

Peter Gratton and John Panteleimon Manoussakis, eds. *Traversing the Imaginary: Richard Kearney and the Postmodern Challenge*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2007

*Eric Severson*

## Preview

Book Review. Eric Severson reviews Peter Gratton and John Panteleimon Manoussakis, eds. *Traversing the Imaginary: Richard Kearney and the Postmodern Challenge*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2007.

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It is widely known that early in his career Jacques Derrida was reluctant to give interviews or participate in public dialogue, particularly in English. One can read certain wisdom into this reluctance. In an interview, Derrida was on stage, on the spot and with little time for the carefully measured prose which inhabit his writings. Public interviews are harrowing in their vulnerability. The factors that led Derrida to a prolific outpouring of interviews and published dialogues are undoubtedly complex, but it may have much to do with the sort of interview questions put to him by friends John Caputo and Richard Kearney. Among the subtle beauty of the compilation *Traversing the Imaginary* is the skillful “art of dialogue” which pervades the first section of this collection. Kearney has the rare but subtle skill of asking probing and difficult questions that lead his dialogical partners into new and imaginative terrain. Kearney’s dialogues with Ricoeur and Derrida are important gems collected from the final years of these two profound and significant figures.

To conduct dialogue in the manner illustrated by Kearney requires careful reading and vigilant listening. A good question gestures in an imaginative direction, pointing beyond what has been said toward what might be said, deftly identifying lacunae and hoping in the direction of greater clarity. Kearney’s interviews show that he has taken seriously his own ethical admonitions in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*. The “other” of Kearney’s dialogues is masterfully freed and chastened toward new and creative expressions of his or her thought. Narrative imagination is as much about good listening as it is about good storytelling.

The collection of essays, dialogues and interactions with Kearney’s work that are cleverly aligned in *Traversing the Imaginary* illuminate the depth with which Kearney has engaged questions of philosophy, politics and narrative. Because Kearney’s readers have stumbled on his work from a number of different directions, this volume serves the important function of painting a broad canvas of intersections and overlaps between the various fields which Kearney’s thought “traverses.” Though this book is a poor replacement for Kearney’s primary texts, it does make a number of revealing connections between the diverse genres in which he writes. The appropriations and challenges to Kearney’s work available in this compilation defy summary through both complexity and diversity. Still, mirroring the organization of the book, the rest of this review will traverse the three overlapping fields of philosophy, politics and storytelling.

The first section, “The Dialogical Imaginary,” offers a series of illuminating conversations between Kearney and Ricoeur, Derrida, Charles Taylor, Martha

Nussbaum and Noam Chomsky. In the dialogue with Derrida we see an important alignment and differentiation between Derrida's use of the Platonic term *khora* and Kearney's understanding of a possibilizing God. Kearney's deft questions and careful engagement of Derrida's *khora* allow for an illuminating interchange that contributes notably to an important and developing conversation between deconstruction and religion. The specter of 9/11 haunts several chapters of this collection, including Kearney's dialogue with Derrida. It is clear that the ethical questions posed to philosophy, politics and storytelling are chastened by the profound destabilization of contemporary terrorism. Derrida makes surprising political and ethical suggestion in this conversation. These responses, teased out by Kearney, provide some correction to the oft repeated critique that deconstruction is unable to provide a resource for the confrontation of contemporary concerns about violence and terror.

Ricoeur was Kearney's teacher, and Kearney represents one of the most faithful followers of Ricoeur's hermeneutic methodology. It is not hard to measure some degree of pride in Ricoeur's dialogue with Kearney, and Kearney makes his deep debt to Ricoeur evident in both the forward and in his comments and questions put to Ricoeur. Ricoeur uses his essay to develop the key concept of mourning and the role of storytelling in navigating the precarious relationship between remembering and forgetting. It is this emphasis on narrative that pervades and unifies Ricoeur's philosophical career and appears so vividly in Kearney's *On Stories*.

In the dialogical section, Kearney often sidesteps key challenges to his diacritical hermeneutics. It seems that this evasion is born less out of avoidance than it is a gesture of deference; he prefers not to derail an interview with distracting defences of his own program. This deference is particularly displayed in his interchanges with Charles Taylor and Noam Chomsky. It is easy for the reader to observe that Kearney's first inclination upon encountering difference is to listen and inquire. This does undermine the ability of *Traversing the Imaginary* to provide Kearney with a platform for the defence of his theories, but we may learn a more valuable lesson about the encounter with the other from Kearney's choice of conversational partners and his pervasive reluctance to be sidetracked from the posture of listening.

Few of Kearney's American readers are aware of his investment and contributions to the political situation in Ireland. Readers accustomed to Kearney's philosophical and theological writings will see how the Irish struggle for peace has stimulated Kearney's imagination. The contributors, Dennis Swarkin, James M. Smith, Ann O'Byrne, John Rundell and Jerry Burke, illustrate an intimate knowledge of the history and complexity of this seemingly intractable conflict. Kearney proposes in *Postnationalist Ireland* that the obsession with sovereignty and nationalism fuel the

conflict between the islands of Ireland and Britain. His proposed solution attacks the absolutist nature of claims to sovereignty and looks to craft a post-sovereign and postmodern understanding of the nation-state. Several of the articles seem to call for Kearney to update his suggestions in *Postnationalist Ireland*. Though Kearney does not provide any responses to these summons, we can read in O'Byrne's and Rundell's articles an attempt to continue the provocative conversation between Kearney's hermeneutics and the political situation in Ireland.

The third portion of this text opens the reader to another overlooked genre in Kearney's corpus: his novels. Kearney's two novels, *Sam's Fall* (1995) and *Walking at Sea Level* (1997), have not been widely read in North America. Though not confined to his novels, the authors in "Part 3: Narrative Imaginary" explore the ways Kearney turns his philosophy of narration into his own form of creative storytelling. David Wood, Jeffrey A. Barahs, Eileen Rizo-Patron and Mark Dooley explore the strengths and weaknesses of the pivotal role offered to narrative in Kearney's work. Some of the strongest critiques of Kearney appear in this section, including Dooley's accusation that Kearney, by following Ricoeur, remains a moral essentialist despite Kearney's gestures otherwise in his trilogy (*On Stories*, *The God Who May Be* and *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*). The collection ends with a fascinating afterword by Kearney on "Traversals and Epiphanies in Joyce and Proust."

If a common theme binds this collection together it is that narration and imagination are essential for ethics and politics. In *On Stories* Kearney offers an intriguing twist on the Socratic maxim "the unexamined life is not worth living." It is the *unnarrated* life, claims Kearney, which is "not worth living." Rizo-Patron's article, among the more creative in the collection, discusses the role of the oneiric (relating to dreams) in testimony and storytelling. The evasiveness of oneiric memory gestures toward a potential weakness in Kearney's claim that unnarrated life is not worth living. Among the more divisive aspects of trauma and abuse is the way it robs victims of memory, of the very capacity to narrate. Kearney is immensely concerned about the ethics of storytelling, and he appears to care deeply about the way that narration can heal and prevent abuse. But how do the words "the unnarrated life is not worth living" fall on the ears of those who have been robbed of the very capacity to narrate their lives? Is this critique over-reading Kearney's playful turn of the Plato's language? Perhaps not. The value of Rizo-Patron's thesis is its gesture toward an extension of Kearney's philosophy of narrative into the fuzzy but critical fog of lost memory and unnarratable trauma. "In testimonies of trauma, survival and transformation," writes Rizo-Patron, "dreams and visions appear to play a pivotal role." The call to provide space for narration is an ethical summons, and narration must be recovered from something other than concrete memories and histories.

Rizo-Patron's thesis points toward a fascinating avenue toward the recovery of "story" for those whose victimization has reached an amnesic apex. The twisting road toward survival and healing is marked by perplexing scars, puzzling remnants, fuzzy dreams, and unexplainable apparitions. Rizo-Patron's chapter does not move against Kearney's philosophy of narrative as much as she points beyond it to a philosophy of narrative that reaches to an even deeper and more vital site for healing and reconciliation. The unnarrated life is an ethical summons; a summons to create sabbatical space where dreams and scars can move subtly toward testimony. Rizo-Patron shows that learning to narrate the unnarratable means reaching beyond testimony and into the realm of dreams.

The value of this collection is certainly the way in which it draws the reader in the depth and breadth of the conversations generated by Kearney's seminal work in the diverse fields of ethics, philosophy, theology and politics. The essays do not appear to have been written with any cohesive thread to bind them together. *Traversing the Imaginary* is a collection of eclectic but interesting essays that are commonly stimulated by Kearney. This book would benefit greatly from an extensive response by Kearney; critiques like Dooley's leave the reader curious and intrigued. It is clear that Kearney's ethical, philosophical, fictional and political writings have resulted in substantial and creative appropriations on the part of his readership. We may also take comfort in the fact that if Kearney's own story tells us anything about his future there are responses and new suggestions just beyond the horizon.

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