

The Ethics of Writing: Derrida, Deconstruction, and Pedagogy by P. P. Trefonis

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Early in this book, Trefonis scolds those who speak authoritatively of Derrida and deconstruction, yet whose commentary reveals a superficial knowledge of Derrida's work. He submits that such "uninformed opinion" posing as expert commentary promotes "a conservative reading of deconstruction without sufficient depth for the expedient purpose of convenient generalizations or harried cooptation" (p.10, n.29). As a result,

deconstruction has been represented by many critics, theorists, and philosophers, unable or unwilling to take an *account of* and provide an *accounting for* (original italics) its ethical and political implications, preferring instead to eschew or disregard both its effectivity in responsabilizing the principles of action or its informing and questioning of the reason of pragmatic utility (p.179).

No such accusation could be directed at Trefonis. *The Ethics of Writing* is a careful, thoughtful, and nuanced reading of those texts of Derrida which are most obviously concerned with educational theory and philosophy, texts which Trefonis argues have received insufficient scholarly attention. His purpose: "to show through and by example *how the radical polemics of deconstruction has value for analyzing the ethical and political implications of pedagogical contingencies of theory and practice* (original italics) (p.7).

The Ethics of Writing contains a "polemical introduction" and five chapters. Only the second chapter, along with most of the introduction, is previously published material. Each chapter is carefully introduced, meticulously argued, and provides a substantial examination of major issues in contemporary philosophy (of education) and the place of Derridean thought therein. The refusal to compromise complexity or to circumvent perplexity is a strength of this writing. Its eloquence, depth, and profundity offer a sober reading of the as yet not (or ever) fully fathomable implications of deconstruction for contemporary philosophy, ethics and politics of, in this case, education. In its method, it epitomizes a rethinking of "the grounds of academic responsibility" (p.179) and, in its manner, it forms a convincing reply "to the inescapable summons to responsibility demanded of an intellectual undertaking thoroughly inscribed by and inscriptive of the conditional effects of a gradual, though steady, intensification of the ethico-political maturation of the states of theory" (p.2).

Nor is *The Ethics of Writing* a case of Donald Graves meets Jacques Derrida, although those who look to this book for thoughts on (the teaching of) writing will find here no food for a diet of 'feel good' pedagogy. The deconstructionist pedagogy which Trefonis highlights challenges expressivist notions of language informed by a naive preoccupation with short-sighted, ultra-individualistic goals. Trefonis notes that Derrida's "science of a new writing" (p.40) casts suspicion on writing as authentication of self. After *differance*, the central notion of Derridean thought, such self-revelatory efforts are identified as "an instance of non-communication, because in the equating of self-hood with self-presence, the Other is effaced to the point where an inner-monologue with one's 'Self' is not really an instance of transmissibility at all, but the self-deceptive verification of the desire for auto-affection. Or an attempt at the reduction of *differance*" (p.42).

Chapters One and Two, in particular, are substantive discussions of issues arising from modernist notions of language, writing and culture which have particular relevance in the context of a prolific public and academic (and largely acritical) attention to same. In Chapter One, "The Cultural Politics of the Sign", Trefonis presents re-readings of Derrida's re-readings of two classic texts: one, of Rousseau on the origins of language; and, another, of Levi-Strauss and his description of the Nambakwara in "The Writing Lesson". In both cases, Trefonis points to how, in the earliest writings of Derrida, "a deconstruction of the normative rendering of what it means *to think, to learn, to teach, to know* (original italics) begins to take root..." (P.176). Chapter Two, "The Ends of Pedagogy", is a compelling essay on Hegel and (a moment of) autobiography, "a rememoration of, and for, a curriculum" (p.54) in which, according to Derrida, "a remembrance of [Hegel's] childhood as the memory of memory itself" legitimizes certain political decisions about education in early nineteenth century Germany "by lending the credibility of intellectual support to a thesis referring to the 'proper age' for philosophy education" (p.56). Chapter Two is essential reading not only for those seeking a profound understanding of the intricacies of curricular change but for any who might question the necessity of philosophy for curriculum theory.

Readers should not turn to this book for affirmation of the end of philosophy or, for that (related) matter, the end of the university. Rather, turn to it for a renewed sense of the relationship of deconstruction and philosophy, and a redefinition of the future of philosophy and the institution of the university. Funereal tones do not abide here. Trefonis is more concerned "to breakdown [such] misinformed generalizations and stereotypes of deconstruction" (p.135). As he points out, "Derrida does not seek to denounce philosophy, to mourn and celebrate

its death. One cannot proceed to an affirmation of a thinking of the Other by destroying the differences that bind each of them together and creates the eternal possibility of articulating a new ethical ground for knowledge and for practice” (p.182). Nay-sayers take note. Advocates proceed with caution. Superficial attempts to dismiss or applaud will be met here with unrelenting scrutiny, in keeping with the best spirit of a rigorous, reborn philosophical inquiry, what Trefonis calls, after Derrida, “a community of the question” (p.182).

In Chapter Three, “Technologies of Reason”, Trefonis addresses directly, through a re-reading of Derrida’s lecture, “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils” as “a sustained re-appraisal of the ethics of academic responsibility patterned after the principle of reason” (p.180), the basis in the writing of Derrida for a reconstitution of the university. Chapter Four, “Teaching the Other the Limits of Philosophy”, focuses on debunking the myth of the end of philosophy at the hands of deconstruction. Its focus is a lecture by Derrida to the UNESCO sponsored first International Conference for Humanistic Discourse in 1994, what Trefonis calls “a mediation on the ethical ramifications of who should ask the question of the right to philosophy and where, in what space and place” (p.136). Importantly, both chapters ponder the key question of “how deconstruction can help an institution to reconfigure itself for the better by causing those who are part of it, are it, to question the grounding of the concepts that they hold most dear as the keys to the perfectability of human being” (p.136).

One of the key contributions of *The Ethics of Writing* is not so much “to facilitate the breaking of new ground for thinking about the practice of pedagogy at large” (p.6), although it does edge us forward in this respect. Rather, it is the attention it brings to previously ignored or insufficiently read texts which expands the scholarly literature on Derrida and education. This contribution is twofold: It raises the profile of Derrida’s educational texts which Trefonis rightly notes have fallen outside the accepted canon of Derrida’s work; and, it casts a refreshingly astute educational eye on the overall project of deconstruction. The implications of what is revealed in this gaze warrant the thoughtful attention of all those interested in the future of philosophy and “the ethico-political focus of deconstruction with respect to issues of educational theory and practice in general” (p.6).

Most importantly, however, this book contributes to a breaking of the neck hold a particularly stubborn binary, that of “the opposition of Eurocentrism and anti-Eurocentrism” (p.136) has over much contemporary debate about philosophy and the future of the university. Trefonis warns that “[t]he Eurocentric myopia of [a] monocultural view of the archive of Western episteme is another peril of taking

sides without actualizing sufficient precautions against the irresponsibility of academic solipsism” (p.156). To quote Derrida, “there are events, philosophical events, which cannot be reduced to this simple origin, and which meant that the origin itself was not simple, that the phenomena of hybridization, of graft, or translation, was there from the beginning...” (In Trefonis, p.156). Or, put more succinctly, “[p]hilosophy does not have a sole memory” (Derrida, in Trefonis, p.157). These insights are central to the assertion that a pedagogy of deconstruction “presupposes an affirmative answering of/to the call of the Other that, above all else, emphatically strives to hasten and improve the concrete possibilities of ushering forth a more equitable *new world picture* (original italics)” (p.4). In this sense, the book is invaluable in that it offers a way forward through the problematic of difference and the study of philosophy and/in the university.

In *The Ethics of Writing*, Trefonis succeeds in bringing renewed attention to persistent and troubling questions of philosophy and education with an unrelenting focus on “how the textuality-based machinations of the Derridean instance of deconstruction can offer a profound resistance to the instruments of domination embedded within the philosophico-institutional praxeology of teaching-learning” (p.6). This book should be of value to all those whose work or interest is in the “foundations” of education. This book will engage those who believe thought is best when unsettled; it should be required reading for those whose settled thoughts suggest a sedation or abdication of an ethics of intellectual responsibility at a perilous moment in the history of education. As Trefonis studiously demonstrates throughout this book, it is time to rethink the future, to rethink what it is we think we know, beginning with the ethical challenge of “looking backwards to the memory of the past and rearticulating the terms of our responsibility to what happened before”(p.183). And, if Trefonis is correct that “a question is like a prayer: its hope needs to be answered” (pp. 165-6), it is also time to rethink deconstruction and its relationship to the best hopes and prayers of education.

References

- Trefonis, P.P. (2000). *The Ethics of Writing: Derrida, Deconstruction, and Pedagogy*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 200 pp. ISBN 0-8476-9558-1 (pbk.)