

AN ETHICS OF WRITING? ON WRITING AS A SOCIAL ACTIVITY

Dirkie Smit & Francois Wessels
University of the Western Cape

Abstract

This article is a plea for 'an ethics of writing.' In a first section, the authors point to the power of writing, drawing on Martin's recent study of the nature and the power of writing and Thiel's study of the vocational responsibility of theologians in modernity, seeing themselves primarily as 'authors.' In a second section, they appeal to recent rhetorical theories that also underscore the importance of questions like who writes for whom and why. In a third section, the social function of writing is further discussed with reference to Gregory Clark's instructive study on dialogue, dialectic and conversation. In a final paragraph, the necessity of an ethics of writing is proposed.

1. Writing and power

Writing is a powerful activity. In his recent classical study, *The history and power of writing* (1994), Henri-Jean Martin has recently made that clear in a fascinating way. Martin has written many works on the history and sociology of writing, the book, and publishing. This momentous study, called 'one of the greatest history books ever written,' by Pierre Chaunu (Martin 1994:xiv), brings the insights and results of these studies together.

The overall impression is clear: Writing is a powerful activity. Writing has to do with power, with influence, with formation of society, with money, with material, with politics, with censorship, with industry, with struggle, with victory, triumph, and defeat, with civilization. And since it has to do with power, it has to do with responsibility, and with ethics.

John E Thiel, in his very instructive study of the nature of 'theological authorship' in modernity, particularly in Catholic theology, but also in the Protestant tradition, called *Imagination and authority* (1991), also approaches the question from the perspective of 'responsibility':

'The theme of theological responsibility guides an examination of the role of creativity in the theologian's vocational self-understanding' (Thiel 1991:ix).

He is interested in what theologians are doing, in their vocation, their responsibility, their function. He wants to appreciate 'how the theologian has come to be configured as a modern practitioner of his or her craft' (Thiel 1991:ix).

Modern theologians, he argues, 'can be distinguished from their premodern precursors by their commitment to the vocational ideal of authorship' (Thiel 1991: ix). Modern theologians, or, better: theologians in modernity, see themselves as 'authors.' With 'theological authorship' he refers to 'the assumption that the theologian is a creative agent whose talent is essential to the performance and the results of the theological task' (Thiel 1991:ix). 'Creative authorship,' he says, can be practised in many different ways, but somehow the notion itself 'is by now axiomatic to the modern

understanding of theological responsibility and expresses a view of the theological vocation that is shared by all nonfundamentalist theologians, whether they are liberal or conservative in their commitments' (Thiel 1991:x).

Present-day Christian theologians see themselves as authors, as creative, as interpreters, as people dealing imaginatively with tradition. They take this for granted. For them it is a 'seminal assumption' (Thiel 1991:2). This is their vocational responsibility. They 'write' - in one way or another.

Accordingly, the 'examination of the theme of theological authorship is an exercise in vocational and ecclesial self-understanding' (Thiel 1991:2).

He demonstrates this by exploring the shift from premodern to modern understandings of the theologian's vocational responsibility. Modern theology, according to him, shows four traits: the attack on traditional authority; the historical orientation of its many methods and approaches; its attention to individualism, human dignity and autonomy; and a focus on theological authorship. The four traits, respectively, focus on the reconceptualization of its body of knowledge (authority); its method (historical); its principal themes (individual); and its discipline as constructed by practitioners (authorship).

The fourth trait of modern theology, namely 'theological authorship,' is often overlooked as one of the characteristics definitive of post-Enlightenment theology, but it is of crucial importance, since it defines the notion of vocation and responsibility implicitly at work:

'Theologians adopted a new understanding of their role in the theological enterprise. (They) began to assume that their own individual talent contributed to the integrity of theology, even to the most fundamental respects in which theology could be considered meaningful for both the church and the society at large. Theologians appealed to theories of the imagination current in intellectual circles of the time to explain the creativity they now claimed on behalf of their own work. (They) conceived of themselves as authors and measured the authority of their work, its value for the church, not only in terms of its faithfulness to ecclesial tradition but also in terms of its creativity, its resourcefulness ...' (Thiel 1991:9).

Accordingly, Thiel distinguishes between two major 'paradigms of responsibility' with regard to writing, or authorship, in the Christian tradition:

What we take for granted, has not always been the case. 'Perhaps (it) is because our own cultural myopia ... leads us to assume too quickly that theological practitioners of every age conceived of their labor, authority, and vocational responsibility in much the same way' (Thiel 1991:9). In our paradigms of who we are and what we are supposed to do, textbooks play an important role to safeguard the assumptions, 'discouraging the reinvestigation of the paradigm's basic assumptions' (Thiel 1991:12). As Thomas Kuhn showed: 'the iconoclastic impetus of (a) new paradigm quickly produces its own version of the previous authority structure with its own complements of authorities, textbooks, and intellectual common sense' (Thiel 1991:12).

The shift took place, to his mind, 'from a classical to a romantic paradigm of theological responsibility' (Thiel 1991:14).

'By theological responsibility I refer to the vocational norms to which the theologian is accountable in his or her intellectual efforts to clarify the truth of an ecclesial tradition. Theological responsibility concerns the issue of authority as it relates to the

theological vocation. By what authority does the theologian speak and judge? To whom is the theologian answerable? By what criteria is the legitimacy of the theologian's speaking and judging measurable? The answers given to these questions will reflect a particular understanding of the role of the theologian in the church and thus of the nature of theological responsibility' (Thiel 1991:14-15).

In the classical paradigm of theological responsibility, distinctiveness and originality were not valued traits to be celebrated by a theologians' contemporaries. Soundness, orthodoxy, faithfulness to the tradition, and to the previous history of biblical interpretation, were the true marks of theological achievement (Thiel 1991:16):

'Consummate theological achievement in the High Middle Ages demanded the blending of individual voice into the harmonious chorus of the past authorities, the standard of theological responsibility from which individual authorship was finally indistinguishable' (Thiel 1991:17).

Albeit in a somewhat altered form, the classical paradigm was also characteristic of classical Protestantism.

'In many respects the denominational splintering of Christianity in the sixteenth century can be understood in terms of the issue of theological responsibility ... Protestantism rejected the (Catholic) conception of theological responsibility (theologians responsible to the tradition of authorities) and understood theological speaking and judging to be responsible to the Word of God alone ... For the reformers, individual acts of theological thinking and judging gained their legitimacy through their faithful exposition of the scriptural text, whose proper author was God' (Thiel 1991:17-18).

These conceptions of theological responsibility, however, clearly shared common assumptions. 'Because theologians were not authors, they did not possess authority' (Thiel 1991:19). This assumption about the nature of theological responsibility remained undisturbed until challenged by the Enlightenment's attack on its authoritative foundations. Then the shift to 'a romantic paradigm of theological responsibility' took place, as the Christian churches sought a means to defend themselves against the Enlightenment criticism.

Now, 'the theologian's task was no longer seen as the mimetic representation of an objective revelation but as the imaginative construction of the historical experience of salvation. This shift in conceptions about the nature of the theological enterprise ... highlighted the theologian's creativity' (Thiel 1991:21).

So, for modern theology 'theologians are authors, whose creativity is essential to their enterprise' (Thiel 1991:13). Friedrich Schleiermacher, in Protestantism (Thiel 1991:33-62), and Johann Sebastian Drey, in Catholicism (Thiel 1991:63-96), serve respectively as first efforts to articulate this (then new) vocational idea of theological authorship. In their attempts to formulate a theological method that was in step with the critical spirit of the Enlightenment, they turned their attention to the role of the practitioner, the subject of method, and sought to understand theological talent in the setting of romantic notions of creativity.

'To whom or to what ... is the theologian responsible in discerning and expressing the present and ever-transient moment in the development of Christian tradition? On whom or on what does the theologian rely to assure the legitimacy of the theological construction of belief? ... Theological authorship plays an important role in this

historical understanding of tradition and its corresponding conception of theological responsibility. It is the theologian's talent that apprehends and articulates the most significant and representative among the church's recent voices and perspectives. Unlike the classical paradigm, the romantic paradigm values theological originality ... The talent of authorship primarily involves an act of the imagination' (Thiel 1991:22-23).

So, the romantic paradigm 'opened the way for an appreciation of the authorial contributions of the individual theologian as an interpreter of the meaning of scripture and tradition for a particular community and in a specific time.' The romantic paradigm 'assumed that the theologian exercised vocational responsibility as an author whose individual talent contributed something valuable, and even indispensable, to the normativeness of the Christian tradition.' The romantic paradigm 'licensed the theologian's partial or relative authority as the author of theological constructions essential to a developing tradition's self-understanding, coherence, and integrity.' This conception of theological authorship 'stands in sharp contrast to the classical paradigm's suspicion ... and sanctions an understanding of theological responsibility that the classical paradigm would have judged ecclesially anomic' (Thiel 1991:23-24).

Each paradigm has its own 'textbooks,' particular genres which it prefers and takes for granted. The classical paradigm of theological responsibility came to expression in the scholastic commentaries, compendiums, and collations of the premodern period. The romantic paradigm (first) found articulation in the genre of theological encyclopedia as theologians struggled with the new assumptions about knowledge, method and disciplinary integrity (Thiel 1991:92).

Thiel then carefully traces the intellectual history of 'creative agency' from the seventeenth century through the early nineteenth century, and shows the manner in which this history provided the resource for the modern conceptualization of 'a theologian.' In particular, he analyses the relations between theological imagination and ecclesial authority in the last 150 years of Catholic tradition, where the new notion of theological responsibility has not been well received, but continuously led to opposition between the magisterium and theologians (Thiel 1991:97-136).

In the modern period, the exercise of authorship through theological construction has taken three principal forms, namely description (Barth, Frei, Lindbeck, Thiemann, Hauerwas), speculation (Bultmann, Tillich, Jüngel, Cobb, Rahner, Tracy), and criticism (the most recent of the three; popular since the political theology in the 1960s; departing from a hermeneutics of suspicion) (Thiel 1991:26ff). Their commonality lies in the assumption they share about the role played by the theological practitioner. All three are ways of exercising theological authorship. All three are ways in which the modern theologian functions as an author and so illustrate conceptions of the theological task that depart markedly from classical assumptions about the proper role of the theological practitioner (Thiel 1991:28-29).

According to Thiel, 'the creative and scholarly demands of an academic career easily lead to circumstances in which the theologian understands the object of his or her vocational responsibility to be the professional community in which he or she usually flourishes, the academy. This situation encourages the theologian to conceive responsibility primarily as faithfulness to the critical principles of the academy as embodied in the individual's scholarly work rather than as faithfulness to the developing tradition of the church. Such a heroic understanding of the role of theological talent

accords undue authority to the individual theologian and has no legitimate role in (at least the Catholic) tradition' (Thiel 1991:135-136).

He briefly considers two major possible alternatives to the modern period's decidedly romantic conception of authorship (of which he is very critical), namely Mark Taylor's deconstructive rejection ('effacement') of the notion of an author (following Derrida) (Thiel 1991:137-150), and George Lindbeck's postliberal criticism 'from within' in the form of 'constraint' of the author (following Karl Barth) (Thiel 1991:151-159). He shows much appreciation for Lindbeck, but concludes that it remains a typically Protestant approach (Thiel 1991:159-166). Finally, he offers an apology for the place of creativity in a confessional tradition that is unused to the happy juxtaposition of novelty and orthodoxy (i.e. the Catholic tradition). In sum, he pleads for a rapprochement of 'authority' and 'imagination' within Catholicism (Thiel 1991:167-220), for 'creative fidelity as a theological habitus' (Thiel 1991:129-136).

The implications of his analyses for our purposes are clear: writing has to do with power, so that being a theological author, writing theology, of any kind, involves the exercise of authority, of power, social power, and therefore questions of responsibility become important. Who are the authors? For whom do they write? To whom are they responsible? What does 'faithfulness' mean? Whose interests are served?

2. Writing: *cur, quis, cui, quando, quomodo, ad quid?*

The recent rhetorical turn in (human and social) sciences has again made us more aware of precisely these (Aristotelian) aspects of ethos and pathos involved in writing activities. Since the Enlightenment, we have focused on the third aspect, namely logos. We focused on the argument, the text, the document, the product. Rhetorical theory reminds us that pathos, i.e. the audience, the readers, and ethos, i.e. the author, the character, the integrity, the motivation, the interests, are important as well.

In many rhetorical studies the importance of these questions related to 'writing' is underscored from diverse angles: in Bender & Wellbery's *The ends of rhetoric. History, theory, practice*; in Hernadi's *The rhetoric of interpretation and the interpretation of rhetoric*; in Fuller's *Philosophy, rhetoric, and the end of knowledge*; in Brown's *Writing the social text. Poetics and politics in social science discourse*; in Nelson et al's *The rhetoric of the human sciences*; in Simons' *Rhetoric in the human sciences*.

Samuel IJsseling, in his fascinating *Rhetorik und Philosophie. Eine historisch-systematische Einführung*, for example asks:

'Was ist ein Text oder gar ein Werk? ... (W)elche Faktoren machen den Text zu einem Text - und genau zu diesem Text? Inwieweit sind innere oder äußere Machtstrukturen beim Zustandekommen eines Textes am Werk? Mit anderen Worten: Welchen Einfluß besitzen Machtinstanzen in Politik und Erziehungswesen, in Kultur und Kirche auf das, was gesagt oder nicht gesagt wird? ... *Wer* schreibt eigentlich, wenn geschrieben wird? Was ist ein Autor? Was kann schließlich ein Text *bewirken* und unter welchen Umständen? Wie steht es mit den ethischen und politischen, theologischen und metaphysischen Überzeugungen, die in den Menschen lebendig sind, und die die Folge eines Netzes von Texten sind, das über der Welt ausgebreitet liegt? Und wie steht es damit, daß man offensichtlich am Schreiben und Lesen von Texten Gefallen findet? Kurz gesagt, was geschieht überhaupt, wenn gesprochen und geschrieben wird?' (IJsseling 1988: 14-15).

We (in South African academic theology) have not paid enough attention to this complex of questions. We are considering 'the power to speak' (using e.g. Rebecca Chopp 1989) and the 'power to read' (in all its meanings: simply the power to be able to read, the power that comes by being literate; but also the power to interpret and to be in positions where one's readings and interpretations, of authoritative texts, are respected; and indeed the power to read in the sense of 'to teach courses,' to determine course content, and curricula), but we have not focused on the power to write. We have not asked questions about the nature of 'theological authorship,' of our 'vocational responsibility,' of 'the responsibility of writing.' Who are writing theology in South Africa? For whom? In which genres, languages? At what price? Who are publishing that, subsidising that? Who are reading what? In short, we have to see writing as a social activity and we need to work on an ethics of writing.

3. Writing as a social activity

Perhaps the delightful little study by Gregory Clark, *Dialogue, dialectic, and conversation. A social perspective on the function of writing* (1990), could help us in a right direction.

Clark, a lecturer in writing skills at Brigham Young University, explains two of the major purposes of his book as the elimination of the 'fiction of the autonomous writer' and the 'fiction of the passive reader' (Clark 1990:32). As the reader's response literature theories have adequately demonstrated, reading is not a passive process, but an active construction of reality. The reader concludes from the cues provided to her by the text. By the same token, the writer communicates with some implied reader(s) right from the first moment of putting words on paper. LeFevre describes the writing of a text as an inherently collaborative process, an act initiated by a writer and completed by readers' (Clark 1990:xv).

Clark's book is a further elaboration of this notion. He wishes to demonstrate that writer and readers do not simply collaborate in the creation of a text, but that they collaborate in constructing the world inhabited by both. Writers not only write, readers not only read. They *use* the written texts 'to negotiate what we can together believe, value, and do' (Clark 1990:xv). Writing and reading are not simply processes by which truth is formulated and received. In writing and interpreting texts writers and readers together define truths which they can share, thereby building common values and creating a community in which we can live together. The consequence of this for both writing and reading is immense. Writing and reading are social acts for which those who write and read are responsible. The purpose of Clark's book is to argue 'that writing and reading are fundamental acts of citizenship that enable individuals to contribute to the construction of community by making them individually and collectively responsible for it' (Clark 1990:xix).

Clark comes to ascribe such an importance to writing and reading because of his understanding of social life as 'essentially a rhetorical process' (Clark 1990:xvii). Any form of communal life is based on mutual agreements between the members of any community. To reach such agreements means to persuade and to be persuaded. Rhetoric (not as decoration but as strategy) plays an important part in the processes of persuasion and agreement. The peaceful co-existence of a community requires a certain collective ability of rhetorical competence - in the art of listening to arguments and responding coherently to them. It was no coincidence that in both ancient Greece and the colleges of

the early American republic the ideals of democracy and rhetoric were both held in high esteem. There is a 'fundamental connection' between rhetoric and democracy. This ideal Clark wishes to see restored in American universities. His own discipline, teaching writing, is strategically positioned to make an important contribution to this restoration. Clark (1990:xvii) quotes James A. Berlin with approval: '...writing courses prepare students for citizenship in democracy, for assuming their political responsibilities, whether as leaders or simply as active participants.'

Clark is therefore not only interested in writing, in the formulation of texts, but in writing as a way of constructing (in collaboration with the reader) a symbolic world. His purpose is to draw attention to the fact that when we write and read what is written, we do construct such reality - whether we are aware of this process or not. The advantage of being aware of this is that we can participate in both writing and reading in a responsible manner, aware of the awesome consequences of the writing and reading processes. An anecdote in the last paragraph in the book illustrates an admirable awareness of this responsibility. A Vietnam veteran with credentials to teach at university level, but who chose to teach at a rough public school, explained his decision with the words, 'I don't want people to kill each other' (Clark 1990:72).

Clark uses three terms to describe the discursive exchange through which people collaborate in instructing the symbolic universe in which they live, three terms which may seem synonymous, but which are not. The term *dialogue* Clark employs to describe 'the cooperative shape of that process, an exchange of discourse that is characterized by its participants'... conscious efforts to interact cooperatively' (1990:xvi); *dialectic* describes 'its collaborative function, how that process of exchange enables people to construct together assumptions and agreements they can share' (1990:xvi), and *conversation* describes the process itself, the 'experience of cooperative, collaborative interaction through which people enact the essence of compromise' (1990:xvi). In the first three chapters of his book Clark explains these notions.

- In the first chapter, discourse in dialogue,' Clark explains how a 'social constructionist perspective' (Clark 1990:4) forms the basis of his understanding of the writing and reading of texts. Using the terminology of the sociology of knowledge, he explains that reality is not an entity which is transmitted from one person to another, or from text to reader, but is constituted in the process of formulation. Therefore, it is more correct to say that we communicate *with* others than saying we communicate *to* others. Those with whom we communicate, do not simply receive the communication as a presentation of reality, but reconstruct reality from the information given to them.

The epistemological discourse in three different disciplines confirm the social construction of knowledge. Thomas Kuhn argued that scientific knowledge is not an expanding body of empirically verifiable truths, but 'the current interpretation of particular experience that a community of scientists has come to consider persuasive' (Clark 1990:5). Learning science is less a matter of absorbing a body of facts than of 'acquiring fluency in the language' in which the current interpretation of facts are formulated. Even scientific knowledge is constructed knowledge, and the construction takes place in the interaction with the constructions of other scientists.

The same holds for philosophical knowledge. Clark quotes Richard Rorty with approval: 'If there is one thing we have learned about concepts in recent decades, it is that to have a concept is to be able to use a word' (Clark 1990:6)

This is true, not only for scientific and philosophical communication of knowledge, but also for 'general cultural knowledge' (Clark 1990:6). We all situate ourselves, according to Clifford Geertz, within a notion of reality that we have constructed with others from shared experiences.

The important consequence of this social constructionist perspective on the acquiring of knowledge is that it stresses responsibility. Knowledge acquired from and knowledge passed on is never simply pure facts, it is formulated, and therefore interpreted, knowledge. The danger that we would forget that is formidable. Once people affirmed the truth of the social knowledge they have constructed, they tend to deny its origins. In other words, consensus tends to be seen not as socially negotiated knowledge, but as absolute truth. The remedy for this, according to Clark (1990:8) lies in maintaining 'abnormal discourse', whose purpose, unlike that of 'normal discourse', is not to reach agreement, but 'to sustain the process of exchange itself' (Clark 1990:8). Abnormal discourse 'raises questions and poses alternatives, disrupting consensus' (Clark 1990:8), thus reminding the community about the historicity and contingency of truth.

The unavoidable obligation of taking responsibility for what we say is emphasized by the literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin. He argues that dialogue is a fact of our existence. 'To live means to engage in dialogue, to question, to listen, to answer, to agree, etc.' (Todorov, quoted by Clark, 1990:9). Everything we say, everything we do are answers given to others. For Bakhtin, to be means to communicate (Clark 1990:10). Even our own inner experience is registered in terms of our commonality. Bakhtin distinguishes between *internal* and *external* utterances. Before a person communicates an external utterance to another, she 'must construct it in an internal... dialogue where it emerges both in response to the memory of relevant, related utterances that have preceded it and in anticipation of utterances that will follow it' (Clark 1990:11). But not only is life itself part of our dialogue with the others. Language is not neutral. In our dialogue we meet others with beliefs and values, imbedded in the words that they use. Our answers to those words are answers to the beliefs and values they express. '... We never say or hear words, we say or hear what is true or false, good or bad' (Bakhtin, quoted by Clark 1990:10). Language used in discourse is therefore essentially ideological.

The implication of this for Bakhtin is that the communicator is 'answerable' for everything she communicates. Every statement is an interaction with the discourse of others, and therefore exposed to the judgement and response of others.

But statements and written texts are not only exposed to the judgement of others. In some cases, for example, the novel, texts are *only completed* when they are received by readers. 'In response to an utterance of a writer a reader constructs an understanding. This understanding finds its function as a silent utterance in a dialogue sustained within that reader... The reader's utterance in response to the utterance of the writer is itself a text, whether articulated or not' (Clark 1990:14). Novels are even more dependent on the 'inherently revisionary understanding of readers' than other texts because they simulate the 'dialogical complexity of actual meaning making' (Clark 1990:14).

Clarke then refers to Don Bialostosky who explored the possible effect of the application of Bakhtin's perspective on the community who read and write literary

criticism. If literary critics (Bialostosky argues) kept in mind the essential answerability of texts, it would have two important consequences:

- * The texts that they would choose to read, would be *read dialogically*, 'read in terms of the particular context in which they were generated.'
- * The texts would be *written dialogically*, 'written both in response to what others have written before and in anticipation of the responses of readers who will hold them answerable.'

A very important implication would follow from this (Clark 1990:16):

'Such discourse would sustain within that community a constant consciousness of where their texts come from, how they come to mean, and how they function there.'

- But dialogue can be used for different purposes. In the second chapter, 'Rhetoric in dialectic,' he focuses on this. We may interact in dialogue 'for the purpose of defeating ideas that differ from our own' (Clark - 1990:19 - calls this the *eristic* purpose), or we may interact 'for the purpose of discovering in our differing ideas points of agreement' (the *dialectic* purpose). In other words, dialogue may be used simply as a technique to assert power, or as a means to discover truth. Those who use dialogue for an eristic purpose, are of course not interested in discovering the truth - for the simple reason that they are convinced that they know the truth already. 'When we assert as complete and absolute truth what is really but one interpretation, our discourse is eristic' (Clark 1990:19).

The type of dialogue, according to Clark, which contributes most towards a common understanding, is dialectic dialogue (Clark 1990:20). Referring to two examples from the history of philosophical discourse, Clark shows that writing can best be used to articulate truth when employed dialectically, and not eristically.

In his *Phaedrus* Plato lets Socrates tell Phaedrus that 'rhetoric... is an art of influencing the soul through words' (Clark 1990:22). For Plato, truth is an eternal idea which our souls once witnessed but in their mortality have forgotten. The search for truth is therefore the search for the memory of the eternal truth, which our souls once possessed. The most profitable method of searching is not by contemplating in isolation, but to have our memories quickened by the discourse with others. 'Trees and countryside have no desire to teach me anything; it's only the men in the city that do' (quoted by Clark 1990:23). Plato's *Phaedrus* is not a critique of rhetoric but a description of how written discourse should function. When dialogue is committed to paper, it often acquires the status of an indisputable truth, simply by virtue of its being written down. A text easily becomes a *pharmakon*, a poison, which relieves its readers to think for themselves ('they will not need to exercise their memories, being able to rely on what is written', quoted by Clark 1990:24), instead of *pharmakon*, a drug 'for memory and wisdom.'

Plato thus made us aware of the necessity to situate a text 'within the process of dialectic... (so that they) are made temporary despite their authoritative appearance' (Clark 1990:26).

The second example is Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Whereas Plato described *why* writing must function within a dialogical process, Aristotle described *how* writing does that. For Aristotle rhetoric and dialectic are essentially two different

applications of the same process. Rhetoric is used in public in order to persuade an audience, dialectic is used on paper in order to persuade a few specialists. But it is essentially the same process. Before the writer commits his argument on paper, he must simulate his argument as a speech to his readers. Aristotle uses the term *enthymème* to describe this composition of 'the preliminary dialectical interaction that is sustained within the mind of the rhetor' (Clark 1990:30).

Like Plato Aristotle emphasizes that truth is not produced in isolation by a writer, but is negotiated by a process of dialectic between writer and readers.

- That both writers and readers collaborate in the processes of writing and reading of texts, is thirdly demonstrated by the *conversational quality of discourse*, in a chapter called 'Writing in conversation' (Clark 1990:33-48). In the last decade, consensus has been growing that any written text forms part of a conversation. A text responds to what has previously been expressed and later texts will respond to it. Kenneth Burke illustrated this process by comparing it to a someone entering a parlour, where a discussion had been going on for some time. 'You listen for a while until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you... The hour grow late, you must depart, with the discussion still in progress' (Burke, quoted by Clarke 1990:34).

The important consequence of this is that a writer, as a participant in this conversation, is almost always dependent on what others have said and wrote before her. Whether she knows it or not, and whether she acknowledges it or not, a writer is conversing with those before and with those that will follow her. The rhetorical situation has three constituents, according to Lloyd Bitzer: the *exegience* which triggered the rhetorical activity, the *audience* which is addressed and the *constraints* - persons, events, objects, laws, images, facts etc which have 'the power to influence decision and action needed to modify the exegience' (quoted by Clark 1990:44). The connectedness with those conversation partners who preceded and succeed is a constraint of the rhetorical situation: '...the function of any rhetorical discourse within a community is necessarily constrained by the related discourses that have preceded it' (Clark 1990:45). In other words, writing is never a monologue. Even when the format of a text is that of a monologue, it is embedded in a larger conversation with other texts. That remains true, regardless of whether the writer knows it or not.

It would, of course be better if the writer is aware of this conversation. That is what Clark sees as one of the duties of those that teach writing - to help writers to be conscious that their writing forms part of a conversation. Because if they are conscious of the effect of their words, they may write with more care and responsibility: '...the conversation model allows us to understand that writing is, at some level, always an exertion of power over others, it reminds us that we must write and read texts with responsibility and care' (Clark 1990:47).

The onus is not only on writers to exercise responsibility and care. Precisely because the exertion of power is a constituent of writing, readers ought to read with equal responsibility and care. Clark (1990:49) quotes Weaver's remark that our use of language is inherently and inevitably 'sermonic.' When we use language, we preach - we try to define truth and to convince others to accept our definition of truth. As part of a community we are exposed to the definition of the truth by

others. If we do not consciously and critically scrutinize what we hear and what we read, our beliefs and values will be defined for us.

In his fourth chapter, on the 'Ethics of reading,' Clark makes the important point that there is an absolutist (and therefore coercive) inclination in rhetorical statements. We state what we believe to be true, and because we state it as the truth (albeit from our perspective) our statement carries with it the persuasion to others to agree with our claim to truth. 'Inherent... particularly in written rhetoric, is one person's claim to the authority to determine what others can together believe and do' (Clark 1990:51). We use rhetoric to attempt to create consensus, and in so doing it can become coercive, because through it we claim that our view is the correct one. We use rhetoric for our private purposes, to assert our views and values. In fact, most of the time we do not offer our view as the one that ought to be accepted by others - we claim that our view represents the consensus that already exists (Clark 1990:54). Our discourse often reveals that we take it for granted that other views, values and actions are incorrect. Clark calls this 'rhetoric's ethical problem' - it belongs to the nature of rhetoric to assert a truth that is authorized by the particular ideology of the person who presents it (Clark 1990:55). His remedy is not to purge rhetoric from this inclination. It cannot, because it belongs to the nature of rhetoric. 'Even the most ethical of writers who *wants* her ideas to be read as contingent, who *seeks* from her readers their critical response, cannot prevent them from reading her text as a statement of consensual truth' (Clark 1990:59).

The remedy is to recognize this inherent inclination of all our rhetorical statements and to resist it by recognizing the conflicting views claiming to be consensus. Once the 'pluralistic notion of consensus' (Clark 1990:58) is admitted, it should be sustained by an open and critical dialogue. Following Perelman, Clark builds his hope for a consensus that will unify a community not in the acceptance of one particular version of the consensus view, but in 'our common consent to continue a particular conversation' (Clark 1990:59), even though our views conflict.

To a large degree this is the responsibility of reading. A writer cannot do otherwise but present her views as authoritative, but readers can acknowledge or reject this claim. If a community does not confer authority on a text, its claim is futile. 'It is in the reading and not the writing that words are turned into action, readers and not writers can empower those words with the authority that allows them to function in the world' (Clark 1990:61). It is therefore not only writers but also readers who have a role to play in the collaborative attempt to establish a critical and creative dialogue in a community, and as a consequence, construct a shared understanding of their common experience that provides the foundation for their continued cooperation.

4. An ethics of writing?

In a final chapter, 'Writing in conversation and the rhetoric of democratic education,' Clark (1990:63-74) spells out the consequences of this perspective for the teaching of writing. He wants to provide 'a perspective on the social function of texts that will enable us to reconceive the teaching of writing as a teaching of a democratic practice' (Clark 1990:65).

He argues that our (also read: theological) knowledge and thus our values and actions are the products of the provisional agreements that we negotiate and continually

renegotiate in discourse with our peers (Clark 1990:66). The rhetoric of our public (also read: theological) discourse forms a practice, in Alasdair MacIntyre's description, 'a particular social context in which all socially constructive interaction, and thus all ethical action, must be situated' (Clark 1990:67). We continuously 'cooperate with others in the process of developing and improving the knowledge that enables us to meet our common needs and reach our common goals. This notion of practice situates our individual action within the context of the common project that we work with others to sustain. We do this cooperative work largely through the process of rhetorical exchange' (Clark 1990:68).

According to him, this makes the teaching of (also read: theological) writing skills so important, for society and for humanity. Teaching people to read and write (also read: theology) is a fundamentally democratic practice, it 'has the potential to provide us with a nonlethal method for managing conflict' (quoting Burke, Clark 1990:71). He concludes: '(This) illustrates the importance of teaching our students a rhetoric of public discourse, a rhetoric in which language is seen as public and, thus, political. And in a world where written language is becoming increasingly powerful in its ability to influence people, (this) illustrates the importance of teaching our students that imbedded in the acts of reading and writing are fundamental human interactions, interactions that determine the direction of our common experience' (Clark 1990:72).

Czeslaw Milosz began his well-known *The captive mind* (1951) with the words 'It was only toward the middle of the twentieth century that the inhabitants of many European countries came, in general unpleasantly, to the realization that their fate could be influenced directly by intricate and abstruse books of philosophy ...' People in South Africa have made the same experience, in many different ways. Writing is powerful. Therefore the people with the power to write must be responsible. They must be accountable. Writing is a moral activity.

For Christian theologians, taking for granted their vocational responsibility as 'authors,' as 'writers,' i.e. on the one hand as people dealing constructively and imaginatively with the Christian tradition, and on the other hand as people involved in a social conversation about the kind of world and the kind of life we want to share with others, these insights in the power of writing have serious implications. Somehow we must ask questions of responsibility explicitly, questions of 'an ethics of writing.'

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