

PHAEDRUS

This is one of the greatest of the dialogues. It should be read with the Symposium. The two together give Plato's idea of love. The Phaedrus is a conversation, not a discourse or a succession of questions and answers directed to a single subject. Socrates and Phaedrus take a walk into the country and talk about whatever occurs to them, but they are Athenians and one of them is Socrates and their notion—and Plato's—of how to pass the time pleasantly while walking is something quite different from our own.

Love is the first matter they take up. Phaedrus has with him a piece of writing about it which he greatly admires and reads to Socrates who objects to it as making love chiefly a physical desire. To him it is an impulse full of beauty and goodness, a kind of divine madness which lifts the soul up and can enable it to enter the path which leads to the truth. The first movement to philosophy, the impulse to seek what is higher—in Plato's phrase, "the beyond"—comes from falling in love with visible, physical beauty.

It is really impossible for us to grasp what beauty meant to the Greeks. It was a mighty power exercising a profound influence upon their daily lives. The greatest leader Thebes produced was said to have told his countrymen that they would never conquer Athens until they had brought the Parthenon to Thebes. Any Greek would understand that. Of course the Thebans would be better men, more courageous, wiser, too, with that beauty always before them. In the Republic, Plato's philosopher-rulers must be graceful as well as wise. Socrates gives Phaedrus a description of what a lover feels which leaves our love poetry far behind. To fall truly in love starts a man on the path upward to where love is satisfied in the perfect beauty of the truth.

The stress in the Phaedrus is on visible beauty, but the reader of Plato must always remember that Socrates, the most beloved and the most lovely of all, was completely without it. Again and again his snub nose is mentioned, his protruding eyes, and so on. He had "no form nor comeliness that we should desire him." His wonderful beauty was within.

The last part of the dialogue is about the inferiority of books and writing in general to pure thought and to discussion concerned only with seeking for knowledge, not with putting it into a shape accept-

able to others, the inferiority of reading to reasoning and of rhetoric to dialectic. The best books do no more than remind us of what we know. The only truly valuable way to write is to inscribe justice and beauty and goodness upon a soul.

227 **SOCRATES:** Where do you come from, Phaedrus my friend, and where are you going?

PHAEDRUS: I've been with Lysias, Socrates, the son of Cephalus, and I'm off for a walk outside the wall, after a long morning's sitting there. On the instructions of our common friend Acumenus I take my walks on the open roads; he tells me that is more invigorating than walking in the colonnades.

b **SOCRATES:** Yes, he's right in saying so. But Lysias, I take it, was in town.

PHAEDRUS: Yes, staying with Epicrates, in that house where Morychus used to live, close to the temple of Olympian Zeus.

SOCRATES: Well, how were you occupied? No doubt Lysias was giving the company a feast of eloquence.

PHAEDRUS: I'll tell you, if you can spare time to come along with me and listen.

SOCRATES: What? Don't you realize that I should account it, in Pindar's words, 'above all business'¹ to hear how you and Lysias passed your time?

c **PHAEDRUS:** Lead on then.

SOCRATES: Please tell me.

PHAEDRUS: As a matter of fact the topic is appropriate for your ears, Socrates, for the discussion that engaged us may be said to have concerned love. Lysias, you must know, has described how a handsome boy was tempted, but not by a lover—that's the clever part of it. He maintains that surrender should be to one who is not in love rather than to one who is.

SOCRATES: Splendid! I wish he would add that it should be to a poor man rather than a rich one, an elderly man rather than a young one, and, in general, to ordinary folk like myself. What an attractive democratic theory that would be! However, I'm so eager to hear about it that I vow I won't leave you even if you extend your

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¹ *Isthmionikai* I.I.

walk as far as Megara, up to the walls and back again as recommended by Herodicus.

PHAEDRUS: What do you mean, my good man? Do you expect 228 an amateur like me to repeat by heart, without disgracing its author, the work of the ablest writer of our day, which it took him weeks to compose at his leisure? That is far beyond me, though I'd rather have had the ability than come into a fortune.

SOCRATES: I know my Phaedrus. Yes indeed, I'm as sure of him as of my own identity. I'm certain that the said Phaedrus didn't listen just once to Lysias' speech; time after time he asked him to repeat it to him, and Lysias was very ready to comply. Even that would not content him. In the end he secured the script and began poring b over the parts that specially attracted him, and thus engaged he sat there the whole morning, until he grew weary and went for a walk. Upon my word, I believe he had learned the whole speech by heart, unless it was a very long one, and he was going into the country to practice declaiming it. Then he fell in with one who has a passion for listening to discourses, and when he saw him he was delighted to think he would have someone to share his frenzied enthusiasm; so he asked him to join him on his way. But when the lover of discourses c begged him to discourse, he became difficult, pretending he didn't want to, though he meant to do so ultimately, even if he had to force himself on a reluctant listener. So beg him, Phaedrus, to do straight-way what he will soon do in any case.

PHAEDRUS: Doubtless it will be much my best course to deliver myself to the best of my ability, for I fancy you will never let me go until I have given you some sort of a speech.

SOCRATES: You are quite right about my intention.

PHAEDRUS: Then here's what I will do. It really is perfectly d true, Socrates, that I have not got the words by heart, but I will sketch the general purport of the several points in which the lover and the nonlover were contrasted, taking them in order one by one, and beginning at the beginning.

SOCRATES: Very well, my dear fellow, but you must first show me what it is that you have in your left hand under your cloak, for I surmise that it is the actual discourse. If that is so, let me assure you of this, that much as I love you I am not altogether inclined to let e you practice your oratory on me when Lysias himself is here present. Come now, show it me.

PHAEDRUS: Say no more, Socrates; you have dashed my hope of trying out my powers on you. Well, where would you like us to sit for our reading?

SOCRATES: Let us turn off here and walk along the Ilissus; 229 then we can sit down in any quiet spot you choose.

PHAEDRUS: It's convenient, isn't it, that I chance to be bare-foot; you of course always are so. There will be no trouble in wading

in the stream, which is especially delightful at this hour of a summer's day.

SOCRATES: Lead on then, and look out for a place to sit down.

PHAEDRUS: You see that tall plane tree over there?

SOCRATES: To be sure.

b PHAEDRUS: There's some shade, and a little breeze, and grass to sit down on, or lie down if we like.

SOCRATES: Then make for it.

PHAEDRUS: Tell me, Socrates, isn't it somewhere about here that they say Boreas seized Orithyia from the river?

SOCRATES: Yes, that is the story.

PHAEDRUS: Was this the actual spot? Certainly the water looks charmingly pure and clear; it's just the place for girls to be playing beside the stream.

c SOCRATES: No, it was about a quarter of a mile lower down, where you cross to the sanctuary of Agra; there is, I believe, an altar dedicated to Boreas close by.

PHAEDRUS: I have never really noticed it, but pray tell me, Socrates, do you believe that story to be true?

SOCRATES: I should be quite in the fashion if I disbelieved it, as the men of science do. I might proceed to give a scientific account of how the maiden, while at play with Pharmacia, was blown by a gust of Boreas down from the rocks hard by, and having thus met her death was said to have been seized by Boreas, though it may have happened on the Areopagus, according to another version of the occurrence. For my part, Phaedrus, I regard such theories as no doubt attractive, but as the invention of clever, industrious people who are not exactly to be envied, for the simple reason that they must then go on and tell us the real truth about the appearance of centaurs and the Chimera, not to mention a whole host of such creatures, Gorgons and Pegasus and countless other remarkable monsters of legend flocking in on them. If our skeptic, with his somewhat crude science, means to reduce every one of them to the standard of probability, he'll need a deal of time for it. I myself have certainly no time for the business, and I'll tell you why, my friend. I can't as yet 'know myself,' as the inscription at Delphi enjoins, and so long as that ignorance remains it seems to me ridiculous to inquire into extraneous matters. Consequently I don't bother about such things, but accept the current beliefs about them, and direct my inquiries, as I have just said, rather to myself, to discover whether I really am a more complex creature and more puffed up with pride than Typhon, or a simpler, gentler being whom heaven has blessed with a quiet, un-Typhonic nature. By the way, isn't this the tree we were making for?

PHAEDRUS: Yes, that's the one.

SOCRATES: Upon my word, a delightful resting place, with this tall, spreading plane, and a lovely shade from the high branches of

the *agnos*. Now that it's in full flower, it will make the place ever so fragrant. And what a lovely stream under the plane tree, and how cool to the feet! Judging by the statuettes and images I should say it's consecrated to Achelous and some of the nymphs. And then too, c isn't the freshness of the air most welcome and pleasant, and the shrill summery music of the cicada choir! And as crowning delight the grass, thick enough on a gentle slope to rest your head on most comfortably. In fact, my dear Phaedrus, you have been the stranger's perfect guide.

PHAEDRUS: Whereas you, my excellent friend, strike me as the oddest of men. Anyone would take you, as you say, for a stranger being shown the country by a guide instead of a native—never leaving town to cross the frontier nor even, I believe, so much as setting foot outside the walls. d

SOCRATES: You must forgive me, dear friend; I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do. Yet you seem to have discovered a recipe for getting me out. A hungry animal can be driven by dangling a carrot or a bit of greenstuff in front of it; similarly if you proffer me volumes of speeches I don't doubt you can cart me all round Attica, and anywhere else you please. Anyhow, now that we've got here I propose for the time being to lie down, and you can choose whatever posture you think most convenient for reading, and proceed. e

PHAEDRUS: Here you are then.

You know how I am situated, and I have told you that I think it to our advantage that this should happen. Now I claim that I should not be refused what I ask simply because I am not your lover. Lovers, 231 when their craving is at an end, repent of such benefits as they have conferred, but for the other sort no occasion arises for regretting what has passed. For being free agents under no constraint, they regulate their services by the scale of their means, with an eye to their own personal interest. Again, lovers weigh up profit and loss accruing to their account by reason of their passion, and with the extra item of labor expended decide that they have long since made full payment for favors received, whereas the nonlovers cannot allege any consequential neglect of their personal affairs, nor record any past exertions on the debit side, nor yet complain of having quarreled with their relatives; hence, with all these troubles removed, all they have left to do is to devote their energies to such conduct as they conceive likely to gratify the other party. b

Again, it is argued that a lover ought to be highly valued because c he professes to be especially kind toward the loved one, and ready to gratify him in words and deeds while arousing the dislike of everyone else. If this is true, however, it is obvious that he will set greater store by the loved one of tomorrow than by that of today, and will doubtless do an injury to the old love if required by the new.