

David Farrell Krell: Three Encounters: Heidegger, Arendt, Derrida

Book Review: David Farrell Krell, *Three Encounters: Heidegger, Arendt, Derrida*.
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2023, 360 pp., 60,00 USD.

David Farrell Krell has offered us a trove of insights of three prominent thinkers of contemporary philosophy with whom he was acquainted. It is at once biographical and autobiographical, intellectual, critical and historical. One finds, in his newest book entitled *Three Encounters*, a less sustained philosophical analytic replaced by a written confessional of personal letters, journal entries and recounted dialogue as they pertain to his work on and personal interactions with Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, and Jacques Derrida. This book is a welcome companion to what continues to be a rich tradition within which these three thinkers play key roles. It is benefitted by Krell's personal—at times conversational—style, which allows for the intellectually demanding work he has done himself, or witnessed in others, to be situated alongside their lived experiences.

Overall, the structure of Krell's *Encounters* is both chronological and thematic. He concerns himself with the encounter with Heidegger first, then Arendt, and finally Derrida—although his correspondences with Arendt, as a *de facto* member of the Harper & Row editorial board working on the Heidegger series precedes those with Heidegger.¹ His reflection could not be 'purely' chronological, certainly. As he argues, the encounters he shares with Heidegger, Arendt and Derrida were bound to run into the ever-present obstacles that each posed in their works and lifetimes. This includes Derrida's extensive treatment of the pitfalls of (auto-)biography as much as Heidegger's dismissal of the relevance of biography on the thinking of a thinker. On Aristotle, Heidegger famously says, "he was born, worked, and died." This is similarly found, Krell himself conveys, for Arendt. Her *vita activa*, the (especially politically) active life, is one that cannot easily be captured in the mortifying throes of writing.

It is for this reason exactly that Krell's book is so intriguing. The work of a noted thinker and translator in his own right, *Three Encounters* feels like such a welcoming demonstration of how autobiography and biography intersect. We might say that *my life* and the *lives of others* are so closely entangled; in the ways that one life unfolds, it also knots further into another's. What one finds in Krell's text is this pairing of biography and autobiography situated alongside a rich understanding of historical and intellectual exchanges, traditions, the depths of the debts we owe to other thinkers living and dead.

¹ With J. Glenn Gray, Sherry Gray Martin, and Joan Stambaugh.

This is gathered in the accessible way that only an accomplished thinker can achieve. Krell glances at the intellectual questions he's considered more directly in other places—on finitude, metaphysics, God, and tragedy, life and death, the human and the animal, as well as the tradition of philosophy that includes the Ancient Greeks, Nietzsche and Heidegger especially. Krell signposts these discussions in light of the ways that they fit within the lives of his interlocutors, and the ways that they were communicated in his own (*imperfect*) written record or (*imperfect*) memory. One will also find considerable reflection on the ethics, responsibilities, and terrors of translation. He notes that, “the primary ‘skill’ of a translator is a finely developed sense of paranoia—not a sense of assuredness or the illusion of mastery” (p. 21).

For each thinker, each encounter is unique. In his fourth chapter, he outlines an engagement with Heidegger that dives into his most problematic period—leading up to and including his involvement with Nazism, and the still emerging information about his personal anti-Semitism in the *Black Notebooks*, something Krell returns to in relation to his encounters with Arendt. In Arendt's case, Krell's acquaintanceship near the end of her life—at the time she was writing her Gifford Lectures gathered in the now unfinished text, *The Life of the Mind*—are especially fascinating given the mystery surrounding what was meant to be its not-yet-begun third and final volume. His engagements with her work—on the *vita activa*, the notion of the public, and natality especially—also demonstrate Krell's enduring interest in the thought of others as much as with their ‘biographies proper.’

One is likely to find Krell's final section, devoted to Jacques Derrida, to be the most enriching though. It is clear—and Krell declares this himself early in the book—that his encounter with Derrida was perhaps the closest and longest lasting, a friendship and intellectual engagement suitable for two thinkers entering the field of philosophy at similar times (in fact, about a decade removed—enough to be closer than that of mentor and apprentice). This means that they shared in similar interrogations and responded to a similar tradition. For those interested in the lives shared between these two, it will also be a section of intrigues, passions, difficulties, and distancing. Krell recounts unflinchingly the petty gossiping sometimes found in academia that sits alongside the posing of questions of universal significance, both contributing to what makes a life what it is.

In the wings—and by the close of *Three Encounters*—it is clear that this book is about mourning as approached by a contemporary thinker of continental philosophy, and one who has not only been entangled in the lives of others, but who has witnessed their successive deaths. This is echoed in the final two chapters of Krell's text but is harkened by the very exercise the book entails. We are already aware of the positioning of this book in relation to its subjects, as a testament of shared lives *after* they have been lived. It is announced in the sense that Krell is engaged with a ‘tradition’ in the first place—with Hegel and Nietzsche, then with Heidegger and Arendt for only two years at the close of their lives. It is a tradition populated equally by the dead as it is the living. There is a way that Krell is charting also this engagement across the veil that is said to distance life from

death. In each letter, conference, course or publication in particular that involved Derrida, there is the looming recognition of what is to follow.

In all of these ways, Krell's book will appeal to scholars in the field (it was published by a university press, indeed) as well as anyone who would like to explore the intersecting lives of three looming figures with their texts, their techniques and struggles, and the *milieux* within which they worked. This includes an intellectual community of effervescent, strange, tragic and contemplative people. For this reason, Krell's book is a welcome addition, a guidebook and important (con-)textualization of the works and lives of three prominent thinkers with whom he was acquainted.

Tyler Correia

University of the Fraser Valley