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Wyschogrod & Raschke - Heterological History - JCRT 1.2 Edith Wyschogrod
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An The Ethics of Remembering Edith Wyschogrod applies the familiar postmodernist concept of “heterology”—the study of Otherness or “alterity”—to the philosophy of history. The following conversation with JCRT Senior Editor Carl Raschke explores the notion of “heterological history,” as Wyschogrod delineates it, in relationship to a variety of contemporary philosophical and theological themes.

6. **RASCHKE:** In *The Ethics of Remembering* you venture forth to challenge the post-structuralist (and hence postmodernist) deployment of the “trace” as it pertains to the reading, and the writing, of history. Whereas in such writers as Derrida, Taylor, and even to a certain extent Levinas, the trace implies an unrecoverable presence, you seem to be arguing that the “ethical” demands of historiography, wherein the other is both engaged and “named”, leads us toward a new understanding of “heterology.” This understanding differs from how the word has been used by many philosophers to date. Do I misread you?
7. **WYSCHOGROD:** Your question raises fundamental issues of absent presence. I argue that the past itself is inscrutable and thus always already an unsurpassable negation. It would seem that only an apophatics of history would be possible. Yet here the model—I invoke it with fear and trembling—of a broken natural theology may help. Just as Levinasian ethics is contingent upon the face not in its phenomenological *Leibhaftigkeit* but as trace so that there both is and is not flesh, so too the artifacts and images of the past both *are* and *are not* signifiers. Here Kierkegaard helps. We make the motions (religiosity A)—but B is a secret, the secret of a command imposed upon us not by, but as, the vulnerability of the Other whose givenness is not infraphenomenal but supraphenomenal.
8. In what sense are we to construe alterity, the subject of the heterological historian. Whose alterity? What narrative? There are two directions that occur to me: first there is the character of the past itself. I claim that the past is “an unsurpassable negation” that can never be brought back materially so that there is an *apophasis* belonging to the past that cannot be overcome. Yet the past is transmitted via language and image. So the past is a secret in the Derridean sense. But this secret begs to be revealed.
9. **RASCHKE:** The problem you raise in the book, so far as I read it, is an inextricably critical one, so far as “postmodern” philosophy of history, or at least an “historical” reading of the textuality of the past, is concerned. Though I know you have little in common with the theological movement known as “Radical orthodoxy”—and would not want to be even associated in such a way—you are responding to the same kind of perceived dissymmetry in the Derridean wing of postmodernism. Can we call them “the Branch Derrideans?” That dissymmetry consists in the refusal of presence. Radical orthodoxy, of course, indulges in a romantic reading of Augustinianism and Chalcedonianism in what amounts at the same time to a curious “theologization” of Heidegger, the utterance of Being as presence in the Christian incarnation. Radical orthodoxy wants to go beyond “ontotheology,” which it claims was invented by Scotus, to recover what it seems to suggest is a divine presence that has been overhistoricized by modern, and hence, postmodern thought. This overhistoricization, following the argument of Michael Gillespie, in their view is what has led to nihilism.

10. The overhistoricization of the divine at once derives from the overdetermination of the sign of divinity, Derrida's "transcendental signified." Ironically, you too appear to be aware of the perils of this overdetermination, particularly to the degree that you talk about the "commodification" of alterity and the loss of mediation within "specular culture." Baudrillard's strange sort of horizontal eschatology does not seem to suit you. In fact, you suggest a strategy, which you don't develop very far, of out-Augustining Augustine through something you call "semiological memory."
11. In the final chapter you point toward a re-membering (in the Heideggerian sense) of fractured memory through an ethic of community. Is it possible—and I hesitate to say it—you are on the same track as the Radical orthodoxy movement, but with a far more sophisticated hermeneutic? The power of the Levinasian, rather than the Derridean, critique of Heidegger looms large here for me and seems to be an overshadowing "presence" in your own argument.
12. **WYSCHOGROD:** You speak about my worries with regard to the perils of the overdetermination of the sign of divinity, especially with the commodification of alterity and Baudrillard's, shall we say, eschatology of the simulacra. Are my fears, you ask and reminiscent of Radical orthodoxy's concerns with postmodernism?
13. I should like to point to some fundamental differences: First, there is what I call the discursive space of authorization that for me, is the alterity of a transcendent other(s) in her/his corporeal vulnerability whose traces are found in the discursive and artifactual "mud" of history. The docetism of Milbank, his emphasis upon a resurrection body that feasts ghost-like at an eschatological banquet remains ethically problematic—feasting while others fast, as it were. Thus what authorizes his discourse is a future that willy-nilly has lost contact with the vicissitudes of time. (At least Nietzsche's eternal recurrence takes account of willing the same with all of its pains as well as pleasures). Moreover Milbank's conceptual repertoire, the social sciences, reflects upon the bad boys of modernity that a supervening postmodernism has both criticized in reference to its *Aufklärung* suppositions and endorsed.
14. It then becomes possible to say, as Milbank does, theology is the queen of the social sciences. As far as Pickstock is concerned, and *mutatis mutandis* Marion, after the depredations of modernity's heritage of nominalism are cleared away, there is recourse to liturgy as the default position. Pickstock is astonishingly non-biblical: her return to the Latin rite is, as you note, a Romantic reading of Chalcedon and Augustine, a criticism to which Marion is not vulnerable, as his brilliant use of Ecclesiastes in *God Beyond Being* attests.
15. To return to Milbank: he has suggested that an ethics of alterity (such as the one that can be found in my work) based on self-sacrifice is masochistic, an odd appeal to psychoanalytic categories and surely overlooking the ways in which ascetic tradition has used pain. There is a problem however in a purely Levinasian account of alterity: finding ways to pleasure once one has abandoned Aristotelian and Kantian orthodoxies and nineteenth century visions of progress. Is it possible to develop a poetics of history, one in which an aestheses of the past could open intense registers of pleasure? There are of course dangers, reading the past in the mode of re-platonization by identifying the beautiful and the good as in Whitehead and Hartshorne, or by aestheticizing the blood and gore of history as in epic traditions, or via a transgressive ascetic of indulgence. I need to think more about the possibility of finding hedonic byways to engage the heterological historian.

16. **RASCHKE:**What you say about historical *aesthesis*, and the possibilities as well as the perils of the hedonicity of the “mud” of history, is extremely provocative, to say the least. It is clear that radical orthodoxy has no sense of concrete history, a pure semiotic history, a history that is in many ways anterior to the writing of history, which is what we usually mean by history, as de Certeau reminds us. I would argue that Milbank is in actuality an Anglican sort of old Hegelian, one who affirms the *principium theologicum* of “incarnation” without acceding to the transdialectic of grave and resurrection that makes Christian eschatology possible in the first place. Radical orthodoxy in this sense is far less Biblical, and hence less “orthodox”, than neo-orthodoxy ever was. A truly “radical” form of orthodoxy would take up the challenge of what you would call “aestheticization,” because the faith of Calvary, as opposed to some kind of pseudo-Johannine conjunctio oppositorum, requires it.
17. I don’t want to sound like I am doing “Christian theology” here, but it seems that heterological history by necessity involves us in the pain and pleasure of history, implied in the dramaturgy of Christian narrative, not to mention the very iconicity of the Cross. Such a hedonics of history can never really be written; it can only be simulated, which renders it a portion of the “spectacle of history.” But heterological history also demands the deconstruction of all “spectacular” narratives of history. If I read you in the manner I believe you seek to be read, then can we urge that the heterological historian is doing something much bolder than reconstituting certain “voices” from the past that have been barred from recitation within the royal theater of discourse. Is the heterological historian not going beyond the writing of history to the “aesthetic” demonstration of sign-charged “revelata”—revelata that quiver not just in the violence of the mud and blood, but in the still, small passions of the nameless ones, revelata that are not yet nameable because they bear the trace of the name beyond names?
18. They are revelata that confound the master narratives of all history-making, including theological or that sort of “liturgical” which in true Augustinian fashion can’t distinguish between *signum* and *res*. I guess my question, therefore, is (ironically speaking): isn’t heterological history the truest sort of “radical doxy” (not an “ortho-doxy”, but a “hetero-doxy”, if by heteros we mean the trace of the divine glory and by doxa we mean the “glory, or presence, that can only be named in its incalculable, and often radically humble, trace. A radical orthodoxy seeks to put on Pilate’s robes. A radical heterology takes up its cross.
19. **WYSCHOGROD:** I would agree about Milbank who identifies Hegel’s enterprise with his own. Milbank’s theological critique, one that is nevertheless a critique through practice of “all historical human community,” is not Hegelian to the core. The Christian story is not over and done with, superseded by philosophy; although, for him, Hegel succeeds in overcoming the individual subject of modernity. It is here that Pickstock becomes interesting in her claim for the Christian liturgical consummation of philosophy, the Latin rite. I cannot endorse this sanitization of philosophy, one that also precludes pluralism, but I can understand the aesthetic pull to which she is subject. I too am, I confess, a swooner before the discursive and material constructions of the past. But here one must appeal to a deconstructed aesthesis, to the aesthesis of ruins, as it were, for even the artifacts of the past that are intact bear the scars of time’s passing.
20. Whether we gaze at the ruins of Angkor or the relatively sound Sainte Chapelle, each is always already fissured by time. Even the restoration, the plastic surgery of the Sistine Chapel’s ceiling, attests the depredations of time, perhaps even more so. Each of these instances becomes a simulation of itself in Walter Benjamin’s sense of the reproduction, but now one

that lacks an original. Yet it is time's power negated and the negation of this negation or de-negation as Derrida calls it that opens the way for an aesthetics of recovery of a past that is present and absent.

21. But aesthetic power is always (and already) fissured by the mortuary power of the past, the pain of past suffering from which there is no dispensation. *Doch*, you may ask, can the heterological historian continue to keep the promise to focus upon the suffering other in this context? A hedonics of history, you say, cannot be written but only simulated. Narration is, as Ricoeur had noticed, wedged between description and prescription. Have I fallen into a Platonic trap of binding the good and the beautiful? Your phrase "revelata that quiver" however suggests another passion, one that is both attested and evaded by Levinas. I am glad that you mentioned glory in that I have thought and written about glory, tracking its flashing from Aquinas to Levinas.
22. Thus I would appeal to a revived notion of glory, one attested in the broken body of the other, both that of the victim and that of the one who is willing to substitute her/himself for the other. One is compelled to surround this claim with caveats: Look out for the creation of suffering in order to suffer, for pride in one's strength to withstand vicissitude. But the language of glory can be used to describe the suspension of the *conatus* to know or to do, as becoming pure passivity before the need of the other. The one who does so says in effect, "me voici, here I am" bears witness to and is chastened by the glory of the infinite and in so doing is glorified.
23. **RASCHKE:** What you say about "glory" raises some interesting questions regarding a kind of "Biblical" thinking about history versus the "sacramental" historicism which seems to dominate most of the radical orthodox writers. It would seem to me that Pickstock, in particular, forces a kind of "aesthetic eschatology" of the historical which others such as Milbank try to adapt to the political sphere. Aesthetic politics with an eschatological drive, of course, can be a disturbing sign, as your work on totalization, and that of other thinkers such as Eric Voegelin, have pointed out. The term "orthodoxy" of course could be rendered from the Greek as "right glory." It is the very nature of "orthodoxy" to have solved in its peculiar kind of theological aesthesis the problem of the brokenness of history. That brokenness, and even history's madness, is "re-de-signed" in terms of an architecture of "glorious" simulacra for the sake of a vicarious divine kingdom. That was the point of Dostoevsky's *Grand Inquisitor*. Biblical "theology" draws glory from brokenness, not from the simulacra of the "religious."
24. I think that was always the fundamental argument of neo-orthodoxy, as opposed to Radical orthodoxy. I am wondering if you could talk more about ruins and monuments in this vein. I guess my question comes down to this: can a heterological history go beyond the "aesthetic" and move toward the "prophetic" (particularly in Levinas' sense of "prophetic", i.e., an ontology that transcends all forms of Hellenic aesthesis).
25. **WYSCHOGROD:** I think we may be picking up some special meanings of a polysemic term, i.e. history, and in so doing we have lost sight of its diachronicity. To be sure, we have focussed on framework issues, history under the aegis of "aesthetic eschatology" (Pickstock) or of a "political eschatology" (Milbank). I would like to turn our conversation from radical orthodoxy's spin on the future to another perspective on the question of communities to come.
26. To begin with, the historian bestows the narrative of the past as a gift to the future, a future we must think of in terms of possibility. As Blanchot points out, possibility is excess, always

(and already) something more, “to be plus the power to be.” The challenge is to convert the plethora of images and information that rapidly disintegrate into the detritus of culture into artifactual existents. It is not the Heideggerian nostalgia for *Dinge* (the handmade object fraught with human meaning) that provides the model but rather *bricolage* in Levi-Strauss’ sense. What I am getting at is the construction of community as an artwork. If there is an eschatological vision here, it is community as the gratuitous production that is for and of no-thing that, as I tried to say in my book, “unwrites the predicative and iterative schema” that provided its conditions. Neither didactic in the sense of the moral work of art nor sentimental in a Romantic sense, such a community would be a “workless work,” one that depends upon the desire and the *conatus* both to archive and to undo.

27. As for the question of ruins that you raised and that in part led to these reflections, I see ruins as artifactual existents and artifactual existents as discursive. Thus the temples of Angkor Watt, the arch of Titus, the Lukasa memory board are linguistic and conversely linguistic records written and oral conjure up material worlds. My point: we must think through the ethics of alterity as applied to history as both an unsaying and a desire for the possible, the desire for a future community and—I will risk this: The work of the historian whether her/his medium is the written word or visual image is the creation of a vast website that is not totalizing but disseminated, hypertextual, like and unlike the *khora* of the *Timaeus* as glossed by Derrida.
28. **RASCHKE:** I take it you are saying, then, that the heterological historian opens up what we might call an ontology of the never-before-spoken, a speaking not of the “unspoken” in the more general, Heideggerian sense, but of that which prior to its historicization was not deemed (perhaps because it signifies what was hitherto the “unre-deemed” of history) but of the unspeakable and speechless. Because this kind of “diachronic” heterology reaches beyond the “ethical” horizons of those texts which generate discourses of redemption, it also offers a prospectus for an “ethos”, and hence an “archetectonic” of community, that is neither a content/architecture nor a “frame” (*parergon*) in Derrida’s sense. It is interesting that you are going this way, because lately I have wished to speak about “red narratives” (the “religious” in the semiotic sense), as opposed to Derrida’s “white mythologies” (the “metaphysical” text-ure of all our historicizing). The problem of the red narrative arises from the way in which we historicize about the “native”—particularly the “native American”—who demands to be more than the ethico-political construct of victim, the hetero-voice that speaks “indigenously” in a deeper way than either the dialectic of repression and recovery can allow and therefore requires a new kind of “historical thinking.”
29. I am taking Vine Deloria here to a more philosophical level. Can the heterological historian deal with narratives that are rich and real, that in a strange way can even be considered “Western” but are not “white” or “Euro-linguistic”, that do not permit of stereotypical sorts of discursive dichotomizations (“religious” versus “scientific,” “literacy” versus “orality”, etc.) which in fact dis-miss them, and render them silent in the name of “recovering” them? I am not asking you to respond to this particular thesis (i.e., the “red” and the “white”), but I am asking, in effect, whether the possibility of community in heterological history truly signifies that our “common” discourse must change as we become “interested” (in Levinas’ peculiar meaning of the word) in the alterity of what has not yet been signified hitherto as history.
30. Is it possible for a heterological historian to continue to speak as an historian at all? I am reminded by way of analogy of the anthropologist that “goes native,” but even that trope is ill-advised. For we are talking not so much about the deconstruction of the narratives of

history as their death and reinscription. Certainly this kind of death and reinscription is happening on an ad hoc basis in contemporary literature. What about history, or the history of philosophy and theology?

31. **WYSCHOGROD:** In thinking about the very interesting issue of the historian's relation to death and reinscription that you raise, I want to consider a new context suggested by your comments: the heterological historian, as situated at the interface of community and economy. The historian cannot ignore the process of globalization, that of the making and distribution of goods including information and services for which new power constellations have been created. One tires of hearing this point reiterated; still, this is the world the hetero-voice (your term) must address.
32. I should like to treat the matter genealogically and resort (like Heidegger) to the pre-Socratics as the default position for contextualizing the global economy. Let's appeal to Anaximander's notion of the *apeiron*, the unlimited, "the first principle of things that are, a 'that' from which the coming-to-be of things and qualities takes place and to which they return making reparation according to the order of time."
33. The *apeiron* can be seen as an ontological storehouse but, contra Heidegger, also as a moral topos, one whose very existence places a demand upon us: things must make reparation for their injustice according to the order of time. This, I would argue, is the topos out of which the Greek "dike," justice, emanates as a demand for reparation, one that is always already unrealized in that reparation is impossible because of the diachronicity of historical time. The task of the heterological historian then is to insert her/himself into this topos, to affect it with alterity, not only in the sense of introducing the voice of the other but by shifting from cyclical to vertical or linear time. The narrative is a call for community issued by the historian through the very act of narration, a call for the redistribution of narrative space.
34. Such a historian is the practitioner of an *askesis*: she/he follows Maurice Blanchot's injunction that one should learn to think with pain. All of this may be placing too great an onus upon the historian. But let me risk the following: The historian is engaged in transmitting the texts of the past (visual, artifactual, oral and written) in the manner Foucault ascribes to the Stoic practice of writing: the writer constitutes his own identity through the recollection of things said.... Through the interplay of readings and assimilative writing one should be able to form an identity through which a whole spiritual genealogy can be read." The aim of the historian may not be to attain Stoic harmony but may still be one in which a disseminated commonality is discernible, one in which the "we" is constituted as an unformed "formation" of others.
35. **RASCHKE:** It strikes me that the hetero-historians truly have their work cut out for them. You raise the question of historical writing as a form of historical justice. But in drawing on Heidegger, and ultimately, Anaximander you raise a profound, and to a certain extent, disquieting question—to what extent does a disseminated commonality that can in the last analysis only be metaphorized run the risk of pushing the writing of history toward some latter day grand narrative of divine default, an epic of "revenge against time" in Nietzsche's sense. I recognize that heterological history is a two-edged saber, so to speak. The thinking of history, as with all thinking, requires a profound anamnesis. And the sign of the heterological invariably speaks for this *anamnesis*.
36. Yet Nietzsche in his warning about the "abuse" of history urged us to forget as well. I acknowledge that even this caveat poses the equal danger of denying history, which is what

most historicizing amounts to, if we follow de Certeau's discussion about the writing of history. The genius of the heterological historian, as you frame it, is her, or his, ability to remake de Certeau's "theater of history" into a theater of cruelty, a deconstitution of the representations that forge the regime of historical writing by carrying them from stage to street, by ringing down the curtain on specular culture (your term) and instantiating a "participatory" play of justice. Where do we end up: the day of Yahweh, or Thermidor? It seems to me that the beauty of a "heterological" community is not its endless iterability, but its unidentified "electability". Is the question of justice ultimately global, or providential? You have written extensively about saints. In terms of heterological history, who might they be? That is where the question of community, it seems to me, arises.

37. **WYSCHOGROD:** The transformation of a particular narrative into a grand narrative is a danger intrinsic to narrative, as is the construing of narrative as the script for action. The alternative is silence. But narratives can build into the text the conditions of their own permeability, the narrative of the other Other. There is also help in Lyotard's understanding of the differend: restoring to the plaintiffs of history the means to argue. When the idiom of one of several parties to a dispute becomes the language of litigation, the wrong suffered by the other cannot be heard. This position also at least in part takes care of the Nietzschean injunction to let memory go in that, as Lyotard points out, the option to speak also entails the option not to speak. Thus "It is possible that p" is true" means we can also say "it is possible that not p." He says that "the opposite of speaking is possible does not mean the necessity of keeping quiet. To be able not to speak is not the same as not to be able to speak."
38. What he is getting at is the difference between imposed silence and the power to withhold speech. To release the speech of the victim into the arena of public language gives the historian, whether she/he wants this power or not, the power to remain silent and thus to censor. Thus the historian speaks from a juridical terrain. Without naming any specific group—let us say Group A—has been both the victim and perpetrator of historical mayhem. The historian judges how to present the "case of A." Whether the historian acknowledges this power or not, historical language conceals an operational dimension even if its subject is a remote historical event.
39. Thus for example the relation of imperial Rome to its colonies has been taken to resemble and to differ from modern colonialism: the historian works from the order of the same and the different, from the contemporary horizon to that of the past (to invoke Gadamer). Historians themselves cannot avoid being appropriators and despoilers, which is why the primordial stationing of the historian in the terrain of *dike*, justice, attentive to the imperative of the Other is crucial.
40. **RASCHKE:** That clears things up immensely. Yet I would raise in summation the issue of what might be called the "heterology of justice" itself.
41. Empowering the victim of history with the option to speak, or to remain silent, may in the final word be what the writing of history is all about. No matter what option the victim selects, she or he is disestablishing, or deconstituting, the juridical narratives that have given audibility to former cries of injustice, or the uncovering of censored accounts. We do not have to be arcane at all here. The history of slavery, its critique, and abolition, for example—not to mention the emergence in the late twentieth century of feminist reading and writing of herstory—is a series of reciprocally inscribed layers of moral-judicial texts which can be sequenced as progressive "heterological" interventions into some prior narrative of the right and the good. Not to speak

is simply to refuse to inscribe a new layer. Thus heterological history may be the instrument of historical transformation in its own right. I am wondering if you could comment finally on the relationship between historical dialectics in the classic Marxist sense and the writing of heterological history.

42. **WYSCHOGROD:** Thanks for putting the matter of justice so well. You ask about the Marxist view in relation to heterological history. One could argue that Marx reads metaphysics as economy and economy as metaphysics. This claim does not open the way to interpreting Marx as a monistic materialist. To be sure, the conflict of bourgeoisie and proletariat is about distribution of commodities but commodities circulate as discourse, that is as a relation of meaning constellations. The discovery of the link between power and discourse is not a discovery of Foucault but rather reflected in Marx's view of fetishization. One could (alternatively) argue as Bloch does that the productive process is like the Hegelian idea. Of course to interpretations of Marx there is no end. But what is pertinent in all of this is that the saga of production is, as has often been noted, teleological and totalizing. As Nancy claims, human beings on this interpretation produce their own essence as production.
43. The pre-originary condition of the community of the heterological historian is exteriority, the commanding presence of the Other. I argue that what remains outside of the production process is a welcoming of the Other, hospitality and peace. All this may have a polyannaish ring as long as one does not recognize that such a community must be watchful, attentive to the ever-present possibility of violence. After all, the Other plays a proscriptive role that may invite what it is hoped she/he will prevent. Law transforms the primordial relation with the Other into specific rules but law requires vigilance. Yet the historian offers hope, hope for what may be possible (if improbable), in part through her gift of inscription. Citing Nietzsche she may say that when the past speaks it speaks as an oracle to the future.

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