**from *Phaedrus***

Plato

Written 360 B.C., Translated by Benjamin Jowett

**Socrates.** About Lysias, whom we censured, and his art of writing, and his discourses, and the rhetorical skill or want of skill which was shown in them--these are the questions which we sought to determine, and they brought us to this point. And I think that we are now pretty well informed about the nature of art and its opposite.

**Phaedrus.** Yes, I think with you; but I wish that you would repeat what was said.

**Socrates.** Until a man knows the truth of the several particulars of which he is writing or speaking, and is able to define them as they are, and having defined them again to divide them until they can be no longer divided, and until in like manner he is able to discern the nature of the soul, and discover the different modes of discourse which are adapted to different natures, and to arrange and dispose them in such a way that the simple form of speech may be addressed to the simpler nature, and the complex and composite to the more complex nature-until he has accomplished all this, he will be unable to handle arguments according to rules of art, as far as their nature allows them to be subjected to art, either for the purpose of teaching or persuading;--such is the view which is implied in the whole preceding argument.

**Phaedrus.** Yes, that was our view, certainly.

**Socrates.** Secondly, as to the censure which was passed on the speaking or writing of discourses, and how they might be rightly or wrongly censured-did not our previous argument show?--

**Phaedrus.** Show what?

**Socrates.** That whether Lysias or any other writer that ever was or will be, whether private man or statesman, proposes laws and so becomes the author of a political treatise, fancying that there is any great certainty and clearness in his performance, the fact of his so writing is only a disgrace to him, whatever men may say. For not to know the nature of justice and injustice, and good and evil, and not to be able to distinguish the dream from the reality, cannot in truth be otherwise than disgraceful to him, even though he have the applause of the whole world.

**Phaedrus.** Certainly.

**Socrates.** But he who thinks that in the written word there is necessarily much which is not serious, and that neither poetry nor prose, spoken or written, is of any great value, if, like the compositions of the rhapsodes, they are only recited in order to be believed, and not with any view to criticism or instruction; and who thinks that even the best of writings are but a reminiscence of what we know, and that only in principles of justice and goodness and nobility taught and communicated orally for the sake of instruction and graven in the soul, which is the true way of writing, is there clearness and perfection and seriousness, and that such principles are a man's own and his legitimate offspring;-being, in the first place, the word which he finds in his own bosom; secondly, the brethren and descendants and relations of his others;-and who cares for them and no others-this is the right sort of man; and you and I, Phaedrus, would pray that we may become like him.

**Phaedrus.** That is most assuredly my desire and prayer.

**Socrates.** And now the play is played out; and of rhetoric enough. Go and tell Lysias that to the fountain and school of the Nymphs we went down, and were bidden by them to convey a message to him and to other composers of speeches-to Homer and other writers of poems, whether set to music or not; and to Solon and others who have composed writings in the form of political discourses which they would term laws-to all of them we are to say that if their compositions are based on knowledge of the truth, and they can defend or prove them, when they are put to the test, by spoken arguments, which leave their writings poor in comparison of them, then they are to be called, not only poets, orators, legislators, but are worthy of a higher name, befitting the serious pursuit of their life.

**Phaedrus.** What name would you assign to them?

**Socrates.** Wise, I may not call them; for that is a great name which belongs to God alone,--lovers of wisdom or philosophers is their modest and befitting title.