring plants into elixirs, the speech-writer culls speech’s most active elements. Phaedrus is amazed by the conversion of writerly work into spectatorial spellbinding.

This equation of composition with the marshaling of language’s affective resources gets support from the best explanation of the politician’s skepticism about Lysias’ speech-writing. It would be natural for someone—especially a civic-minded public figure—to worry about the concentration of language’s manipulative powers in prepared speeches. Everyday talk of course cannot avoid using such powers, but it does so diffusely or haphazardly. It might be thought that talking, especially in the formal decision-making settings—the courts and the assemblies with which the politician has the most familiarity—should present itself transparently as a vehicle for facts and beliefs for rational consideration. Speechifying need not be expected to be psychologically inert, but one might find suspect those who think first about a speech’s effect rather than its rightness.

Socrates’ Conversation with Phaedrus

For Phaedrus, writing, reading, and memorizing are just different moments in composed speech. Writing composes by setting down thoughts, reading verbalizes a composition, and memorizing

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2 The amount of time composition takes comes up not just in Lysias’ case (228a1) but in Socrates’ fourth remark, his quotation of Pindar’s Isthmian I, to the effect that composing poems uses up all one’s free time (227a9-11).

3 Cf. Chrm. 156a1, where Charmides hears that Socrates has a charm to heal his headache, and wants to write it down; more generally Lain-Entralgo (1970), de Romilly (1975).

conceals the fact that writing and reading have ever occurred. Memorizers wish to preempt two kinds of suspicion. The first is that someone else composed one’s speech. This might be a particular person (e.g., Lysias) or nobody in particular (e.g., “earlier people” or “the wise”). Since in order to memorize one relies on (repeated) imitation rather than comprehension, there’s the chance that one could be articulating well what one knows nothing about. The second suspicion is that one’s (possibly self-composed) speech isn’t responsive to its particular audience. Memorization orients one’s speech backwards or inward, to the script or original production, rather than forward or outward, to the listeners and a future good. Since one can address speeches to listeners blind to their needs or desires one might be saying something pointless or inappropriate.

At the end of his Charioteer speech, Socrates prays that Phaedrus direct his life toward love accompanied by philosophical talk (257b6). Given that Phaedrus seems most notable for his zest for prepared speech, I take it that Socrates means “love accompanied by philosophical talk” to be an improvement to that. (What “love accompanied by philosophical talk” precisely means, I cannot say here, but it seems at least something that advances the cause of love as depicted in the Charioteer speech). Thus we could see the dozens of turns in the Phaedrus conversation as Socrates’ cumulative attempts to bring Phaedrus, by harnessing his desire for speech, to perceive, want to modify, and have the ability to modify his desire for prepared speech. A full appreciation of the dialogue, from this perspective, would take showing how each piece of conversation partially contributes to this three-fold goal. We would see Socrates showing Phaedrus how a speech could fail to benefit the city and its people (227d1-2), in particular out of ignorance (260b1-d2); be too long (241e7), especially by recycling its meager ingredients (235a4-8); try to persuade people about what well-born and gentle people know to be false (243c1-d1) or what’s simple-minded and even impious (242d7); persuade unreliably (262c1-3); obscure its precise topic (263d7-e4); have its parts in disarray (264c2-5); be vague and inconsistent (265d6-7); ignore the nature of the audience (268a8-272b4); depend mistakenly on probabilities rather than knowledge (273d2-e4); or aim to gratify one’s fellow slaves rather than one’s good and well-born masters, the gods (273e9-274a2). What we can see from this list is that Socrates had not yet broached with Phaedrus the issues with using prepared scripts, the hazards of depending on reading for learning, and the narrowness of treating speech too pathetically or aesthetically. None
of these criteria for shameful speech address the critic of speechwriting as such or, more importantly, isolate and cure Phaedrus’ desire for scripted speeches.

The Myth of Theuth

Socrates starts his story by saying that the ibis-related Egyptian god, Theuth, has just discovered number and calculation, geometry and astronomy, draughts and dice, and, to top it off, grammata.⁵ There’s also the god-king Thamos; Socrates reminds Phaedrus of the Greek versions of both his name and his territory (“Ammon”; “Egyptian Thebes”). Theuth, he says, brought the seven skills (technas) he discovered to Thamos. Thamos asks about their respective benefits (óphelian), and as Theuth goes through them, he praises and censures what he’s thought Theuth has said well and poorly (hoti kalós è mē kalós dokoi legein). The details for the first six Socrates says he’s not going to go through,⁶ but for the seventh Socrates turns to direct quotation. Theuth, the story goes, says that this study (mathêma) will make the Egyptians wiser and be better with memory (mnemonikôterous); his jingle is that this will be a “drug” (pharmakon) for wisdom and memory. Thamos, in response, addressing Theuth as “most skillful” (technikôtate), claims that it is for some people to beget skills but for others to judge what degree of harm and benefit will come to those intending to use those skills. As father of grammata, Thamos says, your favor toward them has led you to attribute powers quite opposite to their real ones. For the students (mathontôn) of grammata will come to have forgetfulness (lêthê) in their souls, having neglected their memory (mnênês ameletêsiai); and in depending on (dia pistin) writing they are reminding themselves from the outside, by foreign impressions, rather than from the inside, by themselves. The drug Theuth has discovered is not for memory, so it seems, but for remembering. Students of writing will merely seem wise, not truly (alêtheian) be wise. Having absorbed much, without being taught, they may come to seem very worldly (polugnômones) but be, for the most part, the opposite; and this false appearance of wisdom will make them difficult to get along with.

How Socrates narrates this story presents a number of puzzles worth much future reflection. Both gods get strangely verbose introductions;⁷ Theuth can’t bring his discoveries directly to the

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⁵ Cf. Grg. 450d6, where many of these skills are taken to be special for not being manual.
⁶ MS T omits this acknowledgement; I will not depend on it for my interpretation.
⁷ For instance, Theuth is introduced through repeated deferrals: he’s (1) one of the ancient gods, (2) associated with the bird, (3) the sacred, (4) the one indeed they call the ibis, (5) the name of this very divinity, (6) being “Theuth.”
people;\textsuperscript{8} Thamos evaluates not Theuth’s inventions but his presentation of them;\textsuperscript{9} Thamos doesn’t support his claim about the division of labor about discoveries;\textsuperscript{10} and Greek mythology generally attributed the invention of letters to Prometheus or Palamedes rather than to Theuth.

How Socrates leads into and follows this story presents further puzzles. In both his prefatory and defensive remarks he treats the story as a distinctly traditional tale.\textsuperscript{11} He does this here more explicitly than he does with any of the dialogue’s other myths. Socrates prefixes his story by saying that he’s heard it from the “earlier” ones (\textit{tôn proterôn}), and emphasizes that only they (\textit{autoi}) know the truth about it. This is nearly the most general and neutral way possible of indicating this story’s status as traditional,\textsuperscript{12} believed solely because others believed it and had their reasons to retell it. Socrates underlines this meager epistemic warrant by suggesting that were Phaedrus and he, however, to discover for themselves the truth of the matter (\textit{de... heurimen autoi}), they would hardly concern themselves about what other men—presumably these “earlier” ones—might’ve believed. So the earlier people believed the story, for whatever reasons, and thought to pass it on, and we can thank them for doing so—and indeed they vouch in some way for its moral value—but our attitude toward the story can’t simply be that it happened or didn’t. The Myth is about something we very well may be able to find the truth about for ourselves. Since Socrates nevertheless retells it, he must have some firm reason to do so besides claiming that this interaction that supposedly happened in Egypt really happened in this way. What Phaedrus is to listen for, think about, and talk through, must be something else.

The exchange between Phaedrus and Socrates at the end of the story reinforces this sense.

Phaedrus exclaims that Socrates easily makes up stories (\textit{logous poieis}), not just ones supposedly from Egypt but from anywhere he wishes. How Socrates responds to this—that the source hardly

\textsuperscript{8} This is contrast to Prometheus, who apparently does (Aeschylus, \textit{Prometheus Bound}, 7-8).

\textsuperscript{9} This is the same thing Socrates claims to be doing—appraising speeches as good or bad (\textit{ἐν λόγοις τιοι τὰ μὲν ψέγοντα ὡς αἰσχρά, τὰ δ’ ἐπαινοῦντα ὡς καλά})—when he says his alter-ego checked whether he had grounds for his assessments (\textit{Hip.Mj}. 286c)

\textsuperscript{10} Socrates makes a similar claim at \textit{Tht}. 150c, drawing the analogy to \textit{maieusis}; and cf. \textit{Prot}. 320e1-3.

\textsuperscript{11} Socrates’ opening word is that he’s “heard” the following; this is the third and not last time “hearing” is mentioned (\textit{êkousa}: 274c5, cf. c1, c4, 275b9). The movement from dramatis personae, to situation, to selective summary, and then to direct quotation pulls the attention to the antithetical punch-line (”\textit{grammata} will make people seem but not actually be wise”), which is itself triply repeated. The compression, quippiness, and echo throughout the story further betray its constructedness.

\textsuperscript{12} Perhaps even more general is his sourcing of the Boreas myth: “it is said” (\textit{legetai}: 229b5) and “it is believed” (\textit{nomizomenoi}: 230a2).
matters—suggests again that Socrates has some tendentious purpose in telling the story. But before we can make sense of Socrates’ response—where he adds the myth of the Grove at Dodona—we must consider why Phaedrus even challenges Socrates’ claim. After all, challenges from Phaedrus are rare; it is only the second time Phaedrus has definitely resisted something Socrates has said.  

That Socrates attributed an invention to Theuth that Greek myth often talked about as the gift of Prometheus should not itself have proved Socrates’ fabrication. Not only did the Greeks sometimes attribute the introduction of grammata to Palamedes or Orpheus instead; there’s evidence the Egyptians did in fact attribute literacy—or at least the differentiation of languages—to Theuth. Nor does Phaedrus seem exactly justified in charging Socrates with pervasive and geographically-disparate myth-invention. Phaedrus did not earlier challenge Socrates’ source in the myths of the charioteer or of the cicadas, and neither of them have any special foreign location. Phaedrus must accept that there are untold stocks of myth in circulation, one perhaps for most occasions. But perhaps not for every occasion. To take a myth as invented on the spot, it must, it seems, appear too manifestly apt for the present occasion, too pointedly allegorical for the specific audience, to be drawn simply from the vast cultural memory of myths. And so, in acknowledging Socrates’ ability to make up stories from anyplace, Phaedrus acknowledges, if tetchily, the use of stories for ad hominem purposes.

Socrates responds to Phaedrus’ incredulity—and implicitly acknowledges having tailor-made the myth—by presenting Phaedrus yet another incredible story (275b5-c2). In the olden days, Socrates says, people even listened to an oak, and happily so, were its message true. How this response is at all relevant, we should admit, is hard to say: those listeners at the grove of Zeus of Dodona believed the oak’s words to be divine, and they would be unable to test the prophecy’s

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13 The first time is in his response to Socrates’ initial judgment of Lysias’ speech (234e1).
15 Spense (1990), 106-8, and Černý (1948)
16 About the former, Phaedrus is simply awed at how much finer that speech was than either of the preceding (257c2); its believability doesn’t even come up until Socrates brings it up, in his remarks about its usefulness (265b6-8, c8-9). About the latter, Phaedrus says he hasn’t heard it before (259b3), but accepts the moral Socrates draws from it (259d9).
17 Aristotle, at Rhetoric II.20 1394a2, says that didactic or persuasive stories are relatively easy to invent.
truth except by waiting for its realization. And the details of this myth are hard to account for.\textsuperscript{18} But what’s important is that Socrates pretty easily succeeds at getting Phaedrus to accept that the source of a story should not matter, that only the truth of the story’s claims should, and that the words of that story should be as closely interpreted as “mantic utterances,” a most closely-read and pointed genre of speech.\textsuperscript{19}

When Phaedrus admits that Socrates was right to rebuke him (\textit{epepléxas}: 275c3) for his outburst, he seems to be admitting he wrongly took Socrates as being unfair in his pointedness. If this is so, Phaedrus may have come to have been able to see this story as something to think about in ways other than as a source of fact about the past. We may, of course, doubt the depth of Phaedrus’ allegorical reading; he simply goes on to say that he takes what Thamos says to be true, without substantiating his agreement, testing the view, or giving the tale any closer reading. (In Phaedrus’ defense, Socrates doesn’t much elicit anything else.) But Phaedrus is making advances if he at least entertains the idea that grammata could lack the virtues Theuth attributed to it and that he implicitly assumed for it; and Phaedrus is making further advances if he at least partially revises the way he reacts to mythic stories, from dismissal on grounds of artifice or fictionality to appreciation of allegorical potential or moral resonance. Near the dialogue’s beginning, Phaedrus had queried Socrates about whether he was persuaded that the mythic story (\textit{muthologêma}) of Boreas was true, by which, on evidence of the way Socrates responded and Phaedrus’ earlier question about its purported location, Phaedrus meant whether it actually happened (229b5-d2). Socrates there prompted Phaedrus to a different kind of question about myths. He now he quells Phaedrus’ curiosity about the historical facts about literacy’s birth, encouraging him instead to have a view about the value of literacy. Myths occasion a different kind of question to be asked.

Thus Socrates’ briefing and debriefing recommends to Phaedrus treating this story—which is short enough to be memorable and reflected on in the future—with some care. That it includes indirect and direct speech might seem to make it, like other points in the conversation, similar to

\textsuperscript{18} In particular, it’s hard to know whether birds in the tree or the tree itself gave the oracle; for example, Sophocles’ \textit{Trachiniae} is ambiguous in its first mention (171-2) but seems to specify the tree on the second (1168); see Rowe (1986) ad loc. for further discussion. Whoever speaks, as we see in the \textit{Trachiniae}, it’s hard to discern the meaning.

\textsuperscript{19} At \textit{Chrm.} 164e8, Socrates says the \textit{mantis} speaks enigmatically, and one must give some complex interpretations to make sense of it; see also \textit{Apol}. 21b4. Cf. Steiner (1994), 82-83, Bowden (2005), 21, 33, 47.
a dialogue and thus particularly worth studying. It is among the most fantastical of these depicted conversations, telling about the cusp of prehistory, mimicking not mundane exchange but epic etiology. Even more, it’s not even a proper etiology: Thamos’ pessimism about grammata put no stop to its proliferation; the myth tells only an incomplete story about the birth of literacy. All this makes hearing the story like enough to eavesdropping or watching a conversation to excite one’s attention but arresting enough to encourage reflection.

**Reading the Myth Seriously**

Phaedrus, we observe, takes these devices, initially, just to reveal Socrates as the overly-clever author of this story, and then, and only after some brusque encouragement, to highlight the basic message he thinks he’s to take from it. Yet the richness and complexity of the story would be wasted on only these two bulky goals. The story abides, and would seem to claim, further attention. Socrates might not be unwarranted in hoping Phaedrus might return to this story. In the first place, the story is not hard to remember, and Socrates’ recapitulation repeats many of its phrases. In the second place, Phaedrus has not elsewhere hesitated to ask to hear interesting things repeated (228a8, 277b4). Given the friendliness of his departure with Socrates (279c6)—and what appears to be a pretty leisured life—it seems reasonable to expect he would talk with Socrates again, giving him a chance to hear the story again. Either way, upon turning his mind back to the Myth, he might ponder some of the following difficulties. (Another way of putting this, for those who doubt Phaedrus’ resolve, is to think that Plato would hope his audience—to the extent we, like Phaedrus, don’t understand everything at once—might return to this story and ponder some of the following difficulties.) In any event, all the things Socrates has said before, during, and after the Myth—that we can find the truth for ourselves, that we need to understand

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20 The introduction to *Thet.* (143a-c) and remarks early in *Sym.* (172c-173c) about recording everything Socrates says seem to show a familiarity with writings in the dialogue form; see Sharp (2006). The Myth of Theuth would not be special in the *Phdr.* for depicting conversation; Socrates recounts or mentions imaginary conversations between a well-bred man and the censors of love (243c1-d1); a donkey-marketer and someone who needs a horse (260b1-c1); some unnamed arguments and the science of speech (260d4-261a5); an autodidact with Eryximachus or Acumenus, or with Sophocles or Euripides, or with some musician (268a8-269a3); Pericles and Adrastus with Phaedrus and Socrates (269b4-c5); a writer and the rhetoricians (271c10-272b4); and Tisias also with our friends (273d2-274a5).

21 E.g., genealogical talk with *tekein* (274e8) and *patēr* (275a1) picked up by *patros* (275e4) and *adelphon gnēision* (276a1); the games invented by Theuth (274d1) by reference to play (276b5, d2, 6); reminders (275a5) with the same (276d3).

22 Compare Critias at *Tim.* 26b.
why someone says what he does, and that we might treat such stories as ours like superficially inscrutable mantic utterances—speak to working through what one reads.

I leave aside for expedience the puzzles I’ve noted above (about the introduction of the gods, etc.) to talk mainly about the discussion of memory and its connection to wisdom. Together Theuth and Thamos make seven claims about grammata, which I will address in order:

1. the mathêma of grammata will make people mnémonikōterous
2. it is a pharmakon of mnêmês
3. no; it will bring lêthên to people’s psuchais
4. this corruption will happen through mnêmês ameletêsiai
5. it is a reliance on external alien remarks rather than oneself by oneself
6. it is a pharmakon not of mnêmês but of hupomnēseōs
7. it will make people difficult to be around

The Improvement in Memory
Theuth praises grammata with a surprising explanation, that it would improve people’s memory and their wisdom. These are not the obvious benefits of grammata. It would seem more natural to say they allow for the stability of worked-out thought, or for its finer arrangement, more convenient dissemination, or handy reference. Or, if grammata were to benefit people and not just their ideas, then why not say grammata would bring greater familiarity with diverse ideas, greater persuasiveness, or the chance for polymathy? It is odd, at least initially, to think of composition as something principally to modify a person’s cognitive faculties. To see the plausibility in Theuth’s claim we need to make clearer what he could mean by “memory,” and why he would speak of it as a pair with “wisdom.” I will consider a couple of possibilities.

Might grammata directly improve people’s memory-abilities? It is doubtful that this is Theuth’s boast. Nobody would yearn for grammata to teach mnemonic devices, something obviously already taught orally. Nor does the sheer availability of scripts give a person appreciably more

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23 In saying this I’m not saying that upon reflection or experience such a change would be unexpected; not only do theorists about the change to literate culture marshal plenty of reasons to think there would be cognitive change, as suggested in Havelock (1962) and following.
material on which to practice memorizing; a society’s treasure of oral stories provides plenty (229e1). More likely grammata could increase the quantity of things in one’s memory, the content available to be recalled. Grammata could certainly make learning more efficient. Books always have the leisure to teach us, whenever there’s someone to read them aloud or silently (cf. 275d9-e3), and their compression or dilation may promote effective uptake. So a person or a culture that reads could have better memory in the sense of having more beliefs readily discursively accessible. This is not the same as having a better faculty of memory—speed or reliability of recall, storage, or maintenance—but seems part of good memory nevertheless. And having better memory would accompany “being wiser” if wisdom meant “having much knowledge.” All the same, it doesn’t seem Socrates would attribute this meaning to Theuth, for two reasons. First, having knowledge, while perhaps the same as having lots in one’s memory, seems something separate from having better memory, and if becoming more knowledgeable were a benefit of grammata (which it probably is), then Theuth could easily have said so. Second, and more relevant to the dialogue itself, is that neither Socrates nor Phaedrus have yet brought up the power of libraries to expand their readers’ knowledge or improve their memories. Despite asking Socrates about the truth of the Boreas story (229b4-9), Phaedrus seems no zealous collector of knowledge. Socrates would have no reason to voice, through Theuth, a hope for composition’s contribution to capacious learning, and through Thamos, a curt rejection of it.

A distinct through apparently similar idea is that grammata could help one function as though one had excellent memory, as though one were a fast learner, a reliable repository, and a quick recollector. The existence of texts would aid one in doing, but more reliably and on a larger scale, what memory has traditionally been for. Facts and quotations and passages, ideas and theories and systems, any record useful for living well, would be always at hand. A person with grammata nearby would seem to have great memory and, to the extent wisdom means something like “having much resource for living well,” would be wiser. Since recall from memory takes time anyway, even quite protracted time, there seems no disadvantage, and no difference, to

24 In the Clouds, Socrates wants to learn Strepsiades’ “turn” (tropon) of mind, to find out how susceptible he is to learning. His first question is about whether Strepsiades has good memory (mnêmonikos); Strepsiades responds that he tends to remember his credits and to forget his debts (478-485). In the Statesman, the Eleatic visitor lauds Socrates’ memory (mnêmonikos) for mathematics when Socrates applies the concept of proportion (257b).
Having what we might now call external storage.\textsuperscript{25} It seems indisputable that, all else being equal, the person with a library will have a better chance to live well than the person without one. But, again, such a hope for \textit{grammata} doesn’t seem reflective of Phaedrus’ hopes or responsive to his desires. He does not talk about developing a copious reservoir of written-down thought from which he might draw. Nor has he dismissed the usual networks of advisors, craftsmen, and theoreticians as sufficient for his reference needs. A further criticism of this reconstruction is that on it, \textit{grammata} would be, in a certain respect, exactly the opposite of memory, not something to make one’s memory \textit{better} but to replace a poor memory. For Thamos’ critique to be apt, Thamos needs to think that Theuth believes that \textit{grammata} would actually improve memory, not just simulate or replace it. Of course, even if Theuth did think \textit{grammata} could improve memory by replacing it, and augment wisdom by adding knowledge, Thamos’ criticism would be responsive to the view that memory is nothing but memories, wisdom nothing but facts. That response is addressed below.

Given how Phaedrus has treated composition and memorization, I think a simpler reading of Theuth’s hopes for \textit{grammata} makes the best sense. With the existence of scripts one would be more able to memorize any particular speech. This is what Phaedrus exhibits with Lysias’ \textit{biblion}, what the \textit{logographoi} are chastised for doing, and what the context for the description of “true rhetoric”—namely, making and giving individual speeches—suggests. \textit{Grammata} free one from having to pester the creator of a speech to repeat it or from having to invent one’s speech at the same time as proclaiming it.\textsuperscript{26} One can compose at leisure, and then memorize at an appropriate time. The connection to wisdom is in what such preparation allows. Composition allows careful assessment of an issue; memorization presents such assessment as “natural, spontaneous, and vivid.”\textsuperscript{27} Those who speak smartly spontaneously—those who are good at memory—seem wise. The Egyptians, Theuth supposes, would be wiser if they could prepare in advance and then remember what they were going to say. It is such a claim that Thamos responds to. Rather than \textit{being} wise, Thamos says, they may merely \textit{seem} wise. They will seem wise because they’ll seem to be speaking spontaneously about what seems well-considered; but

\textsuperscript{25} This view is argued, in general terms, by Clark (2003) and (2008). Against it, see recently Fodor (2009).
\textsuperscript{26} In the \textit{Theatetus}, Euclides does verify his record of the conversation between Theaetetus and Theodorus from Socrates (143a1–4), but then doesn’t need Socrates’ help.
\textsuperscript{27} Notopoulos (1938), 478.
such appearance does not ensure the actuality. Thamos never explicitly commits himself to the impossibility of someone using grammata actually being wise. What he is committed to is the fact that the invention of grammata can by itself bring someone from not seeming wise to seeming wise. But more on Thamos’ criticism below.

The Drug of Memory
Socrates has Theuth call his grammata a pharmakon—a drug, elixir, or potion—of memory. Calling it this doesn’t reveal anything new about the discovery or its value, so it’s not obvious why Socrates has Theuth deploy what appears basically a catchy slogan. Any explanation would, I think, have to respond somehow to Phaedrus’ expectations for composition.

The most familiar observation about this slogan is that the term pharmakon, just like any of its English translations, doesn’t unfailingly refer to curatives, balms, and other salutary treatments; a pharmakon, if overused or misused or used on the wrong person, can harm its patient. A poison is just too much of a drug. Phaedrus seems particularly interested and well-informed about medicine (227a5, 268a9, 270c7), and so would presumably know this. More relevantly, only a few pages earlier Socrates had wondered about a person who claimed to know medicine simply from having heard about medical drugs (pharmakois iatros) by reading books (bibliou): would this be enough to practice medicine? Of course not, Phaedrus said; without knowing how to diagnose a patient or prescribe the proper dosage, such claim to practical skill would be absurd (268a9-c4). Phaedrus would thus be in a position to see that grammata could be a pharmakon insofar as its value depended not just on itself but on the wisdom of its application: when, why, and how to read or otherwise use them.

What’s remarkable about this term pharmakon is not just its aptness in the context but the way understanding it instantiatedes its lesson about compositions. Phaedrus is able to understand it not by being familiar with the word but because he brings to its interpretation that about which he already knows: for example, that drugs are prescribed only in the context of a larger health-promoting practice. When Socrates has Theuth call reading a pharmakon, that is, something whose benefit is assured only when used within a larger wisdom-promoting practice, he is giving Phaedrus an opportunity to prove that attribution correct. (If Phaedrus does, he’ll know it’s from
himself; since Thamos never plays on the term’s bad sense—instead of saying that grammata is a “poison” of memory, he says that it’s a pharmakon of “remembering rather than memory”—recovery of its ambivalence would come not from the Myth but from the reader himself.)

Theuth’s reference to pharmakon could, of course, have additional resonances. His excitement about grammata may encourage him to emphasize how easy and effective the study really is. Compared to the rigors of learning geometry or astronomy, and the uncertain benefits of them, literacy may seem relatively easy to acquire (basically everyone who tries does), and the resultant wisdom almost gratuitous. Oppositely, to the extent pharmakon signifies “bad-tasting decoction” (cf. Grg. 456b3), the idea might be that acquiring literacy may be painful and even shameful—studying may seem quite unmanly—but the outcome worth it. But against the importance of substantiating either suggestion—that pharmaka are especially easy and effective or especially painful but effective—is Thamos’ retort, that grammata are pharmaka for remembering rather than for memory, a claim that depends on neither idea for its sense. It depends only on the idea that drugs can have different effects depending on their use.

_Forgetfulness in the Soul_

Phaedrus attributes this mythic exchange’s lesson entirely to Thamos (273c3-4, cf. c9). But he does not make specific what he takes to have learned from Thamos, only that what the Theban has said about grammata seems to him to be the case. (It is Socrates who recapitulates the lesson, that grammata are reminders about what a person already knows (d1), and who extends it, that nothing “clear or certain” comes from grammata (c6); Phaedrus assents to this.) So it’s worth looking a little more closely at what Phaedrus could be taking himself to accept.

Thamos’ first charge against grammata is that studying grammata will put forgetfulness “in their soul” (en psuchais). Why does Thamos locate it in this way? The most obvious reason is to emphasize the internality of memory, in reaction to a thesis about “grammata as external memory storage.” No doubt grammata will preserve all kinds of information outside oneself.

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28 All of these explanations are consistent with Rutherford (1990)’s thought that the jingle might have been suggested to Plato from earlier literature about the invention of language, particularly μνήμης δράγανον (Gorgias, “Palamedes,” 30) and τὰ τής... λήθης φάρμακα (Eur. fr. 578, 1).
29 Because “souls” is plural, I don’t think this formulation rules out attention to “cultural forgetting.”
But if the imagery of “forgetfulness” or “concealment” being in the soul suggests an incapacitation of the soul, then Thamos can say that reliance on grammata by themselves could cause an inability to do whatever would be necessary to take advantage of those external resources. Socrates’ return to this formulation, some pages after the Myth, encourages this reading. He suggests that the best speaker will try to sow knowledge in the learner’s soul (276e6) by means of deliberate conversational practice (têi dialektikêi technêi: e5-6). It does not seem Socrates would need to specify “conversation” if he thought teaching involved the gradual conveyance only of “content,” thoughts that could just as well be preserved in grammata. Thought-out conversational instruction would seem specially suited, even necessary, for inculcating the various cognitive competences: the ability to support an argument, to explain the value of a lesson, to teach someone else, and to use one’s newfound good reasons for living happily. Forgetfulness in the soul, then, would seem to mean not simply failure of access to memories or other vehicles of content, but failure of access to the kinds of thought-processes constitutive of wisdom. And this is not inconsistent with the observation that the “writing on one’s inner tablet” location is common in Greek poetry. It generally means “taking to heart” something deeply enough that it may play a role in difficult decisions. What one character is telling the other is not some mere fact they’ve overlooked but something meant to marshal their prior commitments and values. Socrates seems to acknowledge or depend on this view of inner writing (or failure of writing) to emphasize the systemic or comprehensive nature of Thamos’ complaint.

The Neglect of Memory
The cause of this forgetfulness or broader psychic incapacity is, Thamos claims, the neglect of memory. This sounds like a common disparagement of technology—of calculators, search engines, and anything else that frees a person from ratiocinative, investigative, or reflective exercises. But Thamos does not say what aspect of memory one will be “failing to care for” (ameletêi). There’s hardly any reason to think he refers to mere uptake, since the topic of mnemonic devices is absent in this dialogue, and the theme of memorizing as a skill a rather

30 See Cherubim (2009) on a rich conception of lêthê and alêtheia compatible with this.
32 Cf. Symp. 208a: meletê is how we keep from lêthê as the exodus of epistêmês; it ’preserves memory.’
minor one. Nor can he mean that *grammata* would make one neglect the *content* of memory; it seems that with *grammata* one would either treat the content the same or add to it. Memory must, then, it seems, be equivalent to something broader: say, understanding. Presumably it is more than a bromide that we remember best, or longest, what we understand. To neglect our memory is not just to eliminate “memorizing” from our life—though with dependence on books we may indeed eliminate such memorization. It is instead, it seems, to eliminate trying to understand things—how medicine works, how talking works—on the assumption that one can always read about them when the occasion demands. Indeed, we’d be wrong to think that most of the things we need to memorize to live successfully, wisely, are strings of words or instructions to follow. What we are to memorize—what we are to learn, take up from culture, assimilate ourselves into, appreciate the reasons for, determine our distinctiveness by—are abilities. It is the rare activity fully constituted by knowing a script. (What are we to do with the script? On what occasion?) *Grammata* may give some rules, or some facts, or some ideas, but they cannot themselves cause us to understand anything. Acquiring abilities requires having a teacher or other interlocutor with whom to interact, to ask questions of, and to have to identify errors.

**Alien Marks**

Thamos gives what looks like a causal explanation, at least the sketch of one, for *grammata’s* bad effects. People who trust writing remind themselves by external alien marks (*exôthen hup’ allotriôn tupôn… autous … anamimêiskomenous*) rather than by themselves (*huph’ hautôn*). Such dependence is what puts forgetfulness into the soul, what causes the neglect of memory. It is clear that Thamos’ criticism doesn’t mean that one should trust what’s inside more than what’s outside. After all, we are often wrong or ignorant; something being our own belief doesn’t make it trustworthy. Nor are the beliefs inside our mind necessarily more stable; that we forget things we thought we knew is itself one of the encouragements for writing. Since one’s reading-independent beliefs could be wrong or evanescent, Thamos cannot be saying that *grammata* are problematic because they are external; the location doesn’t seem important. Bringing those alien

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33 This absence is noticeable since other dialogues do involve such topics: see *Hip.M.* 285e8, on mnemonic devices, and *Rep.* 468d, 494d, 535c, for explicit remarks about the benefits of having a good memory.

34 Even Ion, the rhapsode who seems mainly to memorize the Homeric compositions, acknowledges the centrality of discerning Homer’s thoughts: *Ion* 530cd.
marks within doesn’t solve any problem; it just repeats it. The problem must be instead that the marks used for reminding are “someone else’s.”

What is it to remind “oneself by oneself”? This locution is not uncommon. Earlier in the dialogue, Lysias’ speech included the observation that lovers think they’re envied by others just as they’re envied by themselves (autous huph’ hautôn: 232a1-2). In other conversations, Socrates presents an argument that the gods change neither on some external basis or by themselves (Rep. 380e1). Aristotle says that completely unified things can’t act upon themselves by themselves (Meta. 1046a25). Such everyday uses are found even more often outside of philosophy; Euripides’ Phaedra says the tongue brings plenty of harm onto itself by its own doing (Hipp. 397); Plutarch’s Alcibades told the barbarians simply to let the Hellenes destroy themselves (Alc. 26.7), and Polybius, reporting more self-destruction, says the Aetolians trampled themselves to death (4.58.8). So speaking of “oneself by oneself” has no necessary technical, “theory of Forms” or “theory of Soul” aspect. It means simply to emphasize the absence of the usual external force.

But what is it to be the internal force of one’s reminding? We have already seen that it can’t be simply having internalized a composition. In the case of playing a song, or reciting a speech, then, knowing it can’t simply be remembering what notes or what words follow the ones currently being played or recited. For this is what scripts do: they tell you what comes next. A contrast with this is playing or reciting what’s next because one knows it ought to come next. It is on the basis of understanding the concept of the score or of understanding the purpose of the speech and its context that one continues. Of course there has been memorization early on, to become familiar with the notes or the phrases; but it is not this memorization which propels the performances. The music and the speech become one’s own once their intentions, their meanings, their lemmas and theses, become one’s own. The musical or linguistic phrasings were another’s, but now, because they express one’s own reasoning and commitments, they are one’s own.

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35 Cf. Chrhm. 161b5-162e1. At the beginning of the Protagoras Socrates warns Hippocrates of incorporating sophistic views into his own outlook without analyzing them (313a1-314b5); he can’t mean “don’t listen to them,” since he accompanies him to Protagoras anyway; he means “examine what one hears.”

36 Broakes (2009), 55, who argues for the technicality of auto kath’ auto in the Clouds, observes that most auto + prep. + hauto constructions are mundane; he does not appeal to hupo constructions for his technicality thesis.
On this view, reminding oneself means depending on one’s understanding of the composition. Such understanding does not require any particular independence from others. Coming to understand something “oneself by oneself,” therefore, does not imply studying in utter privacy. Indeed, coming to understanding something for oneself may take rather more community with others than being able to mimic what other people have to say or than being able to come up with merely wise-appearing documents. Being asked a question, or hearing someone give his view, or wondering aloud with another, can each prompt the process of understanding. Coming to understand may not always require another person, but for those of us without perfect self-mastery, our quests for self-knowledge surely benefit from others’ aid. A questioner can help make sure you’re appealing to your own discoveries rather than simply reporting what you’ve heard from others or what sounds catchy at the moment. A conversational partner can appeal to a large range of the listener’s existing norms—of sincerity, of curiosity, of skepticism—to ensure he relies not on mere memory but on reflection. Such help seems to explain much of Socrates’ action throughout his conversation with Phaedrus (e.g., just from the dialogue’s middle, 257c6-258c10, 259d7, 260a5-7, b6). So conversation is not merely to bring two heads together, to give multiple viewpoints, but to make sure we each give at least our own viewpoint—reveal our own self-knowledge—not someone else’s or no viewpoint at all.

A Drug for Being Reminded
Thamos’ retort, that the discovery of grammata is the discovery of a drug not for memory but for reminding, is not just a glib reversal of Theuth’s jingle. It helpfully reminds those hearing or reading the Myth that talking about memory in gross is too vague. Memory, as we’ve had to distinguish above, refers to being able to stow things, to having lots of things stowed, to being able to recall what’s been stowed, and, perhaps most importantly, to being able to come to do all the activities one was born capable but not ready to do.

Saying that grammata do serve well to remind a person about what he already knows is consistent with the thesis of this paper, that Phaedrus needs to see compositions as, narrowly, recording instruments, and that recording or playing back isn’t itself the leading part of speaking well. Being able to prepare a speech or recall it later is a legitimate ability; the durability of
what’s good is, all else equal, good. But a remembered speech is only as good as the speech itself; the only things worth preserving are those things worth having come by or been written in the first place. Thus Socrates glosses Thamos as saying *grammata* are for reminding those who already know. *Grammata* would also remind those who were mistaken of that about which they were mistaken, but then a script’s durability would not be valuable.

*Wisdom and Apparent Wisdom*

*Grammata*’s relation to memory has throughout the Myth, and the dialogue, been paired with its relation to wisdom. Indeed, a closer reading of the Myth has shown that Socrates must mean by memory something rather similar to wisdom. Theuth’s claim that reliance on memorized *grammata* could make one seem wise without actually being wise reinforces what we’ve discovered above. Memorizing could make someone appear wise, either to others or to oneself, when what one memorized itself seemed wise. Speaking on the basis of memorization itself—spontaneous talking—produces no particular impression except for spontaneity. So it’s not the memorization of *grammata*—which could sound stupid, or garbled, or irrelevant—that would lead to the false appearance of wisdom; therefore the appearance of wisdom is not a consequence simply of *memorization*. It is the consequence of repeating things someone else or you said that sound wise in the new context. For such things to sound wise in the new context, they must seem appropriate to the new context. Such portability requires that the string of words seem divorceable from its original context; it must seem responsive to more than a single interlocutor on more than a single occasion. But seeming wise isn’t the same as being so. On the one hand, the first use of some speech might have been wise, but on subsequent uses, at new times and for new people, the same speech would not have been wise. On the other hand, in an effort to make a speech seem wise to potentially many people, the writer may have paid attention only to what many people might come to believe, not to what is really wise and true (cf. 260a1-4). No doubt it can be helpful to stock up on excellently phrased advice or persuasive arguments or beautiful and memorable descriptions; there is no argument against having or memorizing a commonplace

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37 The Charioteer myth seems to use the language of memory and remembering universals to describe wisdom.
book. But being able to reproduce things that seem wise does not suffice for being wise, just as having an excellent pharmacopoeia on hand does not suffice for being a good doctor.

Just as being able to reproduce wise-sounding speeches does not make one wise, producing them doesn’t suffice either. There is surely much skill in producing wise-sounding things, including facility with, say, expansion or compression (267b2), laconisms and the use of argument form, using what people believe, and so forth. But this skill is not wisdom. Composition doesn’t obligate one to use these superficial devices, but when writing in the absence of an immediate audience, one may be encouraged to focus not on one’s ethical obligations to one’s friends or fellow deliberators, but instead on gathering up one’s rhetorical devices. Since composing takes a long time, one may be enticed into writing something rather general, once-and-for-all, useful for any range of audiences, and thus not wholly responsive to any particular person. And, it is possible that, in the excitement of assembling a speech, one will neglect certain virtues—truth, audience, pedagogy, etc.—in favor of, say, “invention” or “arrangement.”

**Being Difficult to Be With**

Thamos’ final charge is that dependence on grammata will make people difficult to be with. The verb he uses for association, suneinai, though it can refer to intimate relations, refers more broadly to the time spent with one’s companions, generally in diverse conversation, or even in large groups. Thamos must include this reference to the moral dimension to show that his argument against grammata doesn’t depend purely on matters of self-interest. You may not care about your own memory or wisdom, but you’ve got to care about your effect on other people. This effect may be minor, as when we confront know-it-alls at parties, or the effect may be grave, as when we confront in formal political settings conceited people who mistake their ability to advise their peers. Indeed, Plato’s dialogues seem almost universally an indictment of those highly-placed individuals whose confidence in their leadership or powers of advice far exceeds their ability to substantiate that confidence. We know little about Phaedrus’ potential for public influence, but his friendship with the very influential Lysias, his vigorous involvement

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39 Hence Aristotle’s *Topics* and *Rhetoric*.
41 Hippias is perhaps the most notable example, a man who lauds his speeches meant to educate the youth about how to live finely solely on the basis of their formal properties (*Hip.M.* 286a).
in speech-production (242b1), and the way Phaedrus and Socrates joke about his pushiness (236d1-7, 242b2) suggest that his zeal could be a risk to himself and to others. A reliance on *grammata* can cause a lack of self-knowledge, and this ignorance of oneself, coupled with an incomplete discovery of wisdom, can lead to a failure of justice.

**Summary**

Reliance on *grammata* without accompanying reliance on one’s own faculties of reflection and discussion leads to three problems: (i) the failure of memory and cognitive ability, which is to say, understanding; (ii) the failure of self-knowledge, knowing what one is committing oneself to; and (iii) failure of justice or virtue, which is what being difficult to be around amounts to. There is no claim, much less an argument, about avoiding *grammata*. But any value from *grammata* will come not from their introduction, but from something else. We might call it “serious writing” or “serious consideration” or “serious reading” (*spoudê*: 276e5), depending on which moment of memorization is at issue. This seriousness presumably comes from something people already could know how to do: dealing with the hazards of life. And we might suspect that just as Plato depicts the kind of conversations Socrates’ arguments seem to urge people into, Socrates depicts in Thamos’ assessment the kind of reading, assessment, or judgment his criticism of *grammata* urges. Deliberate conversation depends not only on advanced methods of distinction (266b3-c1, 265d3-6), though this may be a way of speaking about the conversational ideal of clarity and consistency (d7). It seems to involve, as well, speaking in all the ways Socrates does, and, perhaps most importantly, speaking on and on (258e6-259d8, 227b9-11).^{42}

**Explanations for the Use of (This) Myth**

Going back through the Myth of Theuth would bring the good reader to see that memory, considered in its breadth, is being spoken of as something hardly different from wisdom. Because it is absurd to think that one becomes wise—lives well or helps others live well—simply by saying things others have once said about living well or by coming up with things that may sound wise, it is absurd to think that memorizing what people have written will by itself augment wisdom.^{43} It is reasonable, however, to think that composition can be helpful, especially

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^{42} For the range of everyday uses of the term *dialegesthai* across the Socratic dialogues, see Dixsaut (2001).

^{43} This is the theme of Nightingale (1995), ch. 4, and Ferrari (1987).
for organizing the thoughts one has had, for oneself or others. Planting crops in a line may not increase their yield, but it does simplify their harvest. Part of self-knowledge, and thus of wisdom, may be knowing what thoughts tend most readily to be forgotten but tend as well to be of most value, and thus which ones, and in which ways, should be recorded.

Socrates’ lesson in the Myth is apt; Phaedrus must remember that cultivating his ideas must follow understanding them and those people, including himself, on whom he ought to use them. The relevance and value of the lesson, however, does not itself explain why Socrates tells it as a myth, or as this myth in particular.

Asking why Socrates uses myth or the Myth of Theuth specifically contributes not just to a survey of Socrates’ pedagogical panoply. In this Phaedrean case there is the suspicion that a critique of composition has special resonance in its coming in the form of a story rather than through continued discussion or question-and-answer exchange. We might be wary about a lesson about how to read well put in the form of something which needs to be read well. For what if Phaedrus were to read this story badly? Might he simply dismiss it on the basis of its dubious provenance, as Socrates denounces the sophisticated rationalizers for dismissing the other strange stories of Greek mythology with their rustic wisdom (229e)? Might Phaedrus find the absence of explicit reasons given for Theuth’s position instantly prejudicial to that position? Might he even think that one just has to try even harder to memorize clandestinely? In other words, why would Socrates risk having Phaedrus interpret a story when he already believes Phaedrus is not inclined to interpret well? Why not keep leading Phaedrus through the analysis of composed speeches, as he did elsewhere? Is not the best practice for good conversation further good conversation? Accounting for Socrates’ reasoning will be at best speculative, but I think we can find a plausible enough reason to have confidence Socrates would intend to use a story like this one.

The main reason is that Socrates seems to take Phaedrus as particularly drawn to myths. Phaedrus asks about the Myth of Boreas, and Socrates describes his apathy toward assessing it by appealing to a whole load of other myths he might anticipate Phaedrus wanting to ask about. Then as a sort of reason for giving the palinode Socrates cites Stesichorus’ improbable report of
his poem about Helen (243a5-b7). Then he gives the long and profound Myth of the Charioteer, which Phaedrus adores (257c2), and of the Cicadas, to which Phaedrus seems also to respond well (259d9). We may not be able to explain what exactly draws Phaedrus to myths; it could be their imagery, their cultural currency and resonance and estimation, their handiness, or their popularity in good examples of public speech (e.g., Prot. 320c1-7). But on the assumption that Socrates speaks in a way optimally persuasive to his interlocutor (cf. 272a1-3), Socrates’ use of numerous myths suggests something about Phaedrus’ character. What this is, I am not sure. Perhaps it is Phaedrus’ sensuality, perhaps his slacking attention to question-and-answer conversation, perhaps his lack of promise in following Socrates’ analytic maneuvers. (I don’t know whether the text provides compelling evidence for any of these suggestions; perhaps Plato relied on his reader’s extratextual knowledge of Phaedrus.)

By giving Phaedrus what he finds appealing (but not just pandering to him), Socrates may hope Phaedrus will pay close attention, remember, and wish to return his thoughts to it. If Socrates helps Phaedrus adopt improved reading techniques, Phaedrus may preferentially return to the myths of the conversation; after all, they’re both more memorable and his attitude toward them more in need of work. Since myths are basically unsubstantiated and are, in most respects, implausible on their literal reading, any initial acceptance, on the basis of their traditionality, will call out to be revisited.

It is perhaps harder to say why Socrates uses this myth. Writing had been spoken of often as a mythic invention, in particular by Thoth (Egypt might have been thought to have had a distinctive relationship with writing). By thinking about the introduction of some technique, one can reflect on how human life may have been before that introduction. In this case, we see that a most significant aspect of wisdom, judging something’s benefits and harms, preceded literacy, and is of superior importance. Less significant might be the fact that in querying how writing gratifies the god (275b9), we might consider some gods talking about it. Or to encourage reflecting on whatever one hears, it might be productive for Socrates to show even a god getting

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something wrong (cf. 260a5-6 on testing what even the wise say). Lastly, besides being drawn to myths Phaedrus seems drawn to depictions of conversations.

To explain why Socrates would use this myth suffices to explain why Plato would depict Socrates using this myth, if it’s true that Plato wants generally to depict Socrates speaking to people in ways that will capture their attention and have a chance of getting them to shift their motivation to caring for virtue. But of course there’s the question about why Plato would depict Socrates talking to people with such particular susceptibilities, in this case to mythology. It seems likely that Plato thought that plenty of his readers, or plenty of their friends, shared such susceptibilities to a strong enough degree that he would want to help those readers and friends to think through and talk about their zeal for composition in a way possible for them.  

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