

“...It was observed by Plato that written composition ‘is very like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. And so it is with written words; you might think they spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing. And every word, when once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself’ (*Phaedrus*, 275D-E). Writing is but an image of living speech, and, like all images for Plato, is fragile and fluctuating and will perish if the author is not there to reassert its meanings when it is abused. Though Plato is distinguishing his philosophical dialectic from artistically written speeches, codes of law, and poems, he is indirectly drawing attention to the precarious existence of literary compositions, which, in turn, suggests the principal functions of literary studies.

A working definition of literary studies can be stated, like an old-fashioned telegram, in seven words or less: The understanding and preservation of literary texts. Most would accede to such general objectives, but perhaps without realizing the most important corollary: that understanding and preservation are mutually prerequisite, and hence correlative. For, if the meaning of the text be misunderstood, its lexical form will gradually vary, through emendation, in accord with the subsequent meanings attributed to it; if the text becomes corrupt, it will cause mistaken interpretations of its meaning. Plato’s great contribution to literary studies, however trivial he may have considered most of them, was his insight into the nature of the word (*logos*): that its preservation is coincident with its intelligibility, and that permanence and intelligibility exist in an eternal present where they are continually re-experienced as functions of one another. The mind seeks self-preservation in what can be understood, however little that may be, and its self-expression, however briefly, strives for permanence, whether experience be contemplated by a Platonist or a pragmatist.”

Taking the above passage as your point of departure or as your cue, write an essay with a proper title elaborating 1) the objectives of literary studies as you understand them and 2) the significance or relevance of literary studies to your academic/life pursuit.

試題隨卷繳回