

interpretation

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Short Notices

WILL MORRISEY

Plato's "Phaedrus": A Defense of a Philosophic Art of Writing. By Ronna Burger. (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1980. Pp. 160. \$14.50 cloth.)

When naming this journal of political philosophy, the founders partook of an insight nearly as old as the activity they studied. As Ronna Burger states it, "Precisely through the acknowledgment of its own potential dangers, the Platonic dialogue sets in motion the activity of interpretation as its own realization" Recognition of the potential dangers of written statements underlay the first political philosopher's decision to write nothing. Those dangers include the decay of memory that writings can encourage in those who prefer not to use their heads and the indiscriminate dissemination of thoughts to readers who prefer not to think for themselves, or who think for themselves ineptly, or who define their 'selves' basely and think for those 'selves' shrewdly. The *Phaedrus* records thoughts of those dangers, presenting us with the paradox of a "written condemnation of writing."

Phaedrus himself exemplifies the "perfect victim" of bad—in his case, sophisticated—writing. He appears self-indulgent, but he defines his 'self' by common opinion, that radically inconstant thing. The demagogues who victimize Phaedrus and his fellow-citizens victimize themselves as well, in a way. For they must try to seduce an inconstant beloved, the *dēmos*; they differ from that *dēmos* only in artfulness, an elaborate pretense hardly worth the prize.

Philosophic *erōs* aims at ideas, which are constant. Yet problems remain, for the human soul, unlike a divine soul, mixes pure mind with mere opinion, passion, and appetite. How can one know the ideas and also know the all-too-human self—particularly, when one is an all-too-human self, among other such selves?

Dialectic, with its capacity to collect and divide in accordance with nature, shows the way for one whose *erōs* aims at Being. Yet even the best human speech remains only partial. One can transfer the uncertainty of thought to writing only in a work "that" betrays a knowledge of its own lack of clarity and firmness," a work that forces its discerning reader not to be 'free' but to think, dialectically. It will thereby remind him of the "Socratic knowledge of ignorance," that famous and paradoxical knowledge. Such writing activates "the drama of thought," allowing Socrates to die, immortally.

Written words, demonstrably, have the potential for ambiguity and irony, fences against intruding herds as well as guideposts for those not of the herds. But one may dispense with both ambiguity and irony in saying that Ronna

Burger's book honors both its subject and her teacher. One may dispense with those guardians because the book contains its own, stoutly deterring all untoward attacks of nympholepsy while encouraging interpretation.

Aristotle on Political Reasoning: A Commentary on the "Rhetoric." By Larry Arnhart. (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1981. Pp. 230. \$18.00 cloth.)

"[C]an rhetoric be distinguished from sophistry?" What is "the place of reason in political life"? Modern thinkers cannot make up their minds. Some of them want reason, usually defined as induction based on the result of experiment, to rule. Others reject this 'rationalism,' saying that it cannot account for the depth and power of human passions and appetites.

By studying Aristotle and teaching us the results of his study, Larry Arnhart shows that the modern dichotomy is false, or at very least in need of important qualifications. Aristotle understands that all reasoning, even scientific reasoning, "depends upon commonsense opinions," not on sense perception alone. "The Hobbesian political scientist knows more than he will admit," Arnhart writes—a polite way of hinting that said political scientist knows less than he will say.

Aristotelian *enthymeme* occupies a middle ground, mediating between passion and mind. Neither sophistical fallacy nor strict demonstration, it aims at persuasion (not compulsion or instruction); conveys opinion (not absolute falsehood or absolute truth); and gives probability (not chance or necessity). It combines *pathos*, *ethos* (the character of the speaker and of his regime),* and *logos*. *Pathos* must not be regarded as purely irrational; a passion, Arnhart reminds us, is always *about* something. It has (to use modern jargon) objective as well as subjective content. "Reason rules a passion not by suppressing it, but by transforming it into a reasonable passion," often by means of shame, the sentiment most maligned by publicists of late modernity.

Arnhart's commentary follows the text of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* as that text unfolds. While Aristotle demonstrates that the tension between reason and passion need not overwhelm us, Arnhart simultaneously shows, by example, that richness and detail may coexist with clarity and concision.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *Émile, or On Education*. Translated with an introduction and notes by Allan Bloom. (New York: Basic Books, 1979. Pp. 501. \$7.95 paper.)

. . . Rousseau is at the source of the tradition which replaces virtue and vice as the causes of a man's being good or bad, happy or miserable, with such pairs as

*"Why is it only in the *Rhetoric* that Aristotle speaks of 'natural justice' as 'natural law'? Perhaps because the rhetorician appeals not directly to the 'just by nature' but instead to the sense of natural justice embodied in the customary moral standards of men."

sincere/insincere, authentic/inauthentic, inner-directed/other-directed, real self/alienated self. . . . The wholeness, unity, or singleness of man—a project ironically outlined in the *Republic*—is the serious intention of *Émile* and almost all that came afterward.—Allan Bloom, “Introduction”

To understate matters, such a book deserves an accurate translation. It now has one. Those who encountered the *Émile* in the Barbara Foxley translation published by Everyman’s Library know an interesting but confusing book by a talented writer of uneven brilliance. Not long after they open the Bloom translation such readers will begin to know a masterpiece by a philosopher.

“[A]most all that came afterward”: for example, Piaget’s teaching is here (“Let childhood ripen in childhood,” Rousseau advises), and so is Dewey’s (Rousseau insists that the child learn from experience). Sentiments much praised by contemporary educators, egalitarianism and compassion, are also the ruling sentiments of Rousseauan education. But Rousseau sees far more clearly than his epigones that to make those sentiments *ruling* sentiments involves a difficult paradox. Rousseau’s variety of egalitarianism will lead *Émile* to admire Socrates and Cato. As for his variety of compassion,

. . . to prevent pity from degenerating into weakness, it must . . . be generalized and extended to the whole of mankind. Then one yields to it only insofar as it accords with justice. . . . [P]ity for the wicked is a very great cruelty to men.

Many have seen that one strand of late modernity has preferred the ‘soft’ Rousseau, while another has preferred the ‘hard’ Rousseau. The project to achieve the unity of man has resulted in a bifurcation of sentiment among modern men. Bloom’s translation requires us to see the whole Rousseau—or, to write more accurately, the whole *Émile*. In doing that, the translator brings a genuinely great book into the English language.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. Translated with preface, notes, and an interpretive essay by Charles E. Butterworth. (Hardcover edition: New York, New York University Press, 1979. Softcover edition: New York, Philadelphia, Cambridge and San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1982, pp. xix + 268, \$5.95.)

“[C]ompletely faithful to Rousseau’s manuscript,” according to translator and interpreter Charles E. Butterworth, this edition of the *Reveries* does justice to a philosopher in the best way most of us can: by letting him speak for himself. Rousseau insists on that—the first word of the *Reveries* is “I”—but as if to confirm its author’s blackest suspicions of men, even the French editions of this “final statement of his thought” contain numerous errors, errors uncorrected in the two centuries since its posthumous publication. Butterworth gives us the real text of the *Reveries* for the first time, albeit translated.

“I am now alone on earth,” Rousseau begins, “no longer having any brother, neighbor, friend or society other than myself.” Detached from others, “what am I?” he asks—posing the question of his nature so as to assume man’s natural asociality, while simultaneously courting men’s pity. Not for nothing does Butterworth caution us of this philosopher’s rhetoric. Among the themes of the First Walk are hope and fear, sentiments often associated with religious faith. Rousseau tells us that he has undergone a kind of creation, falling from order to chaos to a new order, now “unperturbed, like God Himself,” beyond hope and fear—both created and Creator. In the Second Walk, Rousseau playfully describes a kind of fortunate fall that knocked him unconscious. He awakened to feel as if born again: “I knew neither who I was nor where I was; I felt neither injury, fear, or worry,” only “rapturous calm.”

Hope and fear determine the content of one’s faith, Rousseau argues in the Third Walk. While thus implicitly rejecting the concept of grace, he also rejects the Christian doctrine of divine punishment for erroneous faith, thereby placing his own sense of justice against that of the Christian God. Butterworth observes that “the philosopher is necessarily something of a solitary walker,” separate from the religion that binds society. Rousseau makes this separation even more apparent in the Fourth Walk, which he begins by announcing Plutarch is “the author who grips and benefits me most,” not, for example, Matthew, Mark, Paul, Luke, or John. On the question of truth and knowledge, his criterion is justice, as determined by “moral instinct,” not reason. Rousseau’s conscience, so to speak, evidently yields results different from those of Christians; Butterworth observes that Rousseau can prudently resolve to lie no more because he now lives in solitude.

Rousseau’s faith includes a paradise. As fortune would have it, it is named St. Peter’s Island, and the Fifth Walk contains its description. This paradise exists in this life, not in the next, and it requires only an appreciation of “the sentiment of existence” to achieve, not any striving for a *telos* beyond ourselves. Indeed, Rousseau teaches that “we are sufficient to ourselves, like God.” Reverie consists of a “thorough conjunction” of fictions and realities, he also teaches. Butterworth observes that this “passively sensual” experience discards reason, traditional faith, and action.

On this earth, Rousseau applauds the third theological virtue, charity, in the Sixth Walk. His charity has a natural, not divinely inspired character; it is a sentiment that society corrupts by transforming into a duty. Rousseau prefers to treat men with “a universal and perfectly disinterested benevolence,” although he modestly declines to accept, even in fiction, the godlike power of the ring of Gyges to go with this godlike morality. Could one say that Rousseau’s literary skill is a sort of ring of Gyges, making him elusive if not invisible to many readers, while granting him near-creative power over others? Butterworth observes that Rousseau teaches that “By nature, all men are good.” He makes this observation without explicitly contrasting it with the Christian teaching.

Considering human nature can make us think of Eden, and in the Seventh Walk the botanizing Rousseau tells of his eating fruit that was supposed poisonous but in fact was not. No “pleasant-tasting natural product” is harmful “to the body,” Rousseau teaches. He is silent concerning the soul. Botany “recalls to me both my youth and my innocent pleasure”; one might call it the prelapsarian science. Butterworth observes, “Because [Rousseau] does not think it possible to explain the whole, he insists that all one can do is to enjoy being part of the whole.”

The Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth Walks are unfinished—unintentionally so, as far as any of us can tell. The Eighth concerns fortune, which Rousseau calls the basis of public opinion. “I no longer saw in [the public’s “interior dispositions”] as anything but randomly moved masses, destitute of all morality with respect to me.” Fortune, of course, is not grace. Only away from society and its opinions can one find “an earthly paradise.” Insofar as public happiness (civil contentment) is possible, it requires equality, according to the Rousseauan implication uncovered by Butterworth in his interpretation of the Ninth Walk. As all atoms are created equal, one might add that this equality has a kind of justice to it. For a Rousseau, of course, a different justice applies. He is sufficiently bold to tell us that he writes his Tenth Walk on a Palm Sunday, the fiftieth anniversary of the day he first met his mistress, Madame de Warens. The final word of the *Reveries*, by intention or fortune, is “her.” This completes his reverie of paradise.

Butterworth concludes that Rousseau embraced a refined nihilism. Knowing that his edition will doubtless fall into the hands of merely literary sorts, he interprets Rousseau’s theology with prudent restraint. But he gives his faithful reader many telling hints, in the cause of justice for Rousseau.

The Political Philosophy of the Frankfurt School. By George Friedman. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981. Pp. 312. \$22.50 cloth.)

Auschwitz symbolizes the “modern paradox”: “unreasonable rationality,” a systematic, passionate insanity. The Frankfurt School, which consisted of such thinkers as Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, “set itself the task of defining the relationship between reason”—the distinctively human characteristic—“and brutality.”

The underlying paradox they discovered was that the Enlightenment, that image of humaneness, yielded worse horrors than those it eradicated. This, they contended, was inevitable, because reason that aims at content, that wants to be about *something*, “stands in awe of the fact.” It is positive, even to the extent of calling itself Positivism. It affirms the world, that inhumane thing, and does so with fatal inclusiveness and rigor:

Like all myths [the Enlightenment] could not fail, for it had set the terms for its own dialectic. Those elements that did not conform were ruled out of existence. Those elements that did conform were integrated into a precreated structure of thought.

This epistemological totality became political totalitarianism, barbarity-as-system. In the United States, this barbarism was and is commercial; in Germany, it was racist terror; in this, Friedman observes, the School echoes Spengler's thoughts on the modern duel between money and blood. In both countries, the bourgeoisie, the 'enlightened' class, believers in 'progress,' brought down a kingdom of darkness blacker than that of the Middle Ages.

To defeat modernity and its carriers, the Frankfurt School called for the use of both reason and passion. The reason they invoked was not classical, however; indeed, it was distinctly modern. Critical reason, negative and unsystematic, would revolutionize all structures of thought. This "theoretical guerrilla warfare, the warfare of irregulars against regularity itself," would raid the language of philosophic and literary texts for fragments that express "the unrealized possibilities inherent in men." No interpretation of whole texts, of course: that portends system.

The passions they invoked were usual ones, of neither classical nor modern pedigree. Now that modernity has conquered nature, they argued, men have no need to continue the passions' repression. Liberated passions would bring "the joy of gratification," what Friedman wittily calls "the spirit of Nietzsche turned egalitarianism." Drug use would also help, as "the faculty of fantasy shatters the reality principle." So would play, and a complementary eschewal of work. The goal of politics is "to transcend the practical."

If 'history' has brought us only money and blood, we must look outside 'history' to such "strangely archaic" groups as students, the people of the 'Third World,' and American blacks. They will criticize and impassion our way to the end of 'history'; collectively, they constitute nothing less than the Messiah. "The ultimate hope is for the transfiguration of being itself into a realm of utter negativity and autonomy."

In short, the Frankfurt School offers an astounding mixture of insight and bosh. To interpret and assess this mixture takes not only learning and intelligence but good judgment. Friedman has all of these virtues, at least one of which the Frankfurt School may have provoked but never deliberately encouraged. Modernity, he concludes, tries "to abolish the difference between being and becoming," the distinction Plato so assiduously remarked. "[B]y failing, [the Frankfurt School] demonstrated the bankruptcy of modernity." By succeeding, Friedman guides us back to older thought. Am I wrong to suspect that he has a more ancient thought-system than Plato's in mind?