

## Introduction to Plato read in Greek

The purpose of my reading Plato aloud in Greek is to promote understanding of his Greek with as little interference from one's own mother tongue as possible and thus enjoying his writings as fully as possible. I have begun with the *Phaedrus*, which – against the prevalent opinion of scholars – I consider to be Plato's first dialogue. (The reason for this dating can be found in *The Lost Plato*.)

For the purpose of reading the dialogue I have divided it into relatively short sections, eighty six in total, my aim being to read each clause and sentence so as to elucidate their meaning, not to obscure it; for reading aloud can do both. When I tried to make the sections longer, my concentration faltered and I began to make mistakes, and the same is true concerning one's listening to the sections. If the sections were longer, it would be difficult to keep concentration, which is prerequisite if one is not to lose the track of what is said. The slightest lapse of concentration results in losing this or that word, which in itself is distracting and results in one's losing this or that clause, and consequently the meaning of all that one had already listened to.

Listening to Plato without the text in one's hands is a demanding task, which presupposes the most advanced knowledge of Ancient Greek. To encourage, promote, and help in the attainment and cultivation of the required knowledge of Greek is the ultimate goal of the recording, yet I should like at the same time to open the road toward the enjoyment of the original for beginners. This is why I have begun to prepare detailed lexical and grammatical companions to accompany each section. Instead of guiding students to analyse each sentence and translate it into English, which I believe is still the main approach to the study of Ancient Greek wherever it is taught, I do the analysing in the hope that this will enable them to understand each sentence in Greek. So far I have prepared and put on line companions to the first six sections, which comprise the introductory part of the dialogue, up to Lysias' erotic paignion; enough, I believe, to give a serious beginner a good start.

Contemporary Classical studies, and Platonic scholarship in particular, appear to be in trouble. All the great works have been translated not once, but many times, and great books on Plato have been written. What teacher of Classics can promise his or her

students that a great book on Homer, Aeschylus or Herodotus is what he or she, and the culturally demanding public, are expecting of them? What teacher of Ancient Philosophy can inspire their students with the ambition of writing a great book on Plato or Aristotle, surpassing in originality and scholarly rigour all that has been achieved by past generations of scholars? If Classical studies are to survive in any worthwhile form, then the whole purpose of this enterprise must completely change. The question must be what can the study of Homer and Herodotus, of Euripides and Aristophanes, of Plato and Aristotle bring to the life and to the moral and intellectual well-being of those who undertake it. In bringing this question into focus, understanding the great treasures of the Greek literary heritage in the original, with as little interference from one's mother tongue as possible, becomes imperative. If this is to be attempted, then such companions as I have prepared for the first six sections of the *Phaedrus* ought to be prepared for all dialogues of Plato, for all the major works of Aristotle, for Homer, Herodotus and Thucydides, in short, for all the major works of the Ancient Greeks. Students ought to be provided with an opportunity of entering the world of the Ancient Greeks starting with any of those works. But approaching the original texts with such linguistic companions is only the first step. A serious student of Plato should aim at deriving the elucidation of the Greek texts from the texts as such; to achieve this one cannot be satisfied with reading one, two, or three dialogues of Plato, one must read the whole of Plato in the original, and to do so not only once, but many times, and not only Plato, but all the great works of the Greek poets, historians and rhetoricians, beginning with Homer.

At this point you may object: but this would take a lifetime of single-minded devotion. Who can possibly have time for such an enormous task, what society could fund an endeavour, which at its best would be limited to only a few? If the only honest alternative is the death of Classical studies and Ancient Philosophy, so let them die. And anyway, if there is anything of lasting interest in them, one can get it from the many translations of those works that we have! I can vouch for it that at least as far as Plato is concerned even the best translations impoverish and distort his thought. (In *The Lost Plato* many such distortions are pointed out and discussed; see esp. Ch 3 'A critical review of doctrinal arguments for and against the late dating of the *Phaedrus*', and Ch 9 'Plato's shortest dialogue' together with 'The Interlude: The *Clitopho* of Slings'.) But even if one granted me this point, one might object that

reading Plato aloud and listening to his dialogues does not facilitate understanding of his thought. The very speed with which one must apprehend the text when listening to its being read aloud is an obstacle; to understand the text properly one must have time to digest it, to thoroughly comprehend each sentence, each paragraph, each dialogue as a whole both on its own and within the context of the Platonic Corpus in its totality. This can be achieved only by perceiving the text through the eyes, which allows us to dwell on each word, clause, sentence, paragraph and dialogue as long as is needed.

At this point I must confess that when I began to record my reading of Plato, I did it solely with my own needs in mind. Some time ago my eyesight suddenly sharply deteriorated, which was caused by the blockage of some of the tiny arteries on the retina. I began to be seriously worried that soon a day would come when I should be unable to read Greek texts. Luckily, I stumbled upon an eye exercise which unblocked the arteries. When that happened, I became determined to make sure that any future loss of my eyesight would not deprive me of my enjoying the Greeks, and Plato in particular. This is why I began to record the *Phaedrus*. I knew of course that I had to familiarize myself anew with the text of each section by reading it silently before recording it, which I dutifully did. But to my surprise, in my attempt to convey the meaning of each sentence adequately when reading it aloud I failed miserably. I erased the recording prior to listening to it, and started again from scratch. I became satisfied with my next attempt at recording as I was doing it, but when I listened to the recording with my eyes closed I realized that I still failed to convey the meaning of each sentence properly. And so I erased the recording and started again, until I became satisfied that my reading elucidated the text instead of distorting and obfuscating it. When that happened, I became aware that my listening to what I had recorded opened for me an entirely new way of experiencing and enjoying the text.

So far I have recorded and put on my website the *Phaedrus*, the *Charmides*, and the *Hippias Major*. I will soon be adding recordings of the *Lysis*, *Hippias Minor*, *Clitopho*, *Meno* and *Euthyphro*. But the difficulty that I encountered when recording the first section of the *Phaedrus* remains basically the same; it is only with the third, or at best with the second recording that I can be satisfied. What can be the reason for it? What causes the gap between perceiving the meaning of each sentence and each section to my full satisfaction in the course of the initial reading, when I do so

silently, and then attempting to convey that meaning adequately when I read the text aloud? I think that the structure and the function of our brain provides the answer to this paradox. The visual cortex is located in a different part of brain from the auditory one, and both are located in a different part from the one that brings into action and regulates our speech organs. If one is to read the given text aloud so as to elucidate its meaning, the activity of these disparate parts of brain must be fully integrated into one in the process of appropriation and communication of the meaning of the given text. But this cannot be the whole story, for this does not explain how it can happen that I can become satisfied with the recording when I am doing it, and yet be dissatisfied with it when finally listening to it with my eyes closed, for in both cases the auditory function of the brain is fully activated and employed. Part of the answer may be that listening to the text with my eyes closed I can fully concentrate on critically assessing the degree to which I succeeded in conveying the meaning of the text properly. But again, this cannot be the crux of the matter, for, paradoxically, I find my listening to the text to be by far the most demanding, yet at the same time most rewarding activity. So what may be the reason for it? I believe that in purely listening to the text the deepest strata of our being becomes engaged, for the interconnection between our thinking and the auditory expression of our thought is by far the oldest connection, preceding the connection between the written word and thought by dozens of millennia. Furthermore, when we think our thoughts emerge from the subconscious in auditory form – we hear the words in our mind, we do not see them written. It is this most fundamental level of interconnection between the subconscious and the articulation of thought in our mind that is directly and exclusively involved and engaged in pure listening to the text.

When I read and listen to a given section of the *Phaedrus*, I do not even think of Plato, let alone the dating and interpretation of his dialogues; I am fully preoccupied with the task of understanding what Socrates wants to say to Phaedrus and Phaedrus to Socrates. I am beginning to believe that these brief and intensive excursions into Greek thought, which each section represents, allow me to go beyond Plato, to immerse myself in the most fundamental structures of Ancient Greek on the basis of which and in the interaction with which Plato's thought was generated. This is why I should like to do the same not only with the rest of Plato's dialogues, but with Xenophon and Aristotle, Herodotus, Thucydides, Lysias, Isocrates and Demosthenes.

I hope that Classical scholars will join me and that we will thus jointly open the possibility of full enjoyment of Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes for ourselves and for the coming generations.

Paradoxically, the greater intellectual and moral benefits one derives from thus immersing oneself in the world of Plato and of the Ancient Greeks, the greater contribution one can make to the most pressing tasks in front of which mankind now stands. The premises on which our capitalist system runs are unsustainable. Producing more and more goods will destroy the very possibility of existence on this planet. Humans must focus on satisfying and cultivating our true physical and intellectual needs, and thus on our true well-being. What are our true physical, moral, and intellectual needs? The needs the satisfaction of which allows each of us to aspire to attaining our physical, moral, and intellectual optimum. Each of us is different, the ways of pursuing our optimum is different for each of us. In physical terms, not everyone can reach his or her optimum by climbing Mt Everest, but this does not mean that climbing mountains should not be open to all those who can enjoy it and derive benefit from it. Appropriating the Greeks to the full is not open to everyone, but those of us who have the intellectual capacity to make the world of the Ancients their own and share their experience with others do themselves a disservice if they let their ability atrophy, their potential remain unfulfilled, and in doing so they impoverish all of mankind.