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My Way to Hermeneutics with Ricoeur and Friends: A Personal Testimony

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Much have humans experienced
Since we are a dialogue
And can listen to one another
—Hölderlin

Opening

These lines by Hölderlin were taken by Heidegger as emblematic of the hermeneutic project. In his *Commentaries on Hölderlin's Poetry*, he makes the point that all human meaning presupposes a “saying” (*sprechen*), which involves one in a historical community of speakers. Our being-in-the-world qua *Dasein* is revealed through language as a dialogical being in the world with others (*Mitsein*). “The being of man” he writes, “is grounded in language; but this really happens only in dialogue (in speaking and hearing). . . . We have been a dialogue since the time that ‘time is.’ Since time has arisen and has been brought to standing, since then we have been historical. Both—being-in-dialogue and being-historical—are equally old, belong together and are the same.”¹

Inheriting the hermeneutic model of dialogue, Gadamer and Ricoeur showed how human consciousness never knows itself in terms of some intuitive immediacy.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1971), 38–40.

Consciousness must undergo a “hermeneutic detour” in which it comes to know itself through the historical mediations of others. The human self understands itself via the signs, symbols, and texts embedded in its culture. It does not intuit meaning in and from itself—as the Cartesian *cogito* suggests—but must interpret (*hermeneuein*) itself by entering into dialogue with the languages of the historical communities, traditions, and projects to which it belongs. As Ricoeur aptly put it: “the shortest route from self to self is through the other.”²

In what follows I wish to shift and tighten the focus of hermeneutic dialogue from large historical communities to a more personal community of conversations. Moving from upper to lower case, I offer here a short biographical memoir of some formative encounters with philosophical mentors I was fortunate enough to experience during my own “hermeneutic apprenticeship” in Paris in the late 1970s. I intend this personal testimony as a debt to these great hermeneutic teachers—thinkers who deeply influenced the second half of twentieth-century continental philosophers and left a legacy lasting well into the twenty-first, and perhaps beyond.

Testimony

I arrived in Paris in September 1977 to work with Paul Ricoeur. I had been awarded a National Traveling Studentship from the National University of Ireland and Ricoeur kindly agreed to serve as my doctoral dissertation advisor at the University of Paris X (Nanterre). I will never forget my first encounter with Ricoeur. I walked into a packed seminar room at the Centre Herméneutique et Phénoménologique at Avenue Parmentier where a number of Ricoeur’s close colleagues sat around a table—including Emmanuel Levinas, Stanislas Breton, Jean Greisch, and Françoise Dastur. In a second outer circle sat a dozen or so doctoral students. I joined them and waited for Ricoeur to arrive. When he did, he was wearing a bright, multicolored jacket that he had just bought in Chicago, where he was then teaching for a semester each year with Mircea Eliade. I was expecting a sober Protestant intellectual dressed in black. Ricoeur warmly welcomed everyone present and proceeded to ask each student the trademark hermeneutic question: *D’où parlez-vous?* (Where do you speak from?) When it came to me, I explained that I came from Southern Ireland and had been educated in philosophy at University College Dublin—at which Ricoeur happily observed: “Very

² For a more extended discussion of this point, see Richard Kearney, “Appendix: A Note on the Hermeneutics of Dialogue,” in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 127–33.

good, I will call on you whenever we need commentaries on Aquinas!” Little did Ricoeur know I was a rebellious refugee from orthodox scholasticism.³

From then on it was plain delightful sailing through multiple theories of narrative in hermeneutic phenomenology and the philosophy of history and religion. Each Wednesday seminar was a treat and Ricoeur always honored his commitment to “intellectual hospitality” by inviting visiting scholars and friends to offer presentations. The title of one of his volumes, *Le conflit des interprétations*, took on real meaning in the seminar room as different voices chimed and clashed in what Ricoeur liked to call *un combat amoureux* (a phrase he learnt from Jaspers). When it came to religious questions, Ricoeur was invariably open to “interconfessional translation” between Christian, Jewish, and Muslim perspectives.⁴ The model of traversing multiple “hermeneutic detours,” where one exposed oneself to a “polysemantics” of diverse readings, was central to Ricoeur’s method of teaching and writing. He embodied his own guiding maxim that the shortest route from self to self was through the other. Looking back, I can now see the seeds of my own interest in the Guestbook Project, with its central themes of “hosting the Stranger” and “exchanging narratives.”⁵ In keeping with the same hermeneutics of hospitality, I published a number of philosophical proposals for a peace agreement in Northern Ireland in the 1990s.⁶

I became a good friend of Ricoeur over the years, hosting him twice on visits to Ireland once I returned to University College Dublin in the early 1980s to take up my first job as a lecturer in philosophy. I completed my doctoral studies under his direction—with Levinas and Breton as my other examiners—at the University of Paris in 1980 and went on to publish several books on Ricoeur’s work and organize international conferences on his thought (including co-directing the Cérisy Colloque on Ricoeur with Jean Greisch in 1987). Without a doubt, Ricoeur has been the most formative influence on my thinking about narrative imagination and the hermeneutics of culture and religion. Indeed, I think it is true to say that without Ricoeur I would never have been able to write my books on the hermeneutics of religion, *The God Who May Be* (2001), *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003), or *Anatheism* (2011).

³ Although as Joyce wrote of Stephen Dedalus—he had “the cursed Jesuit strain in (him), only injected the wrong way.” Metaphysics was in the blood whether I liked it or not.

⁴ In the 1970s, the turn towards Eastern religions had not yet much of a mark on the continental hermeneutics of religion—though Mircea Eliade was a close friend of Ricoeur’s at Chicago and the first to introduce him in a serious way to Buddhism and other Eastern wisdom traditions.

⁵ Inspired by Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of linguistic hospitality, especially in his volume *On Translation*, I founded the Guestbook Project of “Exchanging Stories, Changing History” in 2009 in Boston. For details see guestbookproject.org.

⁶ See Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998).

But there were other colleagues of Ricoeur in Paris—in particular, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Stanislas Breton—who generously guided me on my hermeneutic path.

I first met Levinas when he invited me to attend his last lectures at the Sorbonne in 1979 on “Kant and Ethics” (co-taught with his ex-Dominican friend, Jacques Colette). Levinas spoke in stuttered whispers that Colette translated for the seminar—about ten of us—in a cold, bare room with no handle on the door. This was just before Levinas’s fame spread widely in the 1980s when the French embargo on philosophy conversing with theology was finally lifted. Levinas challenged Heidegger’s absolute separation of phenomenology and religion (pronounced in the latter’s “Phenomenology and Theology” lecture of 1927) and dared invoke the word “God” in his first classic work, *Totality and Infinity*, published in French in 1961. But Levinas, like his Sorbonne colleague and lifelong friend Ricoeur, was still sensitive to the *séparation universitaire* between philosophy and the study of religion: the latter was not permitted in any public academies of the French Republic but only in denominational establishments like the Instituts Catholiques or Facultés Protestantes. Levinas published his major phenomenological works as “ethical philosophy” and his more religious writings as “Talmudic lectures” (although the border was sometimes porous). I think it was in some sense thanks to his Judaism—which commanded general intellectual tolerance in post-Holocaust Europe—that Levinas was allowed more latitude than other religious thinkers in France at the time (e.g., the Protestant Ricoeur or the Catholic Breton) in blending secular and religious thinking. And one cannot underestimate the importance of Levinas’s young protégé, Jacques Derrida, in making the God question respectable again in public discourse in France, with the publication of his groundbreaking essay on Levinas.⁷ The fact that Derrida was both Jewish and the celebrated pioneer of deconstruction was not irrelevant. The God who was cautiously re-entering French intellectual discourse during my time in Paris was in many respects a deconstructed messianic God, a factor that surely informed my own hermeneutic thinking about God—up to a point—in *La Poétique du Possible* (1984) and *The God Who May Be* (2001).

But before leaving Levinas, let me say a word about a very special meeting I had with him in his home on Rue Michel-Ange in 1980. He invited me for tea shortly before my doctoral defense—of which he was a jury member along with Ricoeur and Breton—and kindly gave me the questions he would ask me the next day. As we talked,

⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79–153.

his son, Michaël, a concert pianist, rehearsed his scales in the next room to the evident delight of his father. The main topic of our conversation—and of my dissertation—was the relationship between a poetics of the possible and an ethics of justice. When I confessed to Levinas that I found his ethics of asymmetrical responsibility to the other—I am always more responsible for the other than the other is for me—impossible to actually *live*, he gave me two simple examples of such a hyperbolic ethics at work in everyday practice. First, he spoke of how one says *après toi* when going through a doorway with someone. That is ethics, he noted: standing back to let the other go first (without the other being expected to do likewise). And secondly, he cited his recent experience of a group of young scholars who travelled all the way from Latin America to ask him how his ethics was practicable—to which he replied: “Your travelling thousands of miles to ask me the question—*that* is ethics.” The concern to do justice is the first act of doing it. Several weeks after my defense, Levinas made another gesture of generosity in agreeing to participate in a colloquium I was organizing with my compatriot, Joseph O’Leary, in the Collège des Irlandais in Paris. It was the first time Levinas had agreed to meet with France’s leading Heideggerians (Beaufret, Fédier, Vézin) since he had lost relatives in the Holocaust. Ricoeur and Marion also agreed to join the conference, which we published a year later as *Heidegger et la Question de Dieu* (1980). (A new edition with an introduction by Yves Lacoste was republished as a *Libre de Poche* in 2016). I never forgot Levinas’s act of intellectual trust and forgiveness. Ethics in action.

And then there was Stanislas Breton, the third member of my doctoral dissertation (June 1980) and another close friend of Paul Ricoeur. A professor at the Ecole normale supérieure in the 1960s—where he taught with Derrida and Althusser—and a priest of the Passionist Order (who officiated at my marriage in Normandy), Breton had a unique hermeneutic ability to combine mysticism, Marxism, and metaphysics. He remained a lifelong friend and confidant and was what I would call a “holy” man. He loved to play with children (including our daughters Simone and Sarah), getting down on all fours and becoming a child himself as he did so. He gave credence to the idea that children are first in the Kingdom; and like other genuinely holy people I have encountered in my life—the Dalai Lama, Chogyi Nyima, my mother—he knew how to laugh from the core of his being as best response to the contradictions of existence. It was Breton who introduced me to the illuminating trope of *perichoresis*—the Greek orthodox figure of three divine persons moving in a circle—by drawing a picture on a white table napkin in my Paris apartment the night before my dissertation defense. This great hermeneutic guide still returns to me again and again in both my academic and spiritual life. Breton was also the person who helped

me find the title for my first single-author book, *La Poétique du Possible*, subtitled *Vers une herméneutique de la Figuration*. And it was also he who introduced me to Duns Scotus's notion of *haecceitas* (thisness) as the particularity of each person created by God. I always think of Breton when I read these lines by Gerard Manley Hopkins from "When Kingfishes Catch Fire":

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves – goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.
[. . .] for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

This poetic image has remained central to my hermeneutics of hospitality ever since—namely, the call to host the quintessential inimitable strangeness of each human person. Responding to the other's singular "thisness" co-responding to one's own. So that each one is saying, in their bodies and souls, "Behold (*ecce!*) this (*haec!*)!" The Latin term, spelled variously *haecceitas* or *ecceitas*, plays on this double sense of annunciatory wonder and singular address. Or as Joyce puts it in *Finnegans Wake*, "here comes everybody" (HCE—*Haec-Ecce*). Each person, Breton taught me, is everyone. The particular is the universal. The concrete is the cosmic. The infinitesimal the infinite. Epiphanies are ordinary, everyday things. God is a god of little things—the last and the least of these (*elachistos*). The strangeness of every stranger (Mt 25). It is a lesson I never forgot.

Finally, there is one other person Ricoeur introduced me to during my Paris apprenticeship who I would like to mention here: Jacques Derrida. My first encounter with Derrida was in 1980, when I invited him to participate in my forthcoming book, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (1984).⁸ I think he agreed largely because I was kindly recommended by our common mentor, Ricœur; and during the course of our discussions he proceeded to share his intellectual confidences and convictions (later published in our exchange, "Deconstruction and the Other,"⁹). This somewhat surprised me, as Derrida had taken robust critical exception, around that time, to

⁸ The book also featured conversations with Levinas, Ricœur, Marcuse, and Breton. See Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*.

⁹ Richard Kearney, "Deconstruction and the Other," in *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 139–56.

Ricoeur's hermeneutics of dialogue, reciprocity, and metaphor (see Derrida's *Le Retrait de la métaphore* in response to Ricoeur's *La métaphore vive*). But it became quickly clear to me that Derrida had a profound generosity that went beyond philosophical differences to welcome a fellow student of his former master.¹⁰ My 1980 exchange with Derrida was to be the first of several published conversations between us over the years, the last two appearing as "Desire of God: An Exchange" and "Terror, Religion, and the New Politics."¹¹

In each of our exchanges over two decades, Derrida was invariably charming, modest, and humane—belying the common caricature of him as a difficult, narcissistic, intellectual rock star. For many who did not read Derrida closely, deconstruction spelled nihilism and relativism. Indeed, I recall when I invited him to give a talk in Dublin in 1998—his notoriety preceding him due to a British media campaign berating Cambridge University for awarding him an honorary degree—thousands turned up to hear him at University College Dublin. He arrived with a massive wad of pages that he had every intention of delivering. But as we walked down the aisle of the packed amphitheater, I swept it from his arms and said: "You are not reading *that*?" Derrida clung to his papers like a mother to a baby the social services were threatening to take into custody; but he soon let go and faced the public, paperless and disarmed. He spoke from the heart about the "lie" (the topic of his talk) for a brisk 50 minutes rather than the 3 hours his paper would have otherwise taken to deliver. (A month previously he had spoken for 6 hours at the Freud Museum in London). The audience, both academic and popular, were utterly entranced. Derrida could charm birds off trees when he was not hiding behind a 200-page paper. And in Dublin he did the former. The question-answer session afterwards was a lesson in careful listening and responding. No question, no matter how naive (e.g., "Mr. Derrida, what does it mean to be human?"), was considered unworthy of response. Indeed, the final questioner of the evening added this remark, delivered in a broad Dublin accent:

Monsieur Derrida, I am delighted you came all the way from Paris to talk to us today. Reading the British gutter press this week I was expecting to see a

¹⁰ Derrida had been a *maître assistant* for Ricoeur at the Sorbonne in the 1960's—presenting the material for his first breakthrough *Introduction to the Origin of Geometry* (1962) in one of Ricoeur's doctoral seminars.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, John D. Caputo, and Richard Kearney, "Desire of God: An Exchange," in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, ed. John Panteleimon Manoussakis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 301–308; and conducted in New York City in the shadow of the fallen Twin Towers in October 2001, Kearney, "Terror, Religion, and the New Politics," in *Debates in Continental Philosophy*, 3–14.

vampire here this afternoon. But you are a grand good man. I always thought the Marquis de Sade was the most maligned man in history, but now I realize it is you, Jacques Derrida! If I was the Lord Mayor of Dublin, I would offer you the keys to our city.

The audience broke into applause and Derrida was deeply moved, bowing deep, his two hands clasped in gratitude.

Another incident I would like to share concerns a conference Derrida and I contributed to in the 1990s. It was the second Villanova University meeting on postmodernism and religion, and at one point my close friend and colleague, John D. Caputo (author of *Radical Hermeneutics*) objected to my challenging Derrida with the question: “How can deconstruction’s maxim that ‘every other is every other’ (*tout autre est tout autre*) be reconciled with a hermeneutics of discernment: namely the need to differentiate between different kinds of others—e.g., a madman or a messiah?” In spite of Caputo’s protectionist zeal, Derrida took my question on the chin and graciously responded: “Richard’s problems with my thought are my own problems with my thought.” I was spared a lynching on the spot and all three of us went on to discuss the issue in perfectly cordial fashion.

One last story I wish to mention here, but which, for reasons of discretion, I have not done so before, concerns Derrida’s final reconciliation with Ricoeur. After Derrida had delivered his Dublin lecture “On the Lie,” we retired to my house for dinner. During the course of the conversation, the question of depression came up—we had both experienced “dark nights” in our lives—and Derrida happened to mention how one of his worst bouts followed his Paris doctoral defense when Ricoeur (his director) never showed up for the post-dissertation toast. Derrida confided that this withholding of the ceremonial blessing (as he read it) had devastated him, because Ricoeur had been for him a surrogate intellectual father since he had left his own family in Algeria to come to France as an émigré student. When I told him that Ricoeur had not come to my doctoral toast either, Derrida was speechless. “You too?!” he exclaimed. “Were you not shocked?” I said not at all. I had simply picked up the phone and asked Ricoeur why he had not shown up—and had received the following frank response:

I am sorry Richard, but I never attend any of my students’ dissertation toasts. I have so many students and I must also look after my own family. I am a bad father to both my intellectual and actual children. I never give either enough time. Such is my life. I do two jobs badly, but it is all I can do.

Derrida was deeply affected by this, and as soon as he returned to Paris, he phoned Ricoeur next day. They agreed to meet that same afternoon in the Jardin du Luxembourg (it was early May) and stayed talking nonstop until the *gardiens* sent them both home when the gates closed at 2100. What Derrida and Ricoeur realized during the exchange was that for thirty years, their respective philosophical positions (deconstructive and hermeneutic) had often been speaking past each other—mishearing, misreading, miswriting—in part because of a *dialogue manqué* at a pivotal moment in their lives: Derrida seeking a surrogate father, Ricoeur neglecting a surrogate son.

Ricoeur confessed to me subsequently that after this reunion, they continued to talk on a weekly basis right up to Derrida’s untimely death from pancreatic cancer in 2002. Ricoeur wept at Derrida’s passing, confiding to me: “It was not fair. He should not have died before me.” Ricoeur joined his adopted spiritual son two years later in 2004. In one of the last conversations I had with Ricoeur, he told me that when he and Derrida had read my book, *The God Who May Be*, Derrida confessed he thought it too hermeneutic while Ricoeur thought it too deconstructionist! I shared with Ricoeur this line from Seamus Heaney: “Two buckets are easier carried than one, I grew up in between.” He smiled.

Concluding Remarks

It was in large part thanks to my conversations with my Paris mentors—recorded above—that I came to hermeneutics at both a personal and philosophical level. For hermeneutics is, I have been suggesting, quintessentially dialogue. What may seem like ‘hermeneutic detours’ or even “distractions” (Pascalian *divertissements*), in our ordinary common shared experiences, can actually perform the basic hermeneutic principle that “the shortest route from self to self is through the other.” And the Other is always others. In hermeneutics the singular is always plural. In what remains, I would like to extend my brief biographical history to include testimonial mention of some additional colleagues and friends who amplified and deepened my “hermeneutic circle” of interlocutors during my formative years as a student of philosophy.

In addition to the philosophical mentorships cited above, I also had the good fortune during my Parisian sojourn (1977–1981) to enjoy vibrant intellectual contact with some other inspirational thinkers who I would like to mention here. This good fortune included learning from the great existentialists, Sartre and de Beauvoir (whose

funerals I attended in the late 1970s), as well as from structuralists and poststructuralists like Barthes, Foucault, Deleuze, Lacan, and Lévi-Strauss, whose extraordinary lectures I attended in the late 1970s. It was indeed a golden age. Every thinker brought an arresting and original intellectual challenge to the table. Indeed, I can recall in vivid detail the specific lecturing style and generosity of each philosopher, who without exception (apart from Lacan) was more than willing to engage their questioners in robust and honest dialogue. And these dialogues included several memorable younger thinkers of the time—like Jean-Luc Marion, Julia Kristeva, and René Girard—who challenged the prevailing *modes intellectuels* and opened up new engagements with events “outside of the text.” For example, the gift as saturated phenomenon (Marion), the strange call of unconscious desire (Kristeva), and the hidden anthropological realities of violence and disclosure (Girard). My wife, Anne, and I enjoyed many a memorable evening in discussion with these thinkers over good food and wine. Even though we were still young students at the time, these intellectuals displayed a remarkable humility and readiness to engage in conversation with us, breaching academic barriers between *professeurs et étudiants*. Perhaps the legacy of 1968 was still in the air, extending the life of the mind in a generous hermeneutic circle. There was no question too basic, no enigma too ineligible, for congenial consideration.

And there is one final hermeneutic interlocuter I would like to recall here. It was also during my Paris apprenticeship that I first developed a creative and lasting relationship with my intellectual compatriot, Joseph Stephen O’Leary, who was studying theology at the time and went on to become a regular collaborator on numerous hermeneutic projects (beginning with our co-chairing the *Heidegger et Dieu* conference at the Collège des Irlandais in Paris in June 1979). Joe went on to teach for three decades at Sophia University, Tokyo, where I had the pleasure of visiting the Buddhist temples of Yanaka and Kamakura in his company. He has become a leading international scholar of East–West philosophical relations (especially Christian–Buddhist) and remains one of my closest colleagues in the hermeneutics of interreligious dialogue. As his most recent books attest, *Conventional and Ultimate Truth* (2015), *Buddhist Nonduality*, *Paschal Paradox* (2018), and *Reality Itself* (2019). As it happens, we were both born in the same city of Cork, Ireland, in the 1950s and will probably die there too, in good time, God willing.

And so—as with everything to do with hermeneutics—we come full circle. Our end is our beginning. If hermeneutics was founded in the 19th century by Schleiermacher and Dilthey, and developed in the 20th century by the likes of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricœur, then the 21st century seems set fair to shepherd the legacy of critical interpretation into new conversations—between phenomenology and

theology, epistemology and ecology, sociology and science, metaphysics and physics, not to mention the crucial contemporary dialogue between what I call “carnal hermeneutics” and digital cybernetics. This last topic seems to me of paramount importance in the coming age of post-pandemic communications; and, to remain at the personal level, it is one I try to engage with in my most recent volume, *Touch*.¹² For hermeneutics—as interpersonal relations always remind us—is as much about the tactile as the verbal. The future of 21st century hermeneutics lies, I believe, in the development of a new understanding of the vital conversation between word and touch. Between the personal digital fingerprint and the global digital network.

¹² Richard Kearney, *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).