

**SÉAN BURKE (2009) *THE ETHICS OF WRITING:
AUTHORSHIP AND LEGACY IN PLATO AND
NIETZSCHE*. EDINBURGH: EDINBURGH
UNIVERSITY PRESS. ISBN 0748618309.**

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The prologue to Seán Burke's *The Death and Return of the Author* concludes with the pithy remark that 'the concept of the author is never more alive than when pronounced dead' (1992: 7). Continuing his focus on the author, it is the origins of this thoroughly resuscitated revenant that Burke turns his attentions to in his new work, *The Ethics of Writing: Authorship and Legacy in Plato and Nietzsche*. As in his earlier publication, this text combines the same uneasy relationship to post-structuralism and deconstruction with rigorous research and a careful, scholarly approach. It therefore raises the following question: does writing against deconstruction from within a deconstructive vocabulary and style constitute a performative paradox or an absolute enactment of, and agreement with, deconstruction?

Burke's current work can essentially be seen to perform two tasks, albeit with varied success. The first one is to provide a new understanding of Plato's position in relation to writing and the author, while the second is to formulate an ethics of writing based on this position. The convincing and subtle reading of Plato which Burke offers is unfortunately somewhat undermined by a less persuasive proposition with regards to the ethical responsibility of the author. Burke argues that Plato inscribed into the *Phaedrus* 'the most succinct (if not the most sophisticated) account of discursive ethics that we have as reference' (222) - an 'ethics of intention' (196). This leads Burke to insist that as the author is responsible for the interpretations made of his or her text, the ethical author is obliged to present his or her intentions in as transparent a light as possible. As such the ethics proposed by Burke is an amoral ethics, as the content of the work is not where the author's ethical obligation lies. The author's responsibility is instead first of all to ensure that

the content is interpreted in direct correlation with his or her intended meaning, and then that the content is open to critical examination, which moves it towards a 'truth' beyond the 'human-all-too-human' author.

Derek Attridge has proposed that the 'distinct ethical demand' of the text is that it be responded to as singular, as other, that it be read openly and without agenda (2004: 130). Burke sees this demand as secondary to the ethical importance of a mode of writing that allows interpretation and discussion to begin from the transparent presentation of authorial intent. The author's ethical responsibility is to write a text that reduces (mis)interpretations. This responsibility does not make the author and the author's intended meaning the centre or totalised meaning of the text, but the necessary yet flawed ground from which to begin analysis. Criticism does not attempt to reveal the author's intentions, but rather works from these intentions to move beyond the monologism of the author's propositions towards an objective 'truth'.

While his work on Plato enables Burke to join the circle of those who, like Alexander Nehamas, move comfortably between philosophical/classicist interpretations of the Greeks and literary theory, the ethics he proposes is problematic. While Derrida is not the primary focus of this text – the companion piece to *The Ethics of Writing* will specifically address Derrida and Levinas – it is nonetheless difficult not to read Burke's book as a critique of Derrida's work through a seemingly approbatory use of the latter's texts. In particular, it places Burke in a negative position in relation to philosophical investigation that takes any form other than the directly analytic or thetic, thereby condemning Derrida's literary or performative approach to philosophy as unethical. The suppositions on which the text is based are troubling – Burke proposes that genres are not mixed *a priori*, that we move towards a universal truth, that authorship presents an origin, that the 'first' meaning of the text must be that of the author, that this meaning can be transparent, and that iterability, mixed genres and texts that are open to the countersignature of the other are unethical. Burke bases his argument on presence, presuming that everything can be transparently presented in a thetic manner, and presupposes that authorial intent is fully present to itself and to the author. Indeed the degree of disagreement between Burke and Derrida's positions becomes such that a comparison seems hardly relevant were it not for the 'continental' style that Burke espouses and his employment of Derrida's texts.

Moving to the content of Burke's argument, his book can be loosely divided between a reading of Plato and Nietzsche. The work on Plato presents the reader with an impressive juxtaposition of Havelock's classicist *Preface to Plato* and Derrida's deconstructive 'Plato's Pharmacy'. Burke finds both at fault in their supposition that Plato was ignorant of the significance of writing – Derrida deems Plato unaware that dialectics is a form of writing, while Havelock considers Socrates, and perhaps Plato, blind to the fact that it was the physical form of writing that enabled the self-reflection necessary for dialectics to exist. Instead, Burke proposes that the form denigrated by Plato was not the grapheme, but rather any form of discourse which was not first exposed to the ethical interrogation of *elenchus* (i.e., the Socratic method of cross-examination).

Burke positions Plato at the birth of the culture of writing. Recognising both the potential and the problems of the new form, Plato is seen to attempt to create a legacy of (readerly) modes of interpretation, and (writerly) modes of expression that incorporate the positive aspects of both orality and literacy, speech and writing. Studies of Plato have always laboured under the complexities of the performative paradoxes of his work – most obviously the written denigration of writing, and the poetic condemnation of the poetic – and also the division of writing into 'good' and 'bad'. Noting that the arguments made against (oral) poetry in the dialogues are identical to the arguments made against writing – 'Repetition, unresponsiveness, rigidity, the refusal of question and answer, the lack of an alternative syntax are used to discredit both oral and written modes of expression' (101) – Burke proposes that it is not specifically writing *qua* the physical form that Plato condemns. Instead internal/external, good/bad and weak/strong forms of writing oppose a (good) writing that has been interiorised through dialectics, that is, tailored to the interlocutor and the situation, and a (bad) writing that is iterable and whose meaning can drift. Personal beliefs or opinions move from being uncontested (false) opinions and become interiorised as a form of good writing when they are subjected to the constant process of examination in the 'dialectic forum, a forum which distils truth from falsehood and rewrites wisdom into the soul of the speaker' (92). Hence 'good' writing is an ethical writing which ensures both that personal belief is as close to eidetic 'Truth' as the dialectical process can render it and that it is correctly received, that is, that the author's intentions are not misunderstood. The misreadings of Plato that have arisen are due to the fact that this writing is often referred to as 'speech': 'A writing which can monitor its own reception – reception being the key issue,

over and above orality and the technologies of writing – carries the name of “speech” (93).

Burke supplements this subtle but important understanding of speech and writing with an unexpected shift – unexpected particularly for readers of Derrida’s ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’ – in the representation of Plato’s position in relation to authorial intent: ‘Plato objects to writing precisely insofar as it replicates unquestioned authorial intentions: unresponsive, potentially dogmatic, immune to dialectical interrogation, the written word is condemned for its monologic propensity’ (109). The stress that Burke sees in the *Phaedrus* is therefore not on the self-presence of authorial intention but rather on the merging of intention and reception through dialectic. The author’s intentions prior to public elenctic examination are the abovementioned ‘opinions’ – potentially false – as ‘only through question and answer can a discourse find itself organised as a *telos* which is an intention not of the speaker but of truth’ (113). As exemplified in *Phaedrus* through Thamus’ rejection of Theuth’s judgement of his creation, the author is too close to the text to give a measured estimation of its merits. Concentrating solely on the fixity of the author’s intentions inscribes in the text a monologism that prevents the text from adapting to suit each specific audience, and may prove potentially dangerous. Objective dialectical critique thus becomes necessary.

An interesting effect of this change to the conception of authorial intent is that it causes Burke to state that ‘the Platonic *oeuvre* ... insists that dialectical practice cannot be pursued by the free-standing subject’ (113). Burke uses Socrates’ self-representation as a midwife as evidence of the need for the public examination – ‘Socrates is insufficient without an interlocutor; his interlocutor is only productive in the presence of his dialectical guide’ (119). However, Burke should question if he has not overemphasised the *active* instrumentality of Socrates in the dialectical situation and subsequently the split between dialogue and monologue. Even despite the fact that Socrates is able to continue the dialectic process alone in *Gorgias* and the *Republic*, Socrates’ role in the elenctic examination is one that forces the interlocutor to *self-examine* through the reflection of his ideas by the passive figure of Socrates. Socrates actively adds little, but instead acts as a prism through which the interlocutor sees his own thoughts, and essentially therefore debates with himself. While Burke’s division between internal and external, monologue and dialogue is not invalid, it is

more involved than he suggests, and less dependent on the co-presence of speaking subjects.

Burke does not propose to entirely undermine the place of the author within Plato's philosophy, which presents us with a 'contradiction ... between the insistence on authorial auto-attendance and the absolute dismissals of authorship at [*Phaedrus*] 273c and 275b-c' (164). This contradiction can be resolved, according to Burke, by dividing discourse into two categories, namely 'apodictic discourses of pure philosophy, physical sciences and mathematics' (167) and literature, or 'scientific and non-scientific discourses' (167). Within the realm of objective truth authorial agency can be dispensed with. Beyond this, however, authorial agency and authority must be taken as the starting point for the elenctic process, which moves the discourse towards objective truth. While unquestioned authorial intent is unethical in its monologic fixity, it must nonetheless be used as the starting point for examination. Iterability is dangerous in that it can potentially relocate the original meaning of the discourse and thereby interfere with the ethical dialectic process. Hence the importance of writing so as to avoid misunderstanding, and reading so as to work on and from the author's meaning. For Burke's Plato the authorial signature is necessary in order to have a place from which to begin the dialectical process, and a 'responsible subject [must] emerge ... to take responsibility for the words spoken or written in his or her name' (174). This subject is both written into and performed by the Platonic corpus.

The second section of *The Ethics of Writing* contrasts Plato's responsible and ethical authorial subject with the unethical excesses of Nietzsche. Burke's Nietzsche is an author who in a double if contradictory gesture of control opens his text wholly to the reader, providing no sign of stable authorial intention on which to base interpretation, while signing each and every potential interpretation. Thus, in a perversion of the Platonic concept of authorial responsibility, Nietzsche's wish to 'preside over the interpretation of texts whose truth eluded him at the time of writing' (193) forces him to sign all interpretations and is thus accountable for all interpretations committed in his name. This accountability is beautifully depicted by Burke in a vignette which places Nietzsche in the acrid smoke of Auschwitz.

The danger Burke sees as inherent to Nietzsche's texts lies in his asystematic, aphoristic and literary mode of 'Catastrophic

philosophy' (200), that is, a philosophy presented through literary, performative or non-thetic discourse. A 'philosophy [which] takes up the lyre' (205) is dangerous by virtue of the genre confusion it causes. According to Burke, mixed genres obscure authorial intention, and thereby disrupt the process of elenchus – reinscribed in this section as criticism – that works towards a universal, objective truth. Hence a performative or non-thetic work of philosophy is less ethical than traditional speculative or analytic philosophy, as it does not present authorial intentions in a transparent fashion. While Burke states that a poem is ethical in that it self-presents as a hypothetical artistic event, and in so doing prevents itself from 'invading the political order' (229), he nonetheless continues throughout the book to juxtapose the ethical and the aesthetic. Not only does this juxtaposition ignore Derrida's work on the law of genre and propose that genres exist as distinct and uncontaminated divisions, it also places Burke's book firmly in opposition to works such as Levinas' *Otherwise than Being* and Derrida's *Glas* or *The Postcard*. This bracketing of texts practicing philosophy outside of the thetic as unethical immediately distances Burke from alterity and the Other within the text, and dismisses any approach that attempts to not simply sign over to the reader as determined other, but to express that which, like Levinas' concept of the Saying, cannot be thetically communicated. The companion piece to *The Ethics of Writing* will purportedly address Burke's authorial ethics in relation to Levinas; I wonder how a text that labels mixed genres as unethical will respond to *Otherwise than Being*. Burke deems Derrida's essay 'Violence and Metaphysics' a response to Levinas, which 'in its perspicuity, detail and length is both unprecedented in the history of written discourse and raises the genres of both "essay" and "review" to an inconceivable, literally vertiginous height' (46). While it could be argued that this essay/review – does the double possibility of categorisation reveal a certain contamination between the categories, and thereby a mixing of genres? – receives its praise (only) as it is a thetically presented text, having read this commendation it is surprising to see Burke position himself so close to Habermas' genre-centred critique of Derrida. Not only does Burke unfortunately call to mind Eagleton's recent book on ethics, where the latter claims that 'the ethical thought of Jacques Derrida need not detain us long' (2008: 247), it also raises problems for Burke's own text. As Burke states, in a footnote:

it is our first duty to concede that this work has commenced by implicating itself in the very writerly irresponsibility that it will henceforth call into question. It has failed to make a

responsible contract with the reader. Part-story, with an essayistic interlude, it knowingly flaunts the law of genre. (23 n2)

Burke excuses his unethical presentation of ethics on the grounds of effectivity, by disclaiming any cultural authority and on the grounds of his restricted academic readership. More importantly, however, he excuses it on the apparent grounds that by acknowledging the irresponsible mixing of genres he renders them if not responsible then less unethical: 'It is a responsibility of the writer to acknowledge rather than suppress self-contradiction' (24 n2), he argues. Presumably this is due to the fact that he locates ethics in the intention of the author: if one intends to (irresponsibly) mix genres then the unethical nature of this act is diffused by the fact that one's intentions are recognised and the text correctly interpreted. Yet when we compare the light touch with which this contradiction is treated with the subsequent 'Respect for the role and rule of genre is hence a matter of grave ethical responsibility' (228), such an excuse is rather hard to allow.

Mentioning editing might seem unduly pedantic, but there is such a degree of errors throughout the book – referencing and italicisation are inconsistent, there are numerous typographical errors and instances of repetition between footnotes and the body of the text while many paragraphs of import have been relegated to footnotes – that Burke's publisher, Edinburgh University Press, have let him down to a degree that warrants note. Despite this, and the more serious problem of Burke's approach to non-thetic, performative philosophy, his *Ethics of Writing* provides a detailed and important reading of writing and the author in Plato. As an example of a thorough and meticulous study of the latter it is indeed an excellent, scholarly work. Notwithstanding certain misgivings that arise from the obvious pro-Derrida bias of this reviewer, the propositions made regarding ethics stem from a thoughtful academic engagement with Plato and Nietzsche, and are very much in keeping with the spirit of Plato's philosophy.

At a time when Derrida's legacy is coming under scrutiny, Burke skilfully performs the divisions that are occurring between deconstruction as a mode of reading and deconstruction as a philosophy. While his work may not comply with the basic stances that deconstruction takes, his approach to the texts – Plato's, Nietzsche's and Derrida's – is a deconstructive one. If, as Derrida wrote, deconstruction happens, in Burke we see it happen against

itself. No doubt the forthcoming sequel to *The Ethics of Writing* will further this happening with Burke's customary care and insight.

References

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