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Deus ille noster: Platonic Precedent and the Construction of the Interlocutors in Cicero's *De oratore*[*]

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SUMMARY: In a letter to Atticus defending the treatment of Scaevola in *De oratore*, Cicero appeals both to the example of Plato, "that god of ours," and to the memory of what the real Scaevola was actually like. Turning from the letter to *De oratore* itself, I show how this juxtaposition of Platonic divinity and Roman memory reflects a pattern present in the prefaces to each of the three books. I argue that Cicero presents his characters, in pointed response to Plato in general and the *Phaedrus* in particular, in such a way as to privilege history and oratory over philosophy.

IN THE LATE SPRING OF 54 B.C.E., ATTICUS SENT CICERO A LETTER THAT contained, among other things, some comments on the recently published dialogue *De oratore*, which he had apparently just finished reading. In general he seems to have been complimentary about the work—at least to judge by the letter Cicero wrote in answer (*Att*. 4.16, as always the surviving half of the exchange), which refers to praise on two separate occasions.[1] Yet Atticus did venture to register one small cavil: he lamented the absence from the dialogue's later sections of the interlocutor Q. Mucius Scaevola, whom Cicero had caused to leave the scene of the conversation at the end of the first book. And this prompted Cicero to mount a vigorous and rather interesting defense. He had not, he explains in his reply, removed the *persona* of Scaevola

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[1] *Att*. 4.16.2: *in oratoriis, quos tu in caelum fers* ("in my oratorical works, which you exalt into the sky"); *Att*. 4.16.3: *in iis libris quos laudas* ("in those books that you praise"). Shackleton Bailey 1965 ad loc. dates Cicero's reply to the period between June 28th and July 3rd.

for no reason; instead he had followed in the footsteps of Plato (*Att*. 4.16.3): *non eam temere dimovi, sed feci idem quod in* Πολιτείᾳ *deus ille noster Plato* ("I did not take it away thoughtlessly, but I did the same thing that that god of ours, Plato, did in the *Republic*"). For just as Plato had made the rich and elderly Cephalus excuse himself from the discussion at an early stage—a decision that Cicero attributes to a recognition on Plato's part that it would "scarcely be sufficiently fitting" (*vix ... satis consonum*) to make an old man stay throughout so long a conversation—so he had caused Scaevola to depart at the end of *De oratore* 1 because he realized, with even greater urgency, that it would be "hardly appropriate" (*vix satis decorum*) to allow such a man—whom Atticus, he points out, would remember as having been old and frail and full of official dignities—to linger at Crassus's villa.[2] Moreover, Cicero adds, while the topics treated in the first part of the dialogue were not alien to the historical Scaevola's actual interests and pursuits,[3] the material in the latter two books was a matter of specialist *technologia*: "and I did not wish that that jovial old man—you know how he was—should be present for that."[4]

The substance of Cicero's defense is straightforward and unexceptionable: it would have been incongruous and implausible for a distinguished *senex* to remain present for the whole discussion. What is notable is the complex and seemingly overdetermined way in which Cicero frames and elaborates upon this central point. On the one hand, there is the appeal to Plato, whose status is rather dramatically elevated to that of a god and whose treatment of Cephalus is interpreted in such a way as to provide a general and generically appropriate warrant for the importance of maintaining decorum in the representation of an old man.[5] On the other hand, there is the recollection of the real Scaevola, whose particular characteristics—not only age, but also social status and personality—are presented as a solid and specific standard from which his *persona* in the dialogue should not deviate. To be sure, this twofold approach is well suited to the practical purpose of influencing Atticus, upon whose shared esteem for Plato ("that god of *ours*") and personal knowledge of Scaevola ("*you* know how he was") Cicero sharply insists.[6]

[2] On the significance of the letter for interpreting *De oratore*, see Schütrumpf 1988: 237 and Fantham 2004: 15–16.

[3] For what is known about the historical Scaevola, see Meyer 1970: 136–48.

[4] *Huic ioculatorem senem illum, ut noras, interesse sane nolui*.

[5] For the speculation that Cicero is in fact misinterpreting Plato's motive for removing Cephalus, see Fantham 2004: 16n29.

[6] Atticus's devotion to Plato seems to have been something that Cicero enjoyed asserting. See *Leg*. 3.1, where it is presented as evidence of Atticus's failure to abide by Epicurean orthodoxy.

But Cicero is not simply trying here to persuade by any means necessary. In fact the juxtaposition of Platonic ideals and Roman historical memory is a recurring phenomenon within *De oratore* itself, and when read against that background, the details of Cicero's self-defense take on greater significance. In particular, his description of Plato as a "god," which might at first appear to be just a conventional type of hyperbole, points directly to his programmatic use of the language of divinity whenever, in the prefaces to all three books of the dialogue, he turns to discuss the nature of his characters in light of Platonic precedent.[7]

The story begins, not coincidentally, with the dialogue's portrayal of Scaevola himself, who in spite of his eventual early departure is assigned the crucial task of getting the conversation under way. The setting, Cicero has just informed the reader, is Crassus's villa at Tusculum, whither the owner has withdrawn, in the company of his father-in-law Scaevola, his friend Antonius, and two rising younger men, Sulpicius and Cotta (the latter of whom Cicero designates as his eyewitness source for the events described), for a short respite during the *Ludi Romani* in the year 91. Back in Rome the political situation is unsettled (the consul Philippus has recently gone on the offensive against the powerful tribune Livius Drusus), and so we are told that on the interlocutors' first day at the villa the conversation, which Cicero does not report in detail, was all about "the times and the whole public situation" (*De or.* 1.26). On the morning of the second day, however, Scaevola starts things off by suggesting that the group adopt a more relaxed posture (*De or.* 1.28):

[7] This is one of four places in the Ciceronian corpus where Plato is described in divine terms. The other three are *Leg.* 3.1 (*divinum illum virum*), *De optimo genere oratorum* 17 (*divinus auctor Plato*), and *Nat. D.* 2.32 (*Platonem quasi deum philosophorum*). See De Graff 1940: 144n7 for a full listing of passages where Cicero signifies any kind of admiration for Plato. See Cole 2006 for Cicero's contribution to the ideology of deification in the speeches and later dialogues. On the subject of divine philosophers in particular, the best starting point is still Pease 1958; see his notes on 1.43 and 2.32. For the Epicureans' habit of referring to their founder as divine (as famously at Lucr. 5.8), see Fauth 1973. Further contributions have typically been made indirectly, often by scholars of early Christianity who wish to associate the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus with Hellenistic notions of the θεῖος ἀνήρ. See Bieler 1935–36: 9–20 and, along similar lines, cf. Corrington 1986: 84–110. For later rhetorical uses of *divinus*, applied to Cicero himself by declaimers eager to bask in his glory, see Kaster 1998: 256, with n15 for a survey of Cicero's own usage. For the political uses of apotheosis in the late republic, see Weinstock 1971: 287–96. For more general discussions of Cicero's debt to Plato see, *inter alia*, De Graff 1940, Douglas 1962, Zoll 1962, Burkert 1965, Boyancé 1970, Gigon 1971, and Long 1995. There is little sign of an emerging consensus about the relationship between the two authors.

> cur non imitamur, Crasse, Socratem illum, qui est in Phaedro Platonis? nam me haec tua platanus admonuit, quae non minus ad opacandum hunc locum patulis est diffusa ramis, quam illa, cuius umbram secutus est Socrates, quae mihi videtur non tam ipsa acula, quae describitur, quam Platonis oratione crevisse, et quod ille durissimis pedibus fecit, ut se abiceret in herba atque ita [illa], quae philosophi divinitus ferunt esse dicta, loqueretur, id meis pedibus certe concedi est aequius.
>
> Crassus, why don't we imitate Socrates, as he appears in Plato's *Phaedrus*? For this plane tree of yours has brought this notion to my mind. It is broad, with spreading branches, and is no less suited to covering this place in shade than that tree whose shadow Socrates sought—a tree that seems to me to have grown not so much because of the stream that is described as because of Plato's words. And what that man, with his very well-hardened feet, did—casting himself down on the grass and thus speaking things which the philosophers say were spoken divinely—surely can be conceded to *my* feet with greater justice.

The passage should be striking in light of the letter to Atticus, to which it bears a marked resemblance. At the outset there is an identical concern with "doing the same thing" that had been done in one of Plato's books: as Cicero, in explaining why Scaevola had to leave, refers to the departure of Cephalus in the *Republic*, so Scaevola, in proposing to rest beneath the plane tree, seeks validation in the behavior of Socrates in the *Phaedrus*. Then there is a parallel movement from remembering the Platonic paradigm to dealing with practical exigencies. In the letter, as we saw, Cicero progresses from considering the godlike stature of Plato and the exemplary precedent of Cephalus to informing Atticus that an early departure was all the more necessary in the specific case of Scaevola, given his actual characteristics as a historical figure. Here Scaevola in like manner portrays the situation in the *Phaedrus* in ethereal terms—Socrates speaking "divinely" beneath a plane tree that, rather than growing and dying, exists in an eternal present because of Plato's *oratio*—then descends from this notional realm to the concrete conditions of his own world, which features not only an actual plane tree but actual feet that require an actual rest.

Scaevola's opening statement nicely expresses a certain philistine charm, much in keeping with the portrait of a "jovial old man" that Cicero would later sketch in the letter to Atticus. But it also serves the more profound purpose of establishing the setting for the whole dialogue in terms of a complex synthesis between the ideal and the real, the timeless and the temporal, the Platonic and the Roman. Its logic requires careful explication.[8] In Crassus's

[8] For somewhat different interpretations of the plane tree from the one I offer here, see Görler 1988: 216–23, Vasaly 1993: 27–28, and Zetzel 2003: 119–23.

garden Scaevola notices a plane tree with spreading branches that provide excellent shade. This alone, one might think, would be sufficient to tempt him, *senex* that he is, to suggest repose beneath it. Instead, the sight makes him think of the *Phaedrus*, and of an archetypal tree created and sustained by Plato's prose. This then reminds him of what Socrates did—namely, resting under the tree and conversing.[9] And that in turn leads Scaevola to consider, in a comparative fashion, the quality of Crassus's tree (no less shady than the one in the *Phaedrus*) and the state of his feet (more tender than those of Socrates, and therefore more entitled to relief). "If Socrates could do it, then so can I—and I actually need to rest right now." The real thus puts him in mind of the ideal, which then, juxtaposed with his particular situation, justifies real action. Scaevola's proposal is not, in other words, a simple matter either of responding to immediate stimulus or of desiring to imitate for imitation's sake. It is rather a case of using Plato to grant broader significance to the facts on the ground and using the facts on the ground to give practical substance to the Platonic pattern.[10]

[9] In fact, Scaevola seems to be under a misapprehension about the actual content of the *Phaedrus*. In his description of Plato's scenery, he identifies Socrates as the one who sought out the shade of the plane tree. In reality, however, Phaedrus is the character who notices the tree and suggests its shade as a place for discussion (*Phdr.* 229a–b), and Plato goes to some lengths to stress this point, since it is connected to Socrates' lack of familiarity with the Athenian countryside and his preference for the human pageant within the city walls. The discrepancy might signify a lapse of memory on Cicero's part, but given the prominence of the country-city theme in the *Phaedrus*, it is more likely that the error is part of a conscious strategy, meant to show that Scaevola retains a degree of freedom in his response to the Platonic model. Cicero may also have wanted to stress the importance of the plane tree as a central symbol of Plato's literary achievement: to have Socrates rather than Phaedrus seek its shade could be a way of suggesting that Socrates, too, is as timeless a creation as the tree, since, owing to Plato, both of them continue to exist in the imagination long after their natural lives have ended. Cicero will return to similar themes at the beginning of *De legibus*, where his own literary ability is said to have a created a timeless image of an oak tree associated with Marius (*Leg.* 1.2). See Görler 1988: 218–20 for comparison of the two trees in the two dialogues.

[10] See Görler 1988: 234–35, who finds (perceptively, in my view) a correspondence between *De oratore* and the *Aeneid* as works that both treat history in terms of "prefiguration, projection, typology." Not surprisingly, Cicero's treatment of rhetorical *imitatio* in Book 2 of *De oratore* (89–98) offers some important parallels to this particular model of a literary relationship. At this point in the dialogue we learn that imitation of an appropriate exemplar is vital to the formation of the orator. It is not, however, a sterile process of simple mimicry—rather the student of eloquence attaches himself to a model who helps him develop his full potential. The case study discussed in *De oratore* is that of Sulpicius

Scaevola's statement that Socrates in the *Phaedrus* spoke things *quae philosophi divinitus ferunt esse dicta* is especially important in this regard, inasmuch as it echoes and contrasts with a claim about the interlocutors in *De oratore* that Cicero has reported a few lines earlier. In recalling what Cotta (according to the historical fiction of the dialogue) had told him about the discussion held on the first day at the villa, Cicero says the following (*De or.* 1.26):

> hi primo die de temporibus deque universa re publica, quam ob causam venerant, multum inter se usque ad extremum tempus diei conlocuti sunt. quo quidem in sermone multa divinitus a tribus illis consularibus Cotta deplorata et commemorata narrabat; ut nihil incidisset postea civitati mali, quod non impendere illi tanto ante vidissent.
>
> On the first day these men conversed much among themselves, until the very end of the day, about the times and the whole public situation (on account of which they had come). And indeed in this discussion—so Cotta used to recount—many things were divinely deplored and called to mind by those three consulars, such that none of the evil that afterwards befell the community was not seen by them long before to be already impending.

Like Socrates, then, the *personae* of *De oratore* are reported to have spoken *divinitus*, in a manner more than human and therefore worthy of remembrance.[11] But there the similarity ends. In Socrates' case it is philosophers in

and Crassus; the former man's imitation of the latter is said to be productive because of a pre-existing and natural similarity between the styles of each (*De or.* 2.89). This kind of imitation leads not to endless repetition but to general evolution of style and ability, as each generation improves on the example set by predecessors. See Fantham 1973 and, along somewhat different lines, Gunderson 2000: 214–18 for further discussion. Cicero's handling of Plato can easily be mapped onto the same scheme: the two writers share enough similarities to make *imitatio* possible, but it does not follow that Cicero's homage to Plato is tantamount to an admission of inferiority. The end result is not a return to earlier models but the attainment of new possibilities.

[11] Commentators have paid surprisingly little attention to the proximity between the two uses of *divinitus*. Wilkins 1892 ad loc. notes simply that in 1.28 *divinitus* means "little more than 'admirably,'" while stating that in 1.26 it "perhaps retains somewhat of its earlier force, 'with divinely inspired foresight.'" Leeman and Pinkster 1981–2008 ad loc. gloss Cotta's *divinitus* with "unter göttlicher Inspiration, in prophetischer Weise" and then list other locations in the text where *divinitus* recurs. They do not draw attention to the unusually short interval between Cotta's *divinitus* and Scaevola's, and the latter receives no comment of its own. May and Wisse 2001 take a better approach in translating *divinitus* in both instances as "in inspired fashion"—a phrase that communicates both

general who make the judgment, which is treated by Scaevola in a distanced manner, as something beyond his expertise or interest.[12] Concomitantly, the "divine" character of Socrates' discourse must have to do with the expression of philosophical insight into eternal and supernal truths. In the world of *De oratore*, by contrast, the focus is political and historical: the interlocutors (described significantly as "those three consulars") spoke *divinitus* as they foretold future disasters that would befall the commonwealth.[13] The judgment about the nature of their discourse is moreover authorized by a specific Roman (Cotta) who was personally present for their conversation and whose subsequent experience verifies the accuracy of their predictions.

The atmosphere of *De oratore* is thus constructed at the outset in explicitly temporal terms, and in pointed comparison with the *Phaedrus*'s timelessness. The key word is *divinitus*, used to set the political and historical foresight of Cicero's characters on a par with Socrates' philosophical utterances. The effect is to suggest that the Ciceronian dialogue may in its own anti-Platonic way become a model for imitation, but at this point the full ramifications of the comparison are not yet clear. Fortunately, this is by no means the last reference to "divine" speech in the dialogue, as Cicero will return to the theme on the next occasion when he discusses the nature of his characters and the importance of their conversation, in the preface to *De oratore* 2.[14] And there, too, Plato and Socrates are in view.

The second book opens with an extensive *apologia*. The object of the defense is the representation of Antonius and Crassus, and the question at issue is whether the portraits given in the dialogue—of orators fully versed in the *doctrina* of their art—reflect the way the two men were in real life. Cicero maintains that they were in fact familiar with Greek teachers and writings and enthusiastic about the usefulness of such things. The majority view, he posits at the outset, is that Crassus had little learning and Antonius even less (*De or.* 2.1).

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the fundamental meaning of the word and gives some sense in English of the effect of the repetition in Latin. See their introduction, 41n56, for incisive comment on the role played by repetition in the construction of arguments in Latin prose.

[12] See Zetzel 2003: 121–23 and 129–34 for a reading of Scaevola's attitude as emblematic of Cicero's skeptical approach to Greek philosophy throughout *De oratore*.

[13] For the idea that a "great citizen and an almost divine man" would be able to predict future political troubles, see *Rep*. 1.45 (and the discussion by Cole 2006: 75–94).

[14] Görler 1988: 232 notes the repetition of *divinitus* at 1.26, 2.7, and 3.4, and states that divine attributes are "mostly associated with Plato."

In making his case Cicero deploys a number of tactics. He claims to possess testimony from members of his own family who, he says, knew Crassus and Antonius personally and vouched for their interest in Greek learning (*De or.* 2.2). He draws on his own personal experience—as a young man, he himself had been able to question Antonius, and to see at first hand how profound his erudition was (*De or.* 2.3). He then adds an argument from probability: Crassus and Antonius could not have been as eloquent as they were had they not been familiar with every kind of knowledge (*De or.* 2.5). Finally, and most provocatively, he undertakes to explain why, in spite of their learning, the two men nonetheless got a reputation for ignorance (*De or.* 2.4): it was only because they concealed what they knew, out of cultural pride (in the case of Crassus), or the desire not to alienate ignorant audiences (in the case of Antonius). All of this leads up to the idea that *De oratore* is Cicero's means of setting the record straight (*De or.* 2.7):

> quo etiam feci libentius, ut eum sermonem, quem illi quondam inter se de his rebus habuissent, mandarem litteris, vel ut illa opinio, quae semper fuisset, tolleretur, alterum non doctissimum, alterum plane indoctum fuisse; vel ut ea, quae existimarem a summis oratoribus de eloquentia divinitus esse dicta, custodirem litteris, si ullo modo assequi complectique potuissem; vel mehercule etiam, ut laudem eorum, iam prope senescentem, quantum ego possem, ab oblivione hominum atque a silentio vindicarem.
>
> Wherefore I undertook all the more readily to entrust to writing the conversation that they once had among themselves concerning these matters—so that the accepted view, that the one man was not particularly learned and the other frankly uneducated, might be exploded; and so that I might enshrine in writing the things concerning eloquence that I judged were spoken divinely by the greatest orators, if I should be able in any way to realize and encompass them; and indeed, by Hercules, so that I might—so far as I could—rescue their fame, already almost becoming dim, from the forgetfulness of humankind and from silence.

It is a cleverly crafted argument, but of course none of what Cicero claims is actually true.[15] The historical Crassus and Antonius were not covertly learned, and Cicero's goal was not to provide an accurate representation of them or

[15] Leeman and Pinkster 1981–2008: 2.187 lay out most of the internal contradictions in Cicero's argument. On that basis, they argue that the preface of Book 2 should be seen as "literarisches Spiel," or as a mixture of seriousness and playfulness ("Spiel und Ernst in einem"). The nature and purpose of Cicero's defense have been discussed most recently by Hall 1994: 211–16, who explores connections between the preface and the rest of the book. See Fantham 2004: 26–48 on the historical Crassus and Antonius.

their conversation. What Cicero is really doing is to rewrite history so that his invented dialogue will not seem implausible.[16] Such is the nature of dialogues: their fiction is that they are not a fiction. Presumably most of *De oratore*'s readers will have recognized as much.

At the same time, Cicero's way of describing his endeavor should be striking in light of the fact that the language he uses—*ut ea, quae existimarem a summis oratoribus de eloquentia divinitus esse dicta, custodirem litteris*—directly echoes the words of both Cotta and Scaevola at the dialogue's opening. The immediate implications are clear. By recalling the former passage, Cicero constructs a place for himself in the historical line of transmission: Cotta had "narrated" the conversation, and now it is Cicero's duty to transmit it to posterity. Furthermore, by echoing what Scaevola had said, Cicero grants himself a more exalted role: as Plato preserved (or indeed created) the discourse of Socrates, so he will do the same for the discourse of Crassus and Antonius, turning it into a model for the instruction of future generations. We are dealing, once again, with the juxtaposition of Roman memory and the Platonic archetype. This time, though, there is a synthesis of the two. Where Cotta's *divinitus* had applied strictly to conversation about political developments in Rome, and Scaevola's to discussion on philosophical topics in an idealized setting outside the walls of Athens, Cicero's refers to discourse on oratory, a subject that he associates throughout the dialogue with both Roman practice and Greek theory.[17] This synthesis is of a piece with the attempt to present Crassus and Antonius as both historically situated figures and authoritative guides whose thoughts have transcendent value. Meanwhile, the environment within which the conversation takes place—partly Roman and partly Greek, partly real and partly idealized, as we have seen—reinforces the pattern.

Cicero's emphasis on his duty to "entrust to writing" a record of the characters and their discussion adds still another dimension to his engagement with the Platonic ideal. Like Socrates, Crassus and Antonius turn out to have written little (in the case of the latter) or nothing (in the case of the former), and therefore the need for someone else's authorial services is all the more pressing (*De or.* 2.8):

[16] The comparison with his treatment of Scaevola in the letter to Atticus is instructive. In the case of the old augur, Cicero is content to let the record stand, even to the point of arguing that any departure from it would constitute an intolerable strain on credulity. With Antonius and Crassus, on the other hand, Cicero has larger ambitions: his aim is to supplant the existing memory of the two men with his own reconstruction.

[17] See *De or.* 1.5, 1.14, 1.23, 1.208, 2.74, 3.74–75, 3.95.

> nam si ex scriptis cognosci ipsi suis potuissent, minus hoc fortasse mihi esse putassem laborandum: sed cum alter non multum quod quidem exstaret, et id ipsum adolescens, alter nihil admodum scripti reliquisset, deberi hoc a me tantis hominum ingeniis putavi, ut, cum etiam nunc vivam illorum memoriam teneremus, hanc immortalem redderem, si possem.
>
> For if they themselves could have become known from their own writings, I might perhaps have thought there was less need for me to do this work. But since one of them wrote little that is extant, and that when he was still a young man, and the other left behind nothing at all in the way of writing, I thought I owed it to the great talents of these men to make the memory of them immortal, if I could, given that even now we still hold a living recollection of them.

Here the actual content of the *Phaedrus* becomes important, as Cicero's treatment of memory, immortality, and writing recalls and addresses a central concern of the Platonic text. There Socrates had explained that writing can be only the εἴδωλον of "the living and breathing word" (*Phdr.* 276a). At best it serves only as a reminder to people of what they already know (*Phdr.* 275a), and at worst it leads those who rely on it to attain a dangerous immortality and a spurious sort of divine status (*Phdr.* 258b–c):

> ὅταν ἱκανὸς γένηται ῥήτωρ ἢ βασιλεύς, ὥστε λαβὼν τὴν Λυκούργου ἢ Σόλωνος ἢ Δαρείου δύναμιν ἀθάνατος γενέσθαι λογογράφος ἐν πόλει, ἆρ' οὐκ ἰσόθεον ἡγεῖται αὐτός τε αὑτὸν ἔτι ζῶν, καὶ οἱ ἔπειτα γιγνόμενοι ταὐτὰ ταῦτα περὶ αὐτοῦ νομίζουσι, θεώμενοι αὐτοῦ τὰ συγγράμματα;
>
> Whenever an orator or a king arises who has the capacity to assume the power of Lycurgus or Solon or Darius and to become an immortal writer of speeches in the polity, does he himself not then believe that he is equal to a god while he is still alive, and do not those who come after him think these same things about him, as they look upon his writings?

Socrates furthermore avers that (unlike the *rhetor* or the *basileus*) the philosopher does not play with written shadows and images, but develops the arts of memory which allow him to recognize the eternal truth that exists beyond the phenomenal realm (*Phdr.* 249c): διὸ δὴ δικαίως μόνη πτεροῦται ἡ τοῦ φιλοσόφου διάνοια· πρὸς γὰρ ἐκείνοις ἀεί ἐστιν μνήμῃ κατὰ δύναμιν, πρὸς οἷσπερ θεὸς ὢν θεῖός ἐστιν ("For this reason only the thought of a philosopher soars justly—for according to his ability he is always, by means of memory, in the midst of those things, the communion with which renders a god godlike"). True divinity, in other words, has nothing to do with writing and the concrete sort of commemoration it represents.

In typical fashion Cicero follows the Platonic pattern up to a point but then makes a sharp turn away from the purely ideal. *De oratore* shares the *Phaedrus*'s fascination with the workings of memory—the first words of the dialogue (*cogitanti mihi saepe numero et memoria vetera repetenti*) signify as much.[18] The whole work is furthermore framed as a two-stage recollection, with Cicero reporting the conversation that Cotta had recalled and recounted.[19] In addition, the *memoria* that is necessary for the training of orators becomes the subject of formal discussion at the end of Book 2.[20] But where Socrates wants to transcend the written word, Cicero is eager to embrace it.[21] In the preface to *De oratore* 2 writing becomes virtually coextensive with remembrance, and the fact that Crassus and Antonius wrote so little is seen not as an advantage, but as a deficiency that must be remedied: only through the practical immortality provided by writing will their authentic selves become known and their divinely spoken words achieve the proper effect.

In *De oratore* 3 Cicero completes the picture and allows the reader to see why revising Plato's conception of the divine is a matter of urgent necessity. The book opens with the most dramatic of Cicero's prologues, devoted to the memory of Crassus. The ideas that had been treated in more general terms in Books 1 and 2—history, divine speech, and the written word—take on fresh immediacy as Cicero narrows the focus to the last days of a single heroic figure. Crassus and Socrates, who have become more and more implicitly comparable in the course of the dialogue, are at last explicitly linked in the account of Crassus's final speech before the senate, which Cicero describes as the orator's "swan song" (*De or.* 3.6):

> illa tanquam cycnea fuit divini hominis vox et oratio, quam quasi exspectantes post eius interitum veniebamus in curiam, ut vestigium illud ipsum, in quo ille postremum institisset, contueremur.

[18] Cf. Zoll 1962: 75–76.

[19] On the importance of recollection and transmission in the *De oratore* prefaces, see Ruch 1958: 195–96.

[20] It is worth noting, following Leeman and Pinkster 1981–2008 ad loc., that in the excursus on Simonidean technique (*De or.* 2.350–60) Cicero specifically stresses the connection between memory and visual perception (*De or.* 2.357): *ea maxime animis effingi nostris, quae essent a sensu tradita atque impressa* ("those sorts of things are most moulded in our minds which have been transmitted and impressed upon them by sense"). This general statement could easily be applied to the interlocutors' treatment of the plane tree at the beginning of the dialogue, and in any event it illustrates once more the Ciceronian emphasis on the interplay between the concrete and the abstract. Cicero also associates Simonides' use of images with the act of writing (*De or.* 2.354).

[21] On the role of the written word in *De oratore*, cf. Gunderson 2000: 210–14.

> That voice and speech was as the swan song of a divine man, which we almost expected to hear after his death when we used to come into the senate house in order to gaze upon that very place where he had last stood.

The Platonic passage in view is of course *Phaedo* 85b, where Socrates, in comparing his discourse on immortality to the song sung by swans just before their deaths, claims that the swans sing for joy, not sorrow, because they are prophetic creatures able to foresee the good things that await them in the afterlife. In the end, then, Crassus becomes Cicero's Socrates. But unlike the prophetic swan song of the Greek philosopher, which was metaphysical in nature and laid claim to eternal validity, Crassus's last speech was a piece of oratory delivered on a specific occasion and in response to particular political circumstances (the conflict between Livius Drusus and Marcus Philippus, here described by Cicero in some detail). The divine ideal that it proposes for imitation is also concrete in other ways: as the young Cicero and his friends go to the senate house (emphatically a real place, unlike the plane tree of the *Phaedrus*) and look at the spot where Crassus spoke, they almost hear an echo of his actual words.[22]

Cicero quotes only a few lines from Crassus's speech, but the way he introduces them is centrally relevant to the pattern he has been developing. It is a concise portrayal of the ideal orator in action, as he discourses divinely about the weightiest matters of state (*De or.* 3.4):

> quo quidem ipso in loco multa a Crasso divinitus dicta esse ferebantur, cum sibi illum consulem esse negaret, cui senator ipse non esset: "an tu, cum omnem auctoritatem universi ordinis pro pignore putaris eamque in conspectu populi Romani concideris, me his pignoribus existimas posse terreri? non tibi illa sunt caedenda, si Crassum vis coercere; haec tibi est excidenda[23] lingua; qua vel evulsa spiritu ipso libidinem tuam libertas mea refutabit."
>
> And indeed it was reported that in that very place many things were said by Crassus divinely, when he denied that that man could be in his eyes a consul for whom he himself was not a senator: "Or do you, when you have thought to take the entire authority of the whole senatorial order as a pledge and have crushed

[22] Not only was the Curia a real place; it also had a real and complicated history. Inasmuch as it had been thoroughly rebuilt by Sulla in 80 B.C.E., Cicero's readers would have had to perform a conscious act of historical reconstruction in order to imagine the circumstances of Crassus's speech and Cicero's youthful visitations of the spot where it was spoken. I owe this point to one of *TAPA*'s referees.

[23] I follow Leeman and Pinkster 1981–2008 (see their comment ad loc.) in preferring *excidenda* to the *incidenda* attested in some MSS.

> it in the sight of the Roman people—do you think that I can be frightened by these pledges? If you wish to coerce Crassus, you will not do so by confiscating them. It is this tongue of mine that you must cut out, and even if that has been torn away my liberty will refute your license with my very breath!"

The programmatic phrase *divinitus dicta esse ferebantur* should by now be familiar.[24] This time it is applied not to the conversations held by the group at Tusculum (as had been the case in the prefaces to Books 1 and 2), but to a single speech delivered in the senate. As with the reference to the swan song, Crassus is being cast as the Roman counterpart to Socrates: his act of political oratory becomes the new standard by which divinity is measured and commemorated.[25]

The specific words quoted are also significant. Later in Book 3 Crassus will criticize Socrates (and Plato) for having established the notion that the skilled use of language could somehow be separate from intelligent thinking (*De or.* 3.60–61):

> hoc commune nomen eripuit, sapienterque sentiendi et ornate dicendi scientiam re cohaerentes disputationibus suis separavit; cuius ingenium variosque sermones immortalitati scriptis suis Plato tradidit, cum ipse litteram Socrates nullam reliquisset. hinc discidium illud exstitit quasi linguae atque cordis, absurdum sane et inutile et reprehendendum, ut alii nos sapere, alii dicere docerent.
>
> He abolished this common title [of philosopher], and in his arguments he divided things that were in fact connected, namely the science of thinking wisely and that of speaking eloquently. His genius and his various conversations Plato rendered immortal by his writings, since Socrates himself had left

[24] *Esse ferebantur* is Lamb's emendation of the transmitted *efferebantur*. The latter reading, while certainly acceptable (it has recently been defended by Leeman and Pinkster 1981–2008 ad loc.), seems to me the less desirable. The emendation not only establishes a parallel to *De oratore* 1, but it also reminds the reader of the fact that Cicero was not present for the speech. It is precisely that absence, and the later attempt to reconstruct and thus "remember" what went on, that becomes the topic of the sentences that immediately follow.

[25] Later in Book 3, Crassus himself will posit that divine status is accorded to excellent orators by their audiences (*De or*. 3.53): *quem deum, ut ita dicam, inter homines putant? qui distincte, qui explicate, qui abundanter, qui inluminate et rebus et verbis dicunt et in ipsa oratione quasi quendam numerum versumque conficiunt, id est, quod dico, ornate* ("Who do they think is a god, so to speak, among men? Those who speak clearly, unambiguously, copiously, and luminously with respect to both matter and words, and who in the speech itself achieve a certain rhythm and phrasing—that is, those who speak in the manner that I call artistic"). See also Antonius's comment on the *divina virtus* of the orator at *De or*. 2.120.

> behind nothing written. Whence arose that severing, as it were, of the tongue and the heart—a truly absurd, useless, and deplorable thing—such that now some people teach us to think and others teach us to speak.

The *discidium linguae atque cordis* pointedly reprises—or more properly, according to the fiction of the dialogue, foreshadows—Crassus's promise in the senate that even the tearing away of his tongue will not diminish the power of his testimony. Where Socrates developed a theory that separated speech from thought, Crassus will ultimately provide a concrete example in which the two are unified, as his tongue expresses exactly what his heart thinks and the attempt literally to sever the two is described as an act of futile violence. Cicero completes the effect by doing for Crassus what Plato had done for Socrates—preserving his divine words so that they can survive the occasion of their original delivery and endure long after the orator's tongue has turned to dust. (Note the echo in the passage above of Cicero's claim in Book 2 that he must make the memory of Crassus "immortal" because Crassus himself wrote nothing.) This is exactly the sort of approach Cicero had to take if Roman orators were to be accorded their rightful place alongside Greek philosophers. History had to be placed on an equal footing with abstract thinking, and a speech about political matters in the senate had to be made as significant as a discourse about the nature of the soul.

As the Book 3 preface continues, Cicero finally confronts the parallel between himself and Plato directly rather than by implication. In doing so he returns, in the last of his programmatic references, to the language of divinity, applying it this time to the written texts themselves. In an address to Quintus and to all his potential readers he says the following (*De or.* 3.15):

> neque enim quisquam nostrum, cum libros Platonis mirabiliter scriptos legit, in quibus omnibus fere Socrates exprimitur, non, quamquam illa scripta sunt divinitus, tamen maius quiddam de illo, de quo scripta sunt, suspicatur; quod item nos postulamus non a te quidem, qui nobis omnia summa tribuis, sed a ceteris, qui haec in manus sument, maius ut quiddam de L. Crasso, quam quantum a nobis exprimetur, suspicentur.
>
> For there is not one of us who, when he reads the marvelously written books of Plato—in almost all of which Socrates is distilled—does not, although those works were written divinely, suspect something greater about the man about whom they were written. Thus I likewise request, not indeed of you (who grant me always the highest consideration), but of the rest of those who might take this work into their hands, that they suspect something greater about Lucius Crassus than what shall be expressed by me.

As usual, the elevation of the Platonic to a level above the merely human (an act here performed twice over, with *mirabiliter* and *divinitus*) comes with a qualification. In spite of the fact that Plato wrote divinely, his dialogues provide only an image; behind that image all readers (so Cicero insists) recur to their conception of Socrates as a historical figure. As the plane tree rendered eternal by *oratio* of the *Phaedrus* is to the actual plane tree in the garden at Tusculum, so the Socrates in Plato's works is to the man himself. The situation in *De oratore* is both similar and different. Like Plato's Socrates, the Crassus of Cicero's dialogue is only a partial approximation of the real man. But unlike Plato, Cicero admits as much. In fact, he makes the success of his work depend upon his readers' willingness to imagine a "real" Crassus who was greater than the figure they encounter in the text.

It will be fitting to bring this investigation to a close by returning to the letter to Atticus, with its striking juxtaposition of Roman historical memory and homage to the example of decorum set by "that god of ours." Viewed merely as an exercise in self-defense, it looks like a lot of special pleading: Atticus might easily have countered his friend's claim about the necessity of being faithful to the character of the real Scaevola by pointing out that Cicero had already taken a lot of liberties with his *personae*, that his versions of Crassus and Antonius, for instance, were in fact far from being accurate portraits of the men they were supposed to represent. The letter becomes much more interesting, however, if one sees it as a rhetorical argument in its own right, as a primer in the art of reading *De oratore*. To understand the dialogue in the proper way, Atticus has to think first of Platonic precedent, and of the image it provides of eternal and universally applicable truths and standards. He then needs to move beyond the image and "remember" the real Scaevola as Cicero wants him to be remembered. To approach him in any other way—to think of Scaevola as a literary fiction only—is to miss what Cicero was trying to achieve in the work as a whole.

In a famous passage in the latter half of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates lays out a complex metaphysical scheme in order to defend the value of *mania* against the aspersions he had cast upon it in his initial speech against love (*Phdr.* 244a–250c). The soul, he says, is immortal, and its existence is one of constant motion, either upwards toward the heavenly sphere or downwards to the earth. Occasionally, while making its rounds, the soul catches sight of the essence of truth and beauty and in so doing experiences "the life of the gods" (*Phdr.* 248a). The task of philosophers, "as they separate themselves from human concerns and become close to the divine," is to make "a right use of reminders" in order to preserve those glimpses of the eternal (*Phdr.* 249cd).

In *De oratore* Cicero takes this Platonic system and revises it. Throughout the dialogue he is at pains to bring his reader into contact with the divine, but he removes metaphysics from the superstructure and replaces it with history. Instead of encouraging contemplation of the things above, Cicero allows his reader to survey past, present, and future, to encounter kindred spirits and noble ideas, and thus to participate in the unfolding of eternity within time, rather than outside of it.[26]

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[26] Cf. *Tusc.* 1.66, where Cicero links memory with foresight and uses them to prove the divine origin and nature of human beings.

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