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Difficult History

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Review of Edith Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998)

Tellers of historical truth need several basic conditions to be met. Most obviously, they need epistemologically safe access to the past: it must be possible to locate evidences of past events and draw inferences about them that are, if never guaranteed to be free of distortion, at least relatively corrigible, so that distinctions may be drawn between more and less credible historical propositions. Historians need reliable methods of communication and tractable materials, so that their telling of the *res gestae* can yield a coherent *historia rerum gestarum*_. They need to assume a steady, clear production of durations and before-and-after positions, so that events and sequences can be given accurate temporal characterizations. They need a safe harbor for historical learning in human memory. Finally, historians need to anticipate that their work can help to sustain a community of understanding and action—that is, that history can be *appropriated* in such a way as to strengthen substantial bonds between the subjects, tellers, and hearers of history.

5. Look on our age, historians, and despair. History's conditions are all in jeopardy. Postmodern thinkers, acting partly as sophisticated critics of modern intellectual projects (including "historical consciousness") and partly as on-the-spot observers of a new culture of referentless images and ownerless information, point out grave metaphysical and ethical problems with them. Somewhat like the undercover agent who has to find and disarm a whole network of terrorist bombs to save a public building, Edith Wyschogrod prowls the corridors of postmodern discourse to see whether an ethically obliged historian, one who *must* tell the truth (and defy the untruth) about others who cannot speak, can get around the apparent unknowableness or unsharableness or unredeemableness of the past. Wyschogrod's problems and results generally parallel those of Kant's dialectic of practical reason: facing experiences that seem to render absurd the principle of a moral responsibility linking generations, she thinks her way toward reasonable faith that a metaphysically chastened but ethically responsible construction of history is feasible. Conversing with a very large array of classic and contemporary thinkers, she assumes and continually tests the stance of a historian of good (yet ironical) conscience, a "heterological" historian bound in relation to the cognitively unencompassable exteriority of others whose real lives cannot be ignored, a historian who deals in artful *ficciones* (in a term taken from Borges) rather than in certifiable facts or destinies. The responsibility and claims of such a heterological historian would be fulfilled in "bringing forth the silences of the other" (32).
6. Weighing on the heterological historian is the thunderous silence left by the mass exterminations of the twentieth century. Wyschogrod indicates these with a term bearing cosmological overtones, the "cataclysm." The cataclysm imposes an ethically ultimate "pressure" to take history seriously; it "purely and simply" demands that history be told from a "non-place"

of responsibility to others (18). Yet Wyschogrod's book is not mainly about the problem of writing Holocaust history and she is not concerned only with the worst events. Her topic is quite general: given our situation, how can a historical representation be well warranted?

7. Chapter by chapter the deep pitfalls open up before us, each receiving a complex, polyphonic treatment. I will try to point to the core of just four of what I take to be the most important problems together with Wyschogrod's heterological strategy of overcoming them and saving history.

Representation

5. No philosopher will be surprised to find that wrinkles in mental and semiotic reference make a full evidential presence or logical grounding of cognition elusive. But the really radical problem in representation and challenge to any fundamental theory is that the cognitive act cannot affirm, as it must, the alterity of its object, and thus a truth of uncovering or correspondence, without at the same time denying and missing alterity—treating as present what never is, was, or will be present, making somehow agreeable what can only be a provocation. This difficulty is exacerbated for the would-be historical truth-teller in that the past is irreversibly lost. A historical representation of truth would be a doubled illusion, an impossible mastery of time to grasp what is impossible to grasp anyway. Spiting the illusion, however, is the heterological historian's "representation" of the other by the linkage of being able to use (and forbidden, in conscience, to ignore) the other's *name*. The one-whom-we-must-name who was "before us" chronologically now comes "before us" as our intentional target in the historian's continuation of the other's speech acts. Cognitive representation and the being of the cognitive subject are subordinated to and qualified by "representation" in the ethico-political sense: "the I-saying of the historian . . . is not the assertion of a substantive self but rather of a promise to assume liability for the dead others by naming them" (17).
6. The heterological historian must seek relatively trustworthy *ways* of representing the cognitively unrepresentable others. Here the Kantian theme of the sublime is pertinent. Despite the danger of aestheticizing the other through the enjoyment of sublime experience or assigning the other to a position in a theoretical system under the sign of the sublime, Wyschogrod is able to associate the Kantian unrepresentable with Levinas' *il y a*, "being in the absence of beings," and to credit this inchoate being with "denucleating" the self and opening it to alterity (68).

Images

7. The proliferation of images and visual simulations in our culture has made a profound change, Wyschogrod thinks, in everyday knowing and being; with our immersion in photographs, films, and virtual realities, the questionableness that had always attended the image as an exceptional sort of presentation now fills our world. (The Hegelian consummation of knowledge without exteriority would, she notes, bring us to the same virtualized place.) At sea among images, the subject loses the power to criticize the relation of the image to reality; Baudrillard complains, for instance, that "film no longer allows you to question." But Wyschogrod opposes to this Benjamin's insight that the selections and recombinations of film can "burst the prison world of [banal everyday life] asunder" (87). For the heterological historian's purposes, the image, like the human face itself, *can* open the space of non-discursive

ethical meaning. The ethical thinker is, for ethical purposes, an epistemological optimist about all sorts of perception.

8. How would the heterological historian comment on a disagreement between two filmgoers, one decrying *Schindler's List* as a Hollywood commodification of the Holocaust and the other hailing it as a breakthrough in ethical experience? Would she necessarily side with the ethically inspired subject? She would insist not on a particular "view" of such a matter but on her own testimony, for which she is responsible: "The historian's power remains deictic: she must be able to pursue the web of images to the point where she can stop them, where the etiolated image is halted by the density of a territory: 'Stop. Here, here it is the church in Nayarabuye in which thousands of Tutsi were slain' " (110).

Time

9. Different philosophical interpretations of time may affect the feasibility of meaningful historical remembering. A realist view of historical reference seems untenable, for reasons already indicated, but to take an anti-realist view—to think that statements about the past can be made true only by their relation to present conventions, and not by their relation to a past reality—is to open the door to historical revisionism with any agenda. The conventions that determine truth and falsity for a certain historical account may be that it "assuages guilt, saves face, or encourages national pride," as in Nolte's portrayal of the Nazi concentration camps as a defensive imitation of the Soviet state's treatment of internal enemies (165). This is unsettling. Unlike those whose remedy to this problem is a tenseless view of truth, however, the heterological historian accepts the changing of truth values as time passes; this admission does not disable her, since she has embraced the fluid idiom of the *fiction* and taken as her controlling standard "not the absolute truth of what was but the [fallible] certainty of that which could not have been" (168). Realism about the past misses its *hyperreality*, its characteristic of "volatilizing" reality in becoming present never as actual but only in word and image.
10. The heterological historian has uses for both of time's major aspects, the stretched and the punctiform. In stretched time, she can understand counterfactually how past events entertain future possibilities (as Heidegger suggested in his ecstatic account of time). Addressing time as punctiform, she can recognize the constraints of before-and-after and interpret the significance of moments, turning points. Her own position in time is "bilocal"; the science fiction trope of "time travel" can express her relation to time past and its hyperrealizing function in present experience. (The time travel idea complements the paradoxical claim that the historian is "stationed" in a "non-place" from which ethical meaning reaches into our experience.)

Community

10. Meaningful historical work, I have observed, is supposed to sustain a community. Wyschogrod's heterological historian cannot but wish to "help to maintain the impossible dream of non-violent communities" (217). But community has not traditionally been conceived in such a way as to foster this intention. The Platonic community of consanguinity and the modern community of production and exchange are both systems of immanence in which injustice is inevitably inscribed (the members having differential standings) and exteriority screened

away. In sustaining *these* operations, history telling is bound to be a harmful lie. The heterological claim that can rescue history from this suicidal self-acknowledgement is that an excess of love and hospitality “fissures” social systems despite their real and ideal totalizations. The historian can participate in that fissuring, articulating that excess, and can even enlist art works in the cause of ethical history as “gratuitous productions” and pointers to transcendence (240). (Wyschogrod includes several artists’ photographs in her book with this purport.) The historian can give the community a gift of memory with a bonus of hope and ethically pure inspiration, a gift containing “not only the *vouloir dire* of a people that has been silenced, of the dead others, but . . . in addition, what giving wants to say” (248).

11. The heterological move, in sum, is to incorporate givens and non-givens, experiences and aporias, beliefs and doubts alike in a responsible comportment. No theory or worry can trump ethical concern. One is commanded by ethical concern to reject any claim that would neutralize it—a claim that murder occurred only as part of normal and unavoidable processes, for example—but beyond this, one cannot deduce any specific assertions or practical policies. The role of the heterological historian is to contribute ethical vigilance to our historico-political discussion, offering provisional endorsements or criticisms of any theses that are offered in it. Like the Pyrrhonian skeptic but holding to ethical disturbance rather than peace of mind, the heterological theorist enforces a sovereign principle, a presumption of responsible relation, against all feelings, perceptions, and thoughts that seem incompatible with it.
12. Wyschogrod bravely takes on the problems she regards as hardest—including what might even be a pointlessly hard problem, that of the role of quantum indeterminacy in mind-brain functioning—but she does not pretend to offer a comprehensive historical theory. Unavoidably, one is left wondering about various undiscussed issues that are relevant to her inquiry. For example, what are we to say about the unproblematized “normal” history which parents continually teach their children and which schools and literatures and media presentations continually teach us all? Since normal history is presupposed in virtually everything we do and say, even in an age of hyperreality, mustn’t an account be given of the conditions under which it is possible or meaningful to *depart* from its assumptions? Can there be a criticism or mutation of normal history that is not at the same time enabled and enfolded by it? (We shouldn’t let an apocalyptic Baudrillardian reading of the situation influence too much our sense of the parameters of discussion.) A companion question: What are we to say from a heterological perspective about the social constructs and biological facts of *inheritance*? In religion, acknowledgement of inheritance is the backbone of piety, and continuation of tradition is a sacred imperative. The political idea of inheritance is a backbone of the *res gestae* (as wars, treaties, and other momentous actions are taken for it) and the *historia rerum gestarum* (as the dynastic series, or some comparable thread, makes possible the narration of a collective experience over time). The economic principle of inheritance is, if not a great theme of history, a great constraint upon it. The biology of genetic inheritance seems to be the real thread of “natural history,” in which human history is embedded. Are there not irresistible reasons, both theoretical and practical, to set skepticism about historical knowledge aside insofar as we cannot orient ourselves cognitively in any of these evidently functional domains without assuming a really knowable historical phenomenon and a real participation in it?
13. A crucial question for me concerns the content of history, that is, what the teller of historical truth means to tell the truth about. Wyschogrod repeatedly uses a traditional expression for the object of historical knowledge, *res gestae* or “deeds,” but does not ask what it means that “deeds” are indicated as the object of remembering and telling. (An echo of “deeds”

is perhaps heard in her references to the “speech acts” of the others for whom the historian speaks.) Much depends, I suggest, on whether our sense of history tilts toward the idea of an inclusive human *experience*--so that we place ourselves in the posture of receptivity and adopt awareness as our chief goal--or toward an idea of an inclusive human *action*, placing ourselves in an active posture and working toward accomplishment as our goal. History telling usually revolves around action, for the same reason that Aristotle speaks of the object of narrative imitation as an action: it is through human agents’ active participation in real occurrences that agents form lives that we can judge happy or unhappy, successful or unsuccessful, and these are the most interesting and important data that emerge in time. The silence of the Holocaust, for example, perceived under the aspect of action, is the emptiness of a practical field, the absence of all the things so many persons could have done--and more largely, a specifically practical grotesqueness, the perversely radical betrayal of cooperative trust and the employment of advanced methods to hack madly away at the agent ensemble itself. The ethical command, understood in the register of action, is to allow and foster the other’s acts (rather than, say, to be the immediate cause of the other’s pleasure). The voice of the other is ethically considerable because the other acts by speaking. The excessive desire of ethical agents is to give themselves over to the unpredictable joint actions of agent ensembles (which is not to be confused with the fascist desire to be part of a great collective action controlled by a single understanding and a single reward).

14. Historical continuity is a relatively spectral and notional thing, and the threats to its intelligibility are less than urgent, if we view history more under the aspect of experience than of action. That is because the community of experience is constituted in a very loosely contingent manner by whoever happens to be seen and heard together. We may be haunted by the thought of persons whose suppressed presence we will never know anything definite about; nevertheless, persons in this category make no contribution to our life. Thinking about Wyschogrod’s “cataclysm” under the aspect of experience, we must admit that we may not be aware of actual mass exterminations other than the ones we are able to name--and we have to admit also that we lack a meaningful way of affirming that it makes a difference to us whether such events really occurred or not.
15. Certainly it makes a great difference whether such events have occurred, but we must engage history in the register of action to capture that meaning. For only in the history of action are causal linkages essentially important, and only by thinking factually or counterfactually about causal linkages can we specify the character and the happiness of human agency either individually or collectively. (In the history of experience what essentially matters is *what* falls together in our awareness, not *how* such data were produced.) Only in the history of action are praise-worthiness and culpability apparent. We connect directly with the history of action when we remonstrate with each other and make our choices about what to do. We connect with the history of action when we reckon with our various inheritances, a core theme of inheritance being causal dependence with practical implications.
16. Wyschogrod acknowledges the primary importance of action in history throughout her book, I believe, but only tacitly. An explicit thematic of action would make more apparent at many points the stakes and implications of the discussion. It would also set up an exchange with an important discussion partner not yet heard from, Bergson, who undertook (especially in *Matter and Memory*) to show the metaphysical priority of a temporally extended and unified reality of action while relativizing momentary perceptions and concepts that cut manipulable but misleading slivers out of that reality. On Bergson’s view, a number of the claims that

threaten to cripple history are based on metaphysical mistakes. I am sure I would learn much from the adjudication of that argument by so subtle and responsible a critic as Edith Wyschogrod.

Steven G. Smith has taught philosophy and religious studies at Millsaps College since 1985. He is the author of *The Argument to the Other. Reason Beyond Reason in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas and Karl Barth* (Scholars Press, 1983), *The Concept of the Spiritual: An Essay in First Philosophy* (Temple University Press, 1988), *Gender Thinking* (Temple University Press 1992), and journal articles on topics in philosophy of religion, theology, ethics, philosophical anthropology, and aesthetics.