

REVIEW

Edith Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries: Dwelling with Negatives, Embodying Philosophy's Others* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), ISBN: 0-8232-2606-9

A compilation of thirty-two chapters, thirty-one of which have been previously published, Edith Wyschogrod's *Crossover Queries: Dwelling with Negatives, Embodying Philosophy's Others* is a tour de force of scholarly work dating back to 1980. Resolutely adroit, Wyschogrod repeatedly underscores decades of study and thoughtful encounter with the so-called postmodern condition with the skill of a surgeon whose craft is nothing less than a matter of mortality. It should come as no surprise to those who have read Wyschogrod that her analysis cuts between technical prose and stunning clarification that comes from treating some of philosophy and theology's most profound questions.

The text is divided into seven major sections, with topics like "nihilation and the ethics of alterity," "training bodies: pedagogies of pain," "the art in ethics," and "God: desiring the infinite" (vii-viii). It would be of disservice to attempt a generalized summary in such a short space—Wyschogrod describes her work in similar ways: "I have tried not to draw a map that, in postmodern language, precedes the territory but rather to move from island to island in an archipelago of concepts" (10)—but rather my approach to understanding this tome, as a whole, is vis-à-vis stitching together many disparate themes that, craftily, come together in a rather enthralling way. One should not, however, mistake Wyschogrod's careful methodology, which she measures from the outset:

[...] the risks and ambiguities, the unstable concatenations of contemporary thought as manifested in many and varied contexts – in the desire for transcendence and in meanings ascribed to corporeality, in critical dilemmas of ethical existence and in the status of philosophical inquiry itself – will be explored as expressions of negation loosely linked in a nexus of crossings (1).

To borrow language from one of her interlocutors, Wyschogrod's *gift* to the field is found in her sustained and rigorous encounter with such figures as Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and, most especially, Levinas, amongst many others. For in the latter, Wyschogrod is on equal footing in a 1982 interview where she probes with such sustained and pointed questions, ending with interrogatories like, "Haven't you then really returned to the roots of Western philosophy? How can you avoid entangling ethics in ontology?" (284). Like all postmodern gifts, however, there is that of anticipation, of expected reciprocity; what Wyschogrod's text requires of the reader, then, is a recasting of chronoexpectation: "Is human existence not

torn between the impetus to get on with it, to be rid of the ball and chain of *Nachträglichkeit*, of what comes later, as Nietzsche advises, on the one hand and, on the other, the desire to speak for the dead, who cannot speak for themselves?" (250).

Wyschogrod's essays span the gamut of western and, to a lesser extent, eastern thought, with varied accounts on topics like opera, dance and choreography, genocide, virtual worlds, eroticism, and bodily pain. Wyschogrod's work is reminiscent of the most storied of thinkers: it is applicable not only across the humanities but also to an envisaging "for the *viva vox* of events both recent and long past, the recovery of the texture of things in all their *Leibhaftigkeit*, their living presence, even as they drift away" (345). Perhaps in their relentless and unwavering clarity, Wyschogrod's questions in interviews with Levinas, John D. Caputo, and Carl Raschke stand apart from her other essays. Her exchanges bring out such riveting insights as Caputo's statement, "But you want to invoke a non-Freudian eros, after Freud – or even before Freud, in Plato – whom you cite, where eros, taken in a wider sense, incites a desire for the Forms, first of all for the Beautiful, but eventually for the Good. In that sense, the desire for God has an erotic component" (304). Or, in the same interview (again Caputo): "There is nothing outside the text and there is nothing outside the image, not in the sense that there is nothing real but in the sense that nothing comes naked and unmediated, untouched by text or image" (313). Wyschogrod's theological encounter with Raschke is no less interesting; for example: "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" (319).

A recurring theme in Wyschogrod's work is that of the ethical dimension(s) that shape, distort, inform, and transform contemporary life. The crises of the twentieth century extend their terrible tentacles of perversion into the new millennium; thus, the ethical questions that stem from such acts of horror deserve careful attention. One example is the capability and execution of genocide; within the nexus of unspeakable atrocity is what Wyschogrod calls the "warring logics of genocide" (222). This logic "is often justified by its perpetrators not principally on the grounds of what the dead are presumed to have done but rather as required by an ontological flaw, as it were, attributed to the victims" (222). Wyschogrod's extended conversation with Levinas is especially helpful in her treatment of genocide, specifically in her understanding of *il y a*, because, "In its doubleness, the *il y a* refers both to the elemental, a terrain that lies escheat prior to the emergence of individualism and the structures of human existence, and also, as we have seen, to Being as that into which the already-existing individual can sink" (231). In her interpretive prowess, Wyschogrod does not recoil from the difficult ethical quandaries that warp our world; indeed, there is an underlying hope, even an expectation, that engagement with the Other can have generative power of the good, "in order to illuminate the warring logics of genocide and the reversal of these logics that issues in the *frisson* of horror, the visceral response to the mass exterminations of the present age" (235).

Though Wyschogrod uses the language of the Other as many of her contemporaries do (especially Levinas, Lacan, and Derrida), and indeed it rightly functions as a way through the mire of such topics like genocide, it also leaves something unfinished in the final analysis. Does the Other ultimately *function* as a foil to avoid the real issue at hand? I might be criticized for my use of “function” here because the Other is comprehensible hermeneutically as *beyond* function (this I acknowledge as possible) but I mean simply that the Other stands as a place marker for the space in which that-not-already or, in psychoanalytic terms, that-beyond-I, functions within and as the marked out, temporal apophatic linguistic tool. Contextualization of the Other in terms of the psychological position cuts across to that of the ethical position. Applied specifically to Wyschogrod’s methodology of marking out the space of the Other, I question phrasing in her analyses like, “The sphere of moral deliberation, the possibility for the discourse of justice, supervenes upon the primordial level of sheer exposure to the Other, where neither reciprocity nor deliberation is possible” (140) or engagement with the psychological language of Lacan: “The double meaning attributed to the Other is tied to the inevitability of human frustration and anguish” (85). And, the same for her analysis of Levinas: “the other person cannot be rendered as an object because she or he is the Other, always already given as uncontainable in thought, as an excess refractory to representation, or in Levinasian terms, as the Cartesian *infinite*, whose ideatum exceeds any idea we can have of it” (71, italics in original). Or, elsewhere: “Not only does the primitive appear as a human countenance and thus as Other, but also as one who is infra-historical, who is extruded from the totality, the institutional and material culture that is the subject of history” (499).

My issue with use of the Other is not one of contextualization but of value(s). If the Other, ultimately, remains aloof from the intraethical mechanics of an argument, how can it have value from within? Perhaps this truly is the *function* aforementioned: to remain entirely outside the argument. The problem here is within the so-called postmodern condition; the Other is a lynchpin remaining valueless within the hermeneutics that Wyschogrod wants to argue have very real value. This aloofness, then, undermines some key points because as a contextual foil it functions to suspend the values but does not allow for real action that such ethical quandaries demand. To illustrate with a prior example, Wyschogrod’s treatment of genocide marks out a space “for a Good that mandates responsibility for the Other. As the expression of divine transcendence, the infinite releases the moral revulsion that is the common response to genocide” (235). Wyschogrod’s argument here, like other ethical discussions, engages with very real problems; few would argue with the necessity of undermining the damning logic of genocidal killing. The Other presupposes that there is still an ‘Other’ outside of the self; the problem when applied to realities as horrifying as genocide is if the demarcation of the Other, as a placeholder of ethical responsibility, goes far enough in the reality of militant boots on the ground and bullets flying overhead. Not that the Other in Wyschogrodian, Derridean, Lacanian, or Levinasian ethical discourse is a crutch to skirt the real issues but that perhaps the hermeneutic does not extend as far as it might. Perhaps the power of the Other is not as a place holder but as the *raison d’etre* for

concrete action. Wyschogrod's analysis throughout this tome approaches this very point but does not, at least in my reading, carry through with the very real socio-political demand for action.

This collection contains some of Wyschogrod's most insightful and challenging work. I specifically say challenging because it is well-suited for those with an in-depth understanding of the postmodern world in which Wyschogrod wrote; it is a specialists' text but also serves as an excellent primer to her scholarly contributions. As a reader, I found myself intrigued with not only the breadth of topics covered but also the skill by which Wyschogrod penetrates some of the problems faced in our time. This is a valuable collection of work, and will, I am sure, provoke scholarly discussion in the future.

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