

Review of Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (eds.), *Carnal Hermeneutics*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. 408 pages

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## Preview

*Carnal Hermeneutics* is a collection of essays published in 2015 in the “Perspectives in Continental Philosophy” series by Fordham University Press. The contributors fall into two categories: established French philosophers (Jean-Luc Nancy, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Julia Kristeva, Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion, Paul Ricoeur, and Emmanuel Falque) and younger Englishlanguage phenomenologists from Ireland and North America who often take much of their inspiration from the Continent (Edward Casey, Anne O’Byrne, Emmanuel Alloa, Dermot Moran, Ted Toadvine, Shelly Rambo, Karmen MacKendrick, and John Panteleimon Manoussakis). The collection is edited and introduced by Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, whose call for a more “carnal” hermeneutics gives unity and contemporary philosophical import to the collection. In the book and in their wider appeal to contemporary philosophers, Kearney and Treanor seek to indicate a “carnal turn” in philosophical hermeneutics, which they hope will serve as a corrective to the “linguistic turn” embraced by Gadamer and Ricoeur in the 20th century. Their claim is not that the linguistic turn was entirely a mistake, but rather that, in Kearney’s words, “the journey from flesh to text often forgot a return ticket”. The aim of carnal hermeneutics, then, is to initiate this return journey. And, crucially, this return ticket is itself not one-way; it is an endless roundtrip journey from flesh to text to flesh to text.

ISSN 1918-7351

Volume 7 (2015)

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In his opening essay, Kearney writes that carnal hermeneutics seeks “to restore hermeneutics to phenomenology and vice versa” (17). The basic argument is that there is no interpretation without embodiment (and vice versa). So, hermeneutics’ over-emphasis on the text to the detriment of the flesh need not be corrected by a turn away from interpretation altogether; rather, as Kearney argues, the purpose of carnal hermeneutics “is to revisit the deep and inextricable relationship between *sensation* and *interpretation*” (17). Thus, where Ricoeur sought to graft the hermeneutic problem onto the

phenomenological method,<sup>1</sup> we might say that carnal hermeneutics will attempt to re-graft the phenomenological method onto the hermeneutic problem and to remind us that interpretation is never a dis-embodied act.

In other words, our hermeneutics of the text is impoverished if it is not supplemented by a phenomenology of the body. We need not—indeed, *must not*—choose between interpretation and sensation, but must instead recognize that there is not one without the other. For, experience, even at its most primordial, is always a *making sense*—an active and interpretive engagement with the world, rather than a passive reception of sense-data. The fundamental questions of carnal hermeneutics, as Kearney writes, are how the body reads the world “*as* this or that, *as* hospitable or hostile, *as* attractive or repulsive, *as* tasty or tasteless, *as* living or dying” (15). In this sense, the adage that hermeneutics goes “all the way down” means *all the way from head to foot*; the “surplus of meaning” to which Ricoeur called our attention is not only textual but carnal as well.

Kearney points to the etymological roots of *sapientia*, which is the Latin term for wisdom. The word, Kearney explains, “comes from *sapere*, to taste. *Sapere-savourer-savoir*. This etymological line speaks legions, reminding us that our deepest knowing is tasting and touching. We first sound the world through the tips of our tongues” (16). Hence, food is “savory,” significant moments are “savoured,” someone is “tech savvy,” and so forth. We might also think of the multi-layered meanings of “sense”—i.e., the senses, “common sense,” something that “makes sense,” the “sense” of a text, etc. These common sayings and metaphors indicate the ways that human understanding is deeply embodied and connected to the material world. A fresh look at our metaphors truly can help “to reconcile the people and the stones,” as William Carlos Williams writes.<sup>2</sup> And this also serves as a reminder that the hermeneutics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—specifically, in this case, Ricoeur’s work on metaphor—does not stand in opposition to the carnal turn, but in fact supplements and is supplemented by it.

Treanor returns to the notion of the surplus in his essay, “Mind the Gap.” He writes, “where there is a gap there is a surplus: something more to be understood. It is the movement or transition back and forth across these gaps that constitutes the work of hermeneutics” (73). Treanor has in mind not only the gaps “in text and language: the spacing of plots, the

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1 See Paul Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” translated by Kathleen McLaughlin, in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, edited by Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

2 William Carlos Williams, “A Sort of a Song,” from *The Wedge*, in *William Carlos Williams: Selected Poems*, edited by Charles Thomlinson. (New York: New Directions Books, 1985), 145.

*différance* in words and meanings,” but also “carnal, material, and earthy” gaps such as “the synaptic gap between nerves, the gaps between sense organs and the objects sensed, the distinction between the body (*Körper, la chose*) and flesh (*Leib, la chair*),” etc. Like hermeneutics’ namesake, Hermes, “patron of transport and messages,” the task of the carnal hermeneut is to “mind the gap,” which means to be mindful of the surplus meanings that fall through the cracks that open in our attempts at certainty and self-transparent rationality.

The call to supplement the hermeneutic turn with a deeper attention to the way sense emerges from our embodiment is a compelling one. As Treanor notes, it speaks to the attempt to escape the insufficiencies of postmodernism—including the desire to move beyond anthropocentrism felt by many environmentalists—as well as the desire felt by Michel Serres and others to engage science more closely. Further, it opens a coherent research project that has had important precursors but is now really coming to fruition, as this collection’s contributions indicate. I will mention a few of these contributions to give a sense of the book, as well as to give some examples of what I take to be a promising and significant movement in contemporary philosophy.

Dermot Moran’s essay, “Between Vision and Touch,” continues this line of thought with a discussion of the classic phenomenological issue of “double sensation”—that is, that “the human subject is itself part of this world and is also the perceived” (215). When I touch my left hand with my right, I am both touching and touched. As Moran explains, “when one hand touches the other, there is never complete coincidence; the experiences do not completely overlap. There is a ‘hiatus’ between the touching hand and the touched. For Merleau-Ponty, there is a ‘chiasm,’ an intertwining, between touch and sight, such that neither is prior to the other.” (231). This gap is what allows for consciousness to arise: “Without a body that can reflect itself in touching and seeing ‘there would be no humanity.’ The double sensation has now become a cipher for the reflexivity of consciousness and an essential trait of humanity itself” (232). In this way, through a discussion of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Moran shows how phenomenology has, from the beginning, contained at least an implicit recognition of the hermeneutic task of minding the gap.

Further highlights from the collection include Anne O’Byrne’s essay, “Umbilicus: Toward a Hermeneutics of Generational Difference.” According to O’Byrne, an “umbilical hermeneutics” reveals the body “as wholly mine *and* wholly entwined with another.... The navel marks us as vulnerable and disrupted from the beginning, and as generated and generational” (185). Accordingly, this umbilical hermeneutics must follow a “circuitous route”:

Our common scar, the circular fold of skin at the center of us, is the place where the hermeneutic circle makes a Mobius twist and interpretation turns inside out. We all have navels because we were attached before we were anything else; an umbilical hermeneutics thus allows us—obliges us—to resist singular reductive interpretations and to approach by a circuitous route (186).

When hermeneutics takes this “umbilical turn,” the “radical non-mastery” and “non-self-transparency” of the subject is revealed. No longer can we think of understanding as a task for an ahistorical, self-transparent ego, but we must acknowledge the deep interdependence which precedes any independence. As O’Byrne writes, “we were brought into the world; we did not come of our own accord; it took action by others to sustain us before we were even aware of self or world” (192).

In turn, O’Byrne’s umbilical hermeneutics opens the way to a consideration of memory. In his essay, “Memory, History, Oblivion,” Ricoeur argues for “a shift from writing to reading, or, to put it in broader terms, from the literary elaboration of the historical work to its reception, either private or public, along the lines of a hermeneutics of reception” (148). What is particularly interesting about this in connection to O’Byrne’s essay is Ricoeur’s discussion of “the actual presence of the absence of the past” (150). The navel is such an actual presence of absence: It is the scar—the gap— which reminds us of what conscious memory forgets. In this regard, the body itself becomes testimonial. Testimony, according to Ricoeur, “is, in a sense, an extension of memory taken at its narrative stage ... The witness says: ‘I was there, believe me or not’” (151). And with O’Byrne’s proposed “umbilical turn,” testimony can be understood to extend memory even further down, from narrative to the body itself.

We have seen how carnal hermeneutics insists upon the crisscrossing of text and flesh, which both denies the collapsing of flesh into text (and vice versa) and also reveals the utter inextricability of the two. In her essay, “Original Breath,” Karmen MacKendrick extends this carnal hermeneutic to Genesis 1:1-2, reading the breath of God as the creative voice speaking the text of the world into existence. As we read of the wind of God moving over the “formless wasteland,” MacKendrick invites us to imagine God’s creative speaking as something other than simple commandment, rather as

a breath given form by matter and matter its meaning by  
breath: a voice, a speaking...in which chaos moves into the

shape and the song of a continuously emerging world... World is both divine word given voice by the earth, and the earth's form shaped by divine breath, bearing that trace of its own brush with divinity (297).

This theo-poetic reading of creation challenges the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, which feminist theologians such as Catherine Keller have argued is less required by the biblical text than it is by the masculine fear of the womb—the *tobu wa bobu* and the *tehom*, in Hebrew, typically translated in this passage as “formless wasteland” and “abyss,” respectively.<sup>3</sup> MacKendrick, then, is following this line of interpretation. She writes, “if we take creation as a breath moving matter—that is, as voice speaking—then this inscribing is also a voicing. The world becomes a strange sort of book that is its own coauthor and reads itself aloud, a song that composes itself in the singing” (297).

This speaking, in turn, creates the first humans, who speak to one another, to the animals, and to God. And human speech, of course, is deeply embodied: “All of our speaking is modulations of breath, raw material shaped and stretched and cut by our body's movements, from our diaphragms to our lips, made into sound, breathed out on our own small wind” (297). We thus see, once again, how a “textual turn” cannot be taken independently of a “carnal turn.” Embodiment, speech, and interpretation are too intricately intertwined to ever make such sharp divisions. Accordingly, MacKendrick's reading of the original breath allows us to see God's creative breath not as a disembodied Word that stands over and above the body, but as “the breath of life, the divine breath that as wind blows the world into habitable form” (304). And lest we assume that at this juncture MacKendrick has allowed the voice to sneak back to a position of primacy over the body, she clarifies,

This is not simply creation *by* voice, however allegorical its form. Creation *becomes* voice, the interaction of matter and breath. The world's movements continue the speaking, or even the song. And it is breath too that moves in, and moves, all animals (humans too), breath by [which] we live—but by which and as which we can only live as material (305).

Once again, it is not a question of Word *or* body, but of how the matter is always one of Word *and* body.

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<sup>3</sup> See Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

Kearney and Treanor have achieved something very important and necessary with this collection: they have shown that hermeneutics need not, and indeed *must not*, simply concern itself with language and texts to the exclusion of the body. If the hermeneutics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century forgot to purchase a return ticket from text to flesh, this collection convincingly demonstrates that this was not because the hermeneutic task stands fundamentally at odds with the task of a phenomenology of the body. *Carnal Hermeneutics* signals an exciting and promising new direction for philosophical hermeneutics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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