AH ANALECTA HERMENEUTICA
INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR HERMENEUTICS / INSTITUT INTERNATIONAL D'HERMÉNEUTIQUE

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 15.2 (2023)

Richard Kearney: Hermeneutics in Word and Deed

M. E. Littlejohn
University of New Brunswick

To write a *laudatio* for Richard Kearney in honor of his receiving Blue Diamond Hermes award is no easy task. His thought, now spanning five decades with no sign of waning, impresses in its depth, breadth, and reach; it is difficult to know where to start. With his contribution to theoretical reflection? Which one? Or with its practice? Then in what domain? Rooted deeply in philosophy, Kearney's work flows on the written page, effortlessly weaving through philosophical periods with a literary flair, bringing into the foreground overlooked voices from the past and bridging dialogue across disparate historical contexts. His hermeneutic spirit leads him to defy the silo mentality so endemic to the contemporary academy, as with admirable ease, he follows his thought across the contemporary disciplinary boundaries of literature, poetry, psychology, politics, religion, film, and visual art. Finally, resisting the temptation to remain within the comfortable confines of an ever-increasing professionalization of the academy which chains philosophy to desks in university offices, Kearney's thought vaults over the high walls of the academy and into the public square, innovating social justice initiatives that put into practice hospitality, peace, and the care for the environment. But even beyond this, Kearney's path of thought has produced no fewer than three novels and a volume of poetry, alongside the multitude of articles and books published in academic presses and journals. The influence of these crossings is mutual, and beneficial: his scholarly writing is permeated by this remarkable literary voice and facility which renders complicated ideas vivid, memorable, and accessible, while his literary work opens out onto the depth of philosophical thought in the historical and

fictional narration of life. His books have been translated into seventeen languages, not only major world languages like French Arabic, and Chinese, but also less-spoken languages like Korean, Czech, and Kurdish. Conferences and scholarly symposiums dedicated to his work have been held worldwide. There are now eight critical volumes published on Kearney's thought, a *Richard Kearney Reader*, as well as a number of special academic journal issues dedicated to his work.[1] His originality, eloquence and appeal, with his ability to address both timeless questions and the particular issues of our times, have led to radio interviews, documentaries, and an increased demand for his writing and public appearances.[2] Kearney's dance card is most often full, but somehow he always finds time to honour new requests. The exhausting pace that he maintains, his intense work ethic, and relentless commitment to engage with ideas would fell a lesser man.

Hilary Putnam once quipped, "any philosophy that can be put in a nutshell belongs in one," and so here will be no futile attempts to encapsulate and summarize Kearney. Such a multifaceted range of thought over the last five decades offers a number of possible entry points to readers. Yet diversity is not division; whatever initial trail one takes as a starting point, as one traverses these paths it is possible to catch a glimmer of the deep threads that run through the entirety of his corpus, and the fundamental insights that ignite and fuel his endeavor. But we must begin somewhere, and as I am persuaded of the autobiographical character of philosophy, I will recount my own contingent entry point, as one among the many who could lift a pen in honor of the man and his work.

---

[1] The most significant of these sources include the recent Scriptorium "Divine Poetics: The Art of Richard Kearney's Anatheism" in *Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 5, Issue 1, 2023; *Anacarnation and Returning to the Lived Body with Richard Kearney*, edited by Brian Treanor and James L. Taylor (London: Routledge , 2022); *Theopoetics and Religious Difference: Richard Kearney, John D. Caputo, and Catherine Keller and the Unruliness of the Interreligious*, by Marius van Hoogstraten (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020); *Imagination Now: A Richard Kearney Reader,* ed. M. E. Littlejohn (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020); *The Art of Anatheism,* eds. Matthew Clemente and Richard Kearney (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); *Richard Kearney's Anatheist Wager*, eds. Chris Doude van Troostwijk and Matthew Clemente (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); and *Debating Otherness with Richard Kearney: Perspectives from South Africa*, ed. Yolanda Steenkamp and Daniël P. Veldsman (Cape Town: AOSIS, 2018); *Traversing the Imaginary: Richard Kearney and the Postmodern Challenge*, ed. Peter Gratton and John Manoussakis (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2007); and *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, ed. John Manoussakis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

[2] Interviews include RTE, France Culture, CBC, ABC, PBS; for articles see for example "Losing Our Touch," in the *New York Times*, Aug. 30, 2014, and "Double Remembrance," in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 1, 2016.

Dialogue in Action

I first encountered Richard Kearney through a radio program dedicated to his account of religion. This would prove providential. I had a background in hermeneutics from my studies of theology, but it was my philosophical training in logic and analytic philosophy that led to my position at a secular university. When I took over the courses in the philosophy of religion still on the books from a bygone era, I was looking for a way to reach my students. Many of them had long lost touch with religious questions and sacred texts, viewing religion as an anachronism, a destructive vestige of the past. A smaller demographic hailed from a 'Bible belt' and tended toward defensive fundamentalism, dogmatism, and closed sectarianism. As I listened to this program, I was amazed at Kearney's deft touch in approaching the question of God, which offered an antidote for the malaise that characterizes contemporary oppositional religious 'either/or' debates of theists versus atheists. Kearney's work was an invitation for everyone to come back to the rough, fertile ground of the hermeneutic conversation, and students found it a refreshing challenge. Like so many others before me, I detected in Kearney not just an ally in the critical re-approach to religion, but a thinker of the highest caliber, whose lucidity, eloquence, and razor-sharp wit, were immediately in evidence as he traversed the history of philosophy, literature, and religions, exploring the possibility of a return to God in the 21st century. He had his hand on the pulse of the age, and he spoke from within the tumult of our times, not outside of it. There is no avoiding challenge with Kearney, there is only reasoning through the school of challenges of the other. Having recommended Kearney in the classroom, I began passing his books on to interested colleagues, even suggesting to friends on sabbatical in the Boston area that they should look him up, and I learned later that they did.

Finally, I decided I should follow my own advice. After a decade focused on teaching, as well as a heavy involvement in party politics in Canada on the side, it was finally time for a long-delayed sabbatical, and I was ready to return to my goal of building bridges across the analytic and continental divide. After a quick e-mail exchange, I found myself knocking at 225 Stokes, wagering on Professor Kearney's hermeneutic hospitality, gambling on the congruence between the shadow and the person, the theory and the practice, the talk and the walk, the word and the deed. "Welcome! Yes, Come in. Come in. Sit down. Have a seat. Have you travelled far?"

Kearney's pre-eminently hermeneutic outlook was manifest in one of the first questions he posed to me: "Who are the five philosophers you gravitate to the most?" He did not ask about my economic status or institutional pedigree, but "Who are you

in dialogue with?" This is not to say that Kearney neglects the personal dimensions of life and how it informs one's experience, of course (whether it is the hermeneut or the novelist in him, it is often a marvel to witness his quick and intuitive grasp of life stories), but that for Kearney, our dialogue is a critical part of who we are. And as we shared what we were working on, I was inspired to propose a new project: to use the common dialogue with St. Augustine's *Confessions* as a way of bridging the analytic voice of Wittgenstein, our shared hermeneutic inspiration of Ricoeur, and Kearney's longtime friend and colleague Jean-Luc Marion, along with a few others. Kearney's response to this boundary-crossing exchange was enthusiastic: "Now that is a book I would like to read!" This gesture of encouragement and generous invitation thus gave life to a project which has become for me the work of a decade. This is the gift of creativity that astonishes one in Kearney, and in the most precise sense: here, words come to life. His work continually underlines the power of imagination to create new possibilities, and this bears out in his scholarship and in his relations with those around him.

For it is true, when one enters dialogue with Richard Kearney, one enters dialogue with a vast, creative circle of colleagues, friends, and even neighbors. There is never a dull moment of discussion, but it's never just talk. For example, some time later, after mentioning my course on Stanley Cavell's work on films, I discovered that Kearney, too, had a passion for film, and had written and taught on film himself. This led to a wonderful conversation which gave rise to a regular movie-and-discussion night with friends, which led to a co-taught graduate course, and ultimately became a co-edited volume, *Thinking Film (*2023), with diverse friends and colleagues, new and old.[3] And all from a comment. Perhaps to someone else it would have been limited to a nice conversation; spoken to Kearney it took on life. My own anecdotes are far from an exception, as can be seen through the many collaborations Kearney has engaged in over the years with students and colleagues, which range over a vast terrain of interesting themes and materials. In addition to his recently co-authored book with Melissa Fitzpatrick, *Radical Hospitality* (2021), we could also speak of the co-edited volumes, including *Carnal Hermeneutics* with Brian Treanor (2015), *The Art of Anatheism* with Matthew Clemente (2018), and *Somantic Desire* with Sarah Horton, Stephen Mendelsohn, and Christine Rojcewicz (2019)—and that would be keeping to only the

[3] *Thinking Film: Philosophy at the Movies*, ed. Richard Kearney and M. E. Littlejohn (London: Bloomsbury, 2023).

last ten years.[4] Many of these editors were his students, who after being initiated into this practice continue in the same collaborative scholarly tradition. In a word, Kearney has a marvelous gift of bringing things to life across many domains, and bringing people together in a community of exploration and discovery. My own encounter with this hospitality was no "one-off"; Kearney's welcome has been extended to scholars from all around the world, creating a ready influx of new dialogue partners and enriching the intellectual culture at Boston College where he holds the Charles Seelig chair.

This brings us to a dimension of academic life which is often backgrounded when reflecting on the accomplishments of someone as prolific as Kearney, even if it is central to the task of a professor: teaching. For Kearney, this is something essential to the practice of philosophy: hermeneutic philosophy is dialogical philosophy, from Socrates on down the line to Gadamer and Ricoeur (supervisor of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Paris). He is a 'student's professor.' For many years now, term after term, a hundred fortunate upper-level and graduate students gather in a magnificent wood-paneled room in Gasson Hall, adorned with frescoes and citations from famous orators, to hear Kearney lecture on the philosophy of the imagination, phenomenology, existentialism, diacritical hermeneutics, carnal hermeneutics, embodiment, and environmentally conscious dwelling in the world. In these lectures one does not merely witness a philosophical performer commanding the attention of the hall with his natural charisma and charm. (Though Kearney originally considered attending the national school of Drama at the Abbey Theatre in 1973, before choosing to study literature and philosophy at University College Dublin.) What the students find is someone communicating ideas, now come to life and made present in the classroom. Kearney is the same man, inside and outside his class, and his respect for his classes is evident in the way he communicates. Always in dialogue, the large room in the semi-round can become small and intimate, as Kearney asks and responds to their questions. It is impressive to see the many hours he spends in his office with students. Even with such large classes, he makes the time to speak to every single one of them about their work. I was astounded to see the time and care he takes in reading and commenting on every paper.

---

[4] *Somatic Desire: Recovering Corporeality in Contemporary Thought,* ed. Richard Kearney, Sarah Horton, Stephen Mendelsohn, and Christine Rojcewicz (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2019); *The Art of Anatheism*, ed. Richard Kearney and Matthew Clemente (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2018).

For those doctoral students who advance to Kearney's seminars, the hermeneutic and dialogical character of Kearney's approach is even more pronounced. Far from a rehash of "greatest hits," his seminars explore the themes which are at the cutting edge of current philosophical inquiry. The reading materials are demanding, and Kearney does not let himself off the hook in this regard. He too must undergo the challenge of the readings which can span the twenty-five hundred years of tradition to the latest works in whatever language published. The answers are not predetermined. Where the conversation goes is dependent on the participants, as each pass through the challenges of the other. Dialogue is dialogue. This spirit is born out in Kearney's texts as well, which feature extensive footnote discussions and generous citations, giving due credit not only to scholarly sources, but even to graduate papers, as well as insights spoken to him in personal conversations. I know of no one else who pays such conscientious attention to the spoken word as a serious medium of philosophical ideas.

With such affinity for the dialogical word, it is entirely fitting that Kearney has brought his entire readership into some of the most important of these conversations through volumes of interviews with some of the most well-known thinkers of our era, many of whom he has counted among his friends. To name some of the more well-known among them: Stanislas Breton, Jorge Luis Borges, John D. Caputo, Simon Critchley, Noam Chomsky, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Václav Havel, Seamus Heaney, Catherine Keller, Julia Kristeva, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard, Herbert Marcuse, Jean-Luc Marion, Martha Nussbaum, Paul Ricoeur, Edward Said, George Steiner, Charles Taylor, David Tracy, Gianni Vattimo, Merold Westphal, and David Wood. Far beyond mere recapitulations, these four books, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (1984), *States of Mind* (1995), *Debates in Continental Philosophy* (2004), and *Re-imagining the Sacred* (2015), are a significant philosophical achievement: Kearney's rare combination of conversational generosity and breadth of knowledge of the philosophical terrain permits him to clarify and challenge the thought of his conversation partners, and to move them into places both deep and engaging. This talent, with his extraordinary ability to think on his feet, has made Kearney an ideal moderator in even heated debates. It's hard to imagine anyone better qualified to manage the significant 1999 Villanova discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion; the publication of this event shows Kearney's mediation played an active, shaping role in this historic conversation between two extremes.

The skill of dialogue relates first to the spoken word, but there is no questioning that in Kearney's case it also fostered by his considerable gift as a writer. In a great poem, each syllable is perfectly placed, each word is used as if it is the only

possible word that could have been employed here. The perfection, the fit, makes the lines appear effortless. Didn't that turn of phrase always exist? Did we not already know it prior to our coming to awareness of it here? One feels this often under Kearney's pen. Ideas that lie flat and useless in a vaguely intuited background of our thought-world leap to vivid clarity, with the perfect word or phrase that brings it to life. This gift is one widely appreciated not only by students seeking to master the difficult philosophical tradition, but by also the international community of scholars who read Kearney. Jean-Luc Marion declares, "We are all anatheists now";[5] Jean-Yves Lacoste cites "microescahtology" as a perfect encapsulation of the experience he has been trying to describe in the friendly sharing of a cup of tea.[6] Kearney's vivid words make things visible, things which were not so visible before. And this goes beyond isolated words. I often find myself marveling: Richard Kearney knows how to tell a story. By this I mean not only the perfect comic anecdote, shared around a seminar table or the table at the dinner afterwards (and it is no trivial thing, by the way, to break tension, to bring people together, open up a space of conviviality among strangers). I mean as well he has a gift of weaving a narrative. Whether it is a question of philosophical ideas or a moment of history, Kearney knows how to draw his audience in to the drama, the tension, the illumination that he has found and cares to share. These are but the small indications, in philosophy, of the skills Kearney has exercised more extensively in his collection of poetry, *Angel at Patrick's Hill* (1991), as well as his three novels, *Sam's Fall* (1995), and *Walking at Sea Level* (1997), and most recently *Salvage* (2023). His fluency with the literary and artistic imagination allows him to freely enter dialogue with paintings and poems, films and novels, drawing fruitful insights from his poignant readings. Kearney's role as a public intellectual has been well served by this poetic imagination and facility with words, and it has been often noted that one of his greatest assets is his ability to communicate difficult ideas in a clear and accessible manner, and across multiple forms of media.

This enormous output, across so many domains is no mere accident when one has a sense of the man. Anyone who has witnessed Kearney at work will be astonished by his remarkable industry and unrelenting work-ethic, as well as his determination to follow the questions wherever they lead. So perhaps by this point the reader will at last understand why it is such a challenge to describe in a short space the contributions that Kearney has made. Like the man, his thought contains multitudes. Yet it is not

---

[5] Jean-Luc Marion, "The Death of the Death of God," in *Reimagining the Sacred,* ed. Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmerman (New York: Columbia Press, 2016), p. 185.

[6] Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Être en Danger* (Paris: Cerf, 2011), p. 277

without its deeper lines of unity, and in my estimation, "imagination" is one of the strongest leitmotifs.[7] As Kearney is a lover of stories, and a great teller of stories, it surely is not inappropriate to trace some of his most significant works to the path of his life.

Bridging Irish Imagination and Parisian Hermeneutics

Kearney was born and raised in Cork, Ireland, in the midst of sectarian, class, and political unrest that had deep, transgenerational roots and which increasingly polarized Ireland, North and South. But Ireland was so much more than its conflicts: this was a land where imagination was bred in the bone. (As Leonard Cohen once noted that the Jewish people gave the world the Law, and the Irish gave the world poetics.) Kearney's childhood drew deep inspiration from the rich resources of this culture of poetry and narrative, familial stories, local and world literature. Raised within a Roman Catholic culture strongly marked by ancient Celtic roots, Kearney experienced the rhythm of the seasons with the cycle of liturgical feasts and its stories of saints and sinners. It would be impossible, living in Ireland during the Troubles, to forget the possibility of religion to generate violence, whether acts of terrorism or authoritarian dogmatism. And yet Kearney also witnessed its potential to enrich life and encourage compassion.

The Benedictine school of Glenstal Abbey Kearney attended was a good example of the latter. The monks did not indoctrinate their students but encouraged them to face critical challenges to faith on their search for truth. They taught their students to seriously explore the arguments of prominent atheists as a condition for the critical reflection on God, which would inspire some of Kearney's later work.[8] It was in this open and creative context that Kearney was first introduced to philosophy. And it was the monks of Glenstal who encouraged the young Kearney to take up a formal study of philosophy and literature in his first degree at University College Dublin. His ongoing inquiry led him to pursue a master's degree on the philosophy of imagination with renowned Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor at McGill University

---

[7] It was my guiding thread in editing the reader on Kearney's work: *Imagination Now: A Richard Kearney Reader*. This idea was also confirmed by Richard Kearney in a recent symposium dedicated to his work, "After Thoughts on After Gods: A Response to Hendel, Damen, Putt, and Hederman," in *Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion* 5 (2023), pp. 119.

[8] As Kearney later writes, "How could one authentically choose theism if one was not familiar with the alternative of atheism? Or the agnostic space between?" *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), xii.

in Montreal in 1975. And Taylor, learning of Kearney's budding center of interests, advised his student to continue his research in Paris with a doctorate under the direction of a philosopher whom Taylor held in highest regard: Paul Ricoeur.

The Paris that Kearney arrived in was a fertile field of conversation. It was the Paris of Poststructuralism, the Paris of Giles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel Foucault, having seized the field that once belonged to Claude Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes. It was also the Paris of psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan holding lecture halls rapt under his spell, while Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva had begun publishing their early, defining works. But most notably for Kearney, this Paris also coincided with Ricoeur's ascendancy in French philosophy. Ricoeur was already well-known for his work exploring symbolism, myth, and metaphor, and in the late 1970s he was developing the philosophical implications of narrative. Ricoeur often began his seminars with the question, "*D'où parlez-vous?"* "From where do you speak?" Kearney, shaped by his Irish experience, armed with his own insights, and guided by prior research on the imagination, was well situated to speak at that table, and Paul Ricoeur would become his great teacher, mentor, and friend. Through seminars, lectures, and conversations, he was in dialogue with Ricoeur as the latter was writing what were arguably the greatest works of his career, his three volume masterpiece, *Time and Narrative*, followed by his Gifford Lectures, published as *Oneself as Another*. None of it was lost on Kearney, who found affirmed at every turn his deepest intuitions concerning the importance of symbol, poetics, and story.

One episode of Richard Kearney's time deserves a particular mention as a clear illustration of his extraordinary talents, and an early example of the achievements that would continue to mark his later career. Together with Joseph S. O'Leary, another young Irishman studying in Paris, Kearney organized a conference which took place on June 24, 1979, entitled "*Heidegger et la question de Dieu"* and giving rise to a collected volume published under the same title in 1980. This event has been of particular fascination for me ever since I began to edit a special scriptorium on it as a little memorial of the fortieth anniversary of this event. What I discovered astounded me, expanding the project far beyond the bounds of a simple scriptorium to fill an entire journal issue.[9] Hardly a minor event, this conference is widely known and respected in France as a critical moment that catalyzed the contemporary field, and in particular the birth of the "Theological Turn." The meeting of minds at this conference, between the staunchly dogmatic Heideggerians led by Jean Beaufret and the "rebels" who

[9] The issue, entitled, "Phenomenology and the Question of God Forty Years Later" was co-edited with Stephanie Rumpza and is published in the *Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion* 2 no. 2 (2020).

sought to move beyond Heidegger, was the occasion that led Jean-Luc Marion to present the original core of *God Without Being*.[10] The edited volume, meanwhile, was popular upon its release and for its thirtieth anniversary, it even earned a special reprinting with a preface written for the occasion by Jean-Yves Lacoste. In his 2001 history of the reception of Heidegger in France, Dominique Janicaud singled out both the event and the "rich volume" of "remarkable quality" that followed it as "the most interesting" of the flourishing tributes and studies in the period following Heidegger's death.[11] He praises it as enormously "instructive," especially because "it avoids no difficulty and opens the debate, to the greatest extent possible, between the scrupulous interpreters of Heidegger's thought (Beaufret and Fédier) and his opponents (Stanislas Breton, Levinas, Ricoeur.)"[12] In other words, already at the ripe age of 24, still a year prior to the completion of his doctorate, Kearney had already made a major wager of bridging a dialogue: attending with O'Leary seminars from both sides of these opposing camps, he dared to extend an invitation to all of them.

The choice of location, perhaps, helped to create a space of dialogue between parties that were deeply divided.[13] A short walk from the Grandes Écoles, the Collège des Irlandais was nevertheless removed from the entrenched institutional politics of Paris. In a 2018 interview, Kearney recounts the palpable tension of the day.[14] Yet Kearney recalls the event was marked by "deeply collegial exchanges," in a true hermeneutic spirit: "the colloquium somehow ambushed everyone, including ourselves, by working with the spoken word and physical presence of the participants. There were no prepared texts. We moved from speech to text back to speech again in a very Irish hermeneutic circle."[15] Kearney too modestly attributes this to the idealistic "naïveté" of youth (he was only twenty four!), remembering Ricoeur's reflection that "only two naïve Irishmen would have dared invite us all. We haven't talked to each

---

[10] It is now printed in §1-4 of Chapter 2, "Double Idolatry" in *God Without Being;* §5 was appended as a response to the critiques from Beaufret and Fédier during this conference, which Marion explains in the text with a contextualizing paragraph. For more on this conference, see the editorial essay I coauthored with Stephanie Rumpza on this special issue, "A Timeless Question and a Timely Event," 121–156.

[11] Dominique Janicaud, *Heidegger in France* (Indiana University Press, 2015)*,* p. 180.

[12] Janicaud, *Heidegger in France,* p. 291.

[13] See a description of this event from Kearney's collaborator Joseph S. O'Leary in "A Seminal Event" *Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion* 2 no. 2 (2020): 176–190.

[14] Richard Kearney and M. E. Littlejohn "In Conversation with Richard Kearney," *Imagination Now*, p. 318.

[15] Ibid., p. 319.

other like this since the War."[16] Naïvete? Or the audacity of genius? Not just anyone knows how to gather the right people at the right time around the right question. In an interview, Jean-Luc Marion recognized the work organizing this conference as "brilliant"; the hard evidence of his remarkable career "bore this out."[17] Jean Greisch, too, praised the "enthusiasm," "audacity," and "cunning," in their refusal to be defeated by the petty grudges of Parisian academic life.[18] We might say that this conference demonstrated so much of what would go on to mark Kearney's celebrated career: the spirit of collaboration, the daring to extend a hand of welcome among enemies, the skill for bridging dialogue across distance, the knack for the right gesture at the propitious moment, and the hope in the possibility of reconciliation and conversation, all grounded in the good community of Irish hospitality.

The preface for the publication of this 1980 volume is particularly important.[19] It begins by a reiteration of the challenge which Ricoeur directly addressed to Heidegger at his famous French conference at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1955, and which he wrote up, at Kearney's request, for inclusion in the 1979 conference volume:

> What has often astonished me in Heidegger is that he has, it seems, systematically eluded a confrontation with the bloc of Hebraic thought… Does the task of rethinking Christian tradition by a "step back" not demand that one recognize the radically Hebraic dimension of Christianity, which is first rooted in Judaism and only afterwards in the Greek tradition?[20]

In his preface, Kearney affirms this point by developing it in an Irish accent:

> It is of primary importance that we recognize and rethink our double belonging to the truth of Being unveiled by Parmenides, Plato, and Greek

---

[16] Ibid., p. 310.

[17] Jean-Luc Marion, *Rigor of Things: Conversations with Dan Arbib* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), p. 108; including in these words Kearney collaborator on this conference, Joe O'Leary.

[18] Jean Greisch, "How Does 'the God' Come into the Philosophy of Heidegger?" *Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion* 2 no. 2 (2020), p. 191.

[19] The original preface, cowritten by Kearney and O'Leary, has not been translated into English, but Kearney agreed to submit a revised version for the special journal issue to present some of the themes of the original co-edited volume, "Prefatory Note," *Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion* 2 no. 2 (2020) 157-58.

[20] Paul Ricoeur, "Note Introductive," *Heidegger et la question de Dieu* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009), p. 37. English translation by Stephanie Rumpza as "Introductory Note: The Exclusion of the Hebraic Tradition" in *Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion* 2 no. 2 (2020), p. 175.

> philosophy, on the one hand, and the truth of the transcendent God announced by Moses, the prophets, and Christ, on the other. In the words of Matthew Arnold, "Hebraism and Hellenism — between these two points of influence moves our world." Or as James Joyce jauntily put it: 'Jewgreek is Greekjew.' Whence the hypothesis of an encounter between a new thinking of being and a new religious thinking which motivates an open dialogue.[21]

These affirmations must not be underestimated. It means that critical to the inspiration behind this conference was the recovering of a voice which had been silenced in the most unspeakable violence, and a violence that Heidegger himself shared. Against the narrow-mindedness of this great philosopher whose thought was compromised by its alliance with the Nazi desire for hegemony, Kearney elevates the question of God in the context of its significance for the Judaic tradition. This is no act of "cancel culture": instead of flatly rejecting everything the father of 20th century hermeneutics had done, Kearney joins in its hermeneutic correction, taking up what it had neglected.

It is telling, too, the teachers who he most gravitated to, who most marked him at this time. There is Paul Ricoeur, of course, who did not cow before the star-power of the great German thinker like most French philosophers did in 1955, but dared to issue a real intellectual challenge to his vexed past by elevating the Hebraic Biblical tradition. And Emmanuel Levinas, whose career ended at the Sorbonne but who first labored for many years unnoticed, drawing inspiration from the Judaic tradition to deliver a powerful first philosophy based on ethics, against Heidegger's first philosophy of Being. Jacques Derrida, too, whose engagement with Levinas helped bring him to attention, whose relation to his own Judaic heritage was one of question and struggle, yet which lent a definitively Messianic character to his deconstructive philosophy. This means that even if what Dominique Janicaud would later critique as the "theological turn" is often associated with Christianity, led by Catholics Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, Jean-Yves Lacoste, and Jean-Louis Chrétien, along with the Protestant Paul Ricoeur, it all began with the challenge opened by the Jewish tradition.[22] Although raised in a country beset by the violence caused by religious exclusion, or perhaps in deliberate rebellion against it, Kearney from the beginning was deeply aware of broader faith perspectives.

---

[21] Richard Kearney, "Prefatory Note," 157.

[22] Dominique Janicaud himself, of course, attributes Levinas to the beginning of the "swerve." *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate.* Translated by Bernard G. Prusak and Jeffrey L. Kosky (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), p. 36.

Ricoeur, Levinas, and Derrida: to these three important teachers, Kearney would add a forth.[23] Stanislas Breton was a brilliant Passionist priest who was the pride of the Institut Catholique de Paris, and of the local Communist Party (along with his good friend Louis Althusser). Breton's creative reappropriation of the history of Neo-Platonic philosophy and mysticism, along with his Pauline theology of the Cross, was deeply influential on Kearney's spirituality, both intellectually and personally. It was Breton who Kearney asked in 1980 to officiate his wedding to Parisian artist Anne Bernard, who Kearney met during his early days of arrival in the city. Breton remained a close friend to the Kearney family until his death.

University College Dublin: Imagination amidst the Troubles

After receiving his doctorate in 1980 from l'Université de Paris X-Nanterre, Kearney returned to Ireland to teach at University College Dublin. It was an Ireland broken and torn by the "Troubles": bombings, kidnappings, and executions haunted the lives of everyday people north of the border. Shootings at pubs, explosions at parades, attacks on funerals of victims leading to more funerals and more victims. Divided neighborhoods became battlegrounds, and tensions rose. Ireland's anguish captivated international attention as the world recognized it as a microcosm of the many wars, conflicts, and divisions that mark the human condition; "the trenches dug within our hearts," lamented by U2 from stages around the world, lay at the foundation of every fractured history. Under such circumstances, many would have hoped to simply teach and write in peace. But Kearney could not let his philosophy remain in the classroom: he would marshal his research, writing, and conversations from Paris to confront the fractured and divisive narrative of his native land. True to his ethical impulse and in the hermeneutic spirit, Kearney would move from text to action, and then back to texts again, as he took up the call to engage. He found himself in the role of a public intellectual. With Mark Patrick Hederman, a monk of Glenstal, Kearney served as editor of *The Crane Bag*, a journal the two had founded before he went to France in 1977, which invited dialogue and critical thinking from across the whole of Ireland. He engaged in conversation with John Hume, who would receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1998, and future president of Ireland Mary Robinson. He also wrote studies

[23] Richard Kearney discusses these influences at greater length in, "Where I Speak From: A Short Intellectual Autobiography," *Debating Otherness with Richard Kearney. Perspectives from South Africa.* Eds. Daniël P. Veldsman and Yolande Steenkamp (Cape Town: AOSIS, 2018), pp. 36-45.

and essays applying his hermeneutic expertise to the Irish situation: how to broker peace and change centuries-old false narratives that held people captive in division, hate, and violence? *Navigations: Collected Irish Essays 1976-2006* gathers his writings on this theme, spanning from the more poetic *Transitions* (1987), to the more political *Visions of Europe* (1993) and *Postnationalist Ireland* (1997). Kearney could see that there was no victory for anyone within the oppositional story: Northern Ireland *either* belongs to a united Ireland *or* it belongs to the United Kingdom. This intransigent situation ran centuries into the past, with deep historical, political roots and oppositional narratives to support both sides, both assuming that present-day British and Irish citizens are two peoples clearly distinguished by culture, genetics, and religion. But in fact there was always intermingling between the two, and the strict difference was only artificially enforced, perhaps most crudely in the Statutes of Kilkenny (1367), which declared as "civilization" or the "gentry" (English) those who lived within Dublin, and as "non-civilization," or "degenerates" (Irish) those who lived outside the enclosing fence or palisade, "beyond the pale." When the Reformation arrived, these distinctions only gained in strength. Kearney's task was to break the spell cast by these old stories of opposition based on such deeply entrenched dualities of pure and impure. The way out, he knew, could only come from a reimagining of the very concept of national identity, beginning with a refiguration of the past, telling a new story and thus opening new possibilities for the future. To the initial enmity between Loyalists and Republicans, Kearney encouraged a rereading of Ireland that sounded options beyond the either/or duality, advocating for a position that would eventually be upheld by the Good Friday Peace Agreement of 1998: why not *both* Irish *and* British?

Hostility, division, and war seem to come far easier than peace and unity, but Kearney's philosophy was for him a tool of resistance against despair. And in the midst of all of his practical and political applications Kearney did not cease to pursue the theme of imagination, not only in practice, but at a theoretical level. After publishing his first monograph in French, *Poétique du possible* (1984), he expanded on these insights in their historical and conceptual dimensions in order to challenge the longstanding diminishment of the imagination in Western philosophy, leading to *The Wake of Imagination* (1988), *Poetics of Imagining* (1991), and *Poetics of Modernity* (1995). What is remarkable in these early texts is Kearney's range, as he traces the place of the imagination from its key moments in the history of philosophy (ancient, medieval, and modern) to its most contemporary manifestations in postmodern philosophy and popular culture. Historically, philosophy has long privileged reason over imagination: reason is at the height of Plato's epistemic ladder, the Divided Line, and imagination

at the bottom, while Descartes sees imagination as a source of error against the indubitable clarity of rational intuition. But in good hermeneutic style, Kearney also investigates in the same philosophical tradition the glimmer of a reversal, starting from the original Transcendental Deduction of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, where the intelligible and sensible "transcendental imagination" is the only faculty dynamic enough to combine the active synthesizing of the understanding with the passive reception of empirical sense data.

While Kearney lays out the history of the tradition, the majority of pages in these three texts concentrate on key figures in the 20th century in phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Bachelard, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty), hermeneutics (primarily Ricoeur), deconstructionism (primarily Derrida), psychoanalysis (Lacan, Kristeva), poststructuralism and postmodernism (Foucault, Vattimo, Lyotard, Caputo), and even poetry and literature (from Yeats and Joyce to Rushdie and Kundera). In doing so, Kearney also navigates a careful hermeneutic dialogue between two very different and opposing perspectives of past and present. After the violence and strife of the 20th century and its philosophical developments, Kearney refuses to retreat to a golden age of the past; he recognizes as myth the universal, rational modern subject in perpetual progress towards enlightenment. Yet Kearney also refuses to fall into the nihilist cynicism of those postmodern thinkers who would deny any access to truth and offload our human initiative onto systems of interchangeable signs or structures of political power. While he acknowledges the ongoing risk of alienation under the rise of technology and mass-consumerism, Kearney advocates for new possibilities for the future under a postmodern rehabilitation of the imagination which would not be a denial or flight from reality, but a creative "figuring" and "transfiguring" which alone opens up the field of the possible.

For Kearney, this is not just a matter of philosophical curiosity, but an ethical imperative. Imagination, even in its poetic and narrative dimension, has an essentially ethical, social dimension: "imagination can open us to the otherness of the other."[24] In bringing into focus the creative power of the imagination as fundamental to our world-making, self-understanding, and self-constitution, Kearney also recognized from the beginning that imagination is a power that can be used for good or for ill: to create and heal or exclude and destroy. The worlds we make can reflect the face of tyranny, injustice, and barbarism, or they can reflect the human face of compassion, justice, and hospitality—and everything in between. This emerges with special clarity in Kearney's

[24] Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Ideas of Creativity in Western Culture,* first published in 1988 (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 370.

retrieval of a voice one might not expect to find in a philosophy text, but which clearly has philosophical import: the "Hebraic imagination."[25] Kearney draws our attention to the fact that the word for "Creator" shares the same Hebrew root as the word for "imagination": YZR. The world and human beings flow from God's good imagination, the *yetzer hara*, and as we are made in God's image, we are invited to be co-creators in this action. And yet, human beings are also able to employ and become victims of an evil imagination, the *yetzer hatov*. It is this false imagination that ensnares Adam and Eve, as the serpent, like a primordial false advertiser, bids them to imagine more, desiring more, even though they have their every need met by God. It was evil imagination that led the jealous Cain to the idea that murdering his brother would allow him to stand in Abel's favour before God. As the Hebrew scriptures progress, we can see the way divisions move from person to person and community to community, eventually leading to entrenched violence and conflict. And thus, in a sense, we can conclude that wars between nations are not only a failure of reason and diplomacy. Following Kearney's insight, they are first and foremost massive failures of the imagination. It is a result of the inability to imagine or to project peace, tranquility, resolution. To fail to imagine any new way of being, to fail to conceive of anything beyond the entrenched divisions and narratives that hold us captive.

Boston College: Stories of Gods and Strangers

Kearney's ideas were too widely appreciated to be confined to Ireland. Boston College, at the behest of renowned phenomenologist William Richardson, had invited Kearney as a visiting professor for several years, and officially offered him the full time Charles B. Seelig Chair of Philosophy in 2001. As Ireland was beginning the long process of reconciliation with the Good Friday Peace Accord, Kearney moved across the Atlantic, and Boston has been his academic home ever since. It was here that Kearney prolonged his hermeneutics to the edges of human thought, producing the trilogy, "Philosophy at the Limit," where *On Stories* (2002) symbolically bridges the apophatic realms explored in *The God Who May Be* (2001) and *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003).

If it was only in 2001 that Kearney produced a full publication reflecting on God, his interest in religion has deep roots, growing up in a place where religion often meant triumphalism or violence, even if he counts his good fortune in having experienced an alternative at places like Glenstal Abbey. In his Paris years he published

[25] Ibid., pp. 37–78.

some texts on the possible God in French and engineered a pivotal moment of the "theological turn." He was also involved in conferences engaging with religious themes, notably the famous Villanova conferences organized by his friend and colleague (and fellow Blue Diamond Hermes Laureate) John D. Caputo in the late 1990s. These themes also permeate his novels and many of his lectures and essays. For the question of God is one of the major questions of our age. As Kearney asks, "how might one speak of the sacred after the disappearance of God?" Is it possible "to have faith after the scientific enlightenment dispensed with superstition and submission," after the violence of the 20th century made it impossible to believe in the benign march of history?[26]

For Kearney, we must first of all change our view of what God is, or, to be more precise, what he "may be." It is imperative we move beyond the metaphysical idols of God as the "Supreme Being," the "Unmoved Mover," or, as Kearney terms it, the "Omni-god," omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent. Instead, Kearney suggests we rediscover a divinity where *esse* is second to *posse;* where possibility exceeds actuality. In fleshing out this concept Kearney turns of course to the philosophical tradition, but now also applies his hermeneutical skills on the scriptures. Particularly rich is the deconstruction of texts which later became fodder for metaphysical arguments about God's Being: Exodus 3:14, where a voice from the burning bush responds to Moses' request for a name in the response, according to the dominant translation, of "I am who am." Kearney, following the translation of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, interprets this response as a puzzle or a paradox. It is not so much a direct answer, but a refusal to answer in the expected way; it is not so much a name, but a promise or invitation: "I am who may be, who can be, who shall be if you allow me to be God." It is an offer, not a command. It leaves us the full exercise of our imagination, and our freedom to respond. As always, Kearney underscores the ethical dimensions of this radical freedom. We are "free to make the world into a more just and loving place, or not to."[27] If a more just world seems impossible to us, Kearney gives us reason to hope: "it is not impossible to God—if we help God to become God. How? By opening ourselves to the 'loving possible,' by acting each moment to make the impossible that bit more possible."[28] This last line of *God Who May Be* gestures to an idea that *Anatheism* would flesh out in detail ten years later, weaving examples from a number of religious

[26] Richard Kearney, *Anatheism*, xvi.

[27] Richard Kearney, *God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 5; thus Kearney's own formulation of the divine invitation: "I am who may be if you continue to keep my word and struggle for the coming of justice," p 38.

[28] Kearney, *God Who May Be* p. 111

traditions, with literature, poetry, and art. The young Nazarene woman's "yes" to the invitation to bear a son permitted the unfolding of a new vision of a kingdom of justice manifested in Jesus of Nazareth, who took the side of "the least of these," dared to eat with prostitutes and tax collectors, and became the occasion where men and women rediscovered their humanity in the ordinary encounters of life. The "yes" alone can open the door to the God of the poor and vulnerable, the God of everyday moments, the God who speaks in a still, small voice which does not force our fidelity but waits for us to respond—if we choose.

Kearney thus welcomes the moment of atheism as it lays bare the inadequacy of the idol gods of metaphysical, scientific, or religious certainty, the alpha-gods which can lead to violence. It bids us to take a step back so as to reapproach things—an "ana-" movement that invites us reconsider, reimagine, resituate ourselves beyond superficial and idolatrous absolutes, with the help of sacred texts of religions, literary traditions, and history, which point us towards another story about who God is—or rather, who God *may* be, if we allow God to be God.

In this exploration of religious questions, it is clear to what extent Kearney's approach relies on the imagination, and in particular, the rereading and unfolding of stories. In tandem with his work on God, Kearney was also deepening our methodological grasp of this critical function of the hermeneutic imagination. *On Stories* begins by correcting a line from *A Winter's Tale:* stories not as common to us as eating, Kearney argues (with all due respect to Shakespeare), "for while food makes us live, stories are what makes our lives worth living."[29] From ancient myth to contemporary history and fiction, stories provide us with a new, shareable way to see and to exist in the world. Kearney's method of investigating the role of stories is through examples that capture the extensive range of narrative in the formation of individual human identity across psychology, history, and literature (where characters in stories are themselves marked by their stories), as well as the larger-level collective stories that bind national identities—for better or for worse.

And at their worst, stories can become a dangerous force of exclusion. We might say that it is in this latter "language-game" of storytelling that we are most often hooked, personally and communally; and if stories form us so deeply, it is not easy to find our way past them. I am referring here, of course, to the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who demonstrated our great propensity to be "bewitched" by language, and how easily our thinking can be held hostage to tacitly assumed, pre-philosophical

[29] Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 3

conceptual pictures.[30] We are captivated by conceptual pictures: "every word stands for an object" led the early Wittgenstein astray; "the arrow" or "endless river of time" led the Manichaeans to posit eternity as an endless sequential expanse, and so on;[31] if Kearney is right, it is not only conceptual pictures, but the faulty narratives that carry them, and embed them over time and within a tradition, that reinforce our divisions. Our futures are hostage to narrative idols of the past. This theme is at the center of *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, which confronts the harsh truth that stories defining identity and belonging are often at the same time stories that define an outcast, an other, an alien. Through the rich and diverse analyses of this book, Kearney suggests that this shadow side of identity, this "stranger," "god," or "monster" is not merely a phantom outside of self and civilization, but in fact an intimate part of our identity, even the part we fear most.

So how do we escape from these damaging stories? Can we respond to this otherness without this violent rejection which gives rise so often to war and bloodshed? Kearney wagers that we can, and that if stories can go wrong, stories can also go right:

> [P]hilosophy today needs a narrative understanding capable of casting rope ladders and swing bridges across opposing extremes… I am suggesting that philosophy might help relocate the subtle chiasmus linking but not conflating self and other. That a new hermeneutics of understanding might help us learn to knit together again the weaves of transcendent and incarnate existence.[32]

Weaving his philosophical investigation seamlessly with myth and religion, literature, image, film, history, and contemporary events, Kearney imagines a new way of responding to this otherness that would move beyond violent rejection. The wager that Kearney makes in this text is that only if we critically examine the flaws in our own one-sided story can we find the way forward. Only when we can learn to welcome, and not reject, the strangeness of the other, can we come to a fuller understanding and acceptance of who we are. But this is easier said than done: our attachments to the narratives of our personal and collective wounded past are deeply embedded.

Kearney recognizes that sometimes the first step in overcoming an enemy is to unmask the mythical terror which hides from us the face of a real human being. Listening to the narratives of the other, face to face, can break the hold of the

---

[30] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), §109.

[31] Augustine, *Confessions* XI, 11, 13.

[32] Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 12

pretensions of one's own narrative and allow us to acknowledge differences, but also to see commonality, shared ground, and the possibility of re-writing a more inclusive history that opens up possibilities of imagining a less exclusive future based on hospitality rather than hostility. The future always remains unwritten, and our creative response opens pathways to new possibilities. In addition to a number of conferences and collected volumes—*Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions* (2011), *Traversing the Heart: Journeys of the Inter-Religious Imagination* (2010), and *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality* (2011)—Kearney's reflections on the power of stories to create reconciliation led to the founding of the Guestbook Project in 2008.

This multi-disciplinary international peace outreach is committed to healing the intergenerational wounds of divided communities around the world. In addition to hosting conferences, talks, and celebrations of the arts, one of the most unique and "Kearneyan" elements of Guestbook is his challenge of "Exchanging Stories." Kearney invites young people on either side of a deeply embedded conflict to come together in a face-to-face dialogue and then bring all of their imagination to bear in developing a short film representing their new, shared story for the future. Browsing these videos, posted online at www.guestbookproject.org, one is amazed at the creativity and vision of these young people seeking to understand and move beyond divisions of language, religion, class, and nation. In one particularly brilliant video, two teenagers from Derry/Londonderry, one Protestant, and one Catholic, exchange the most visible symbol of their divided identity: their school uniforms. They walk around polarized neighborhoods wearing the other's school colors and feeling the hostile stares, before switching blazers to create a new uniform that breaks out of the simplistic division. Once again, we see the fruits of Kearney's insight that imagination, in this case a new shared story and shared creative project, can break us out of the false narrative that hold us captive, opening dialogical paths beyond entrenched social, political, and religious divides.

Hermeneutics All the Way Down

We move at last into the most recent years of Kearney's work. Throughout the period of developing the power of narrative hermeneutics to address the divine and the stranger, Kearney often appealed to the critical importance of the concrete. He is not so interested in grand theophanies but in the carnal, "micro-eschatological" moments of sharing communion in the humble here and now: the sharing of a meal, a spoken word, a handshake. Whether it is Kearney's deep affinity for literature and art, or his

attention to the "least of these" which rationalistic philosophy has overlooked, Kearney has always been attuned to the lived body, the flesh, our "gut" instincts. In recent years he has begun to develop more explicitly these marginal regions of "diacritical" hermeneutics that read between, beyond and beneath the lines, not only at the highest moments of consciousness but "all the way down."

This is precisely the theme of the scholarly essay which opens his co-edited *Carnal Hermeneutics* (2015), which eventually led to *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* (2021), a monograph that expanded and made accessible these insights to the wider public. With the rise of smartphones and constant virtual connectivity, we seem to forget the body, minimize it into a tool to be manipulated. Even though we are "in touch" like never before, glued to our touch screens, the authentic "double sensation"[33] of carnal, communal contact, first discussed by Husserl, has become merely a "one-way voyeurism."[34] But even if the technology has advanced, it is only a novel manifestation of an old malady that appears in various guises at different times: the temptation to believe we can escape the body and take flight into the abstract heavens. If philosophy has often participated in generating and perpetuating these frameworks, Kearney also performs a linguistic, conceptual, hermeneutical retrieval of an alternate philosophical tradition which can help us overcome our artificial line between body and mind. We cannot escape from the fact of the body; we must learn to love living in our own skins. What an irony, then, that *On Touch* was released in the midst of the Covid crisis! A strange time, when the body was no longer forgotten at all, for the awareness of every passing touch on a doorknob was engraved into everyone's consciousness, no longer a sign of welcome and community, but a risk of harm and infection. Yet in another sense, glued to our screens and confined to our homes, we felt the importance of touch even more in its absence, as well as the hope that we could soon recover the healthy "normal" of the embodied touch, face-to-face. As Kearney understood, it is all the more imperative after this time of rupture to get back in touch with each other and with the world, returning to and restoring our tactile and dialogical mutuality in the double move of the "ana-", following a path of "anacarnation."[35]

---

[33] *Carnal Hermeneutics,* 26-29; *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 46.

[34] Kearney, *Imagination Now*, 325-326.

[35] This idea, raised first in the context of Christ's resurrection (*Touch*, 78), was expanded by Kearney and other friends, students, and colleagues in *Anacarnation and Returning to the Lived Body with Richard Kearney,* particularly in Kearney's lead essay "Anacarnation: Recovering Embodied Life."

The "double sensation" of flesh teaches us mutuality, for each time I touch I am touched in turn. To be a body is to be intrinsically in relation, to be exposed thereby to healing or to harm. Essential to Kearney's account of carnality is the discussion of wounds, not only in the vulnerability and fragility of flesh but in the vulnerability and fragility of the psyche. Kearney has been open about the darkness and wounds of his own life; suffering and depression are not foreign to him. He has long drawn on the psychoanalytic tradition in his work, from Freud's early therapeutic hermeneutics to Lacan and Kristeva as well as literature, to consider the questions of trauma and psychic wounds which often lie at the foundations of the broader landscape of social and political drama. However, again, Kearney finds reason to hope, even in our vulnerability. A wound does not disqualify a voice; sometimes it gives it a greater power. Kearney reflects on the examples of remarkable "wounded healers," like Oedipus, Chiron, or Helen Bamber, as well as the ways that trauma can be healed in conversation, and sometimes in the creation of new texts, as in the cases of Joyce, Odysseus, Freud, and Shakespeare.

Most recently, Kearney's work has taken yet a new turn, if one that was already present in his Irish heritage and nascent in his philosophy. It is too early to comment in great depth on a thought which is still in its early stages, but we can nevertheless indicate some of the new lines we might expect to see developed by Kearney in coming years.[36] Kearney's diagnostic, diacritical hermeneutics, extending from psychic vulnerability to the language of the flesh, have opened a path for seeking shared ground with other bodies, from the body of the animal to the body of the planet: belonging with the whole earth. This new frontier of research is based on one of the most urgent questions of our day: the ecological crisis. From the wager of peace across human hostilities, Kearney has turned to the question of hospitality towards the earth, and all that lives on it. But whose hospitality, we might ask: is it the earth toward us? Or we toward it? In fact, Kearney says, it is imperative to recognize the fundamental interdependency of all life, all beings, all living creatures. For if we hope to find an escape from the destructive, possessive attitude of the Anthropocene that has set us on a course for global devastation, we must learn to listen and engage in this mutual exchange of life, which will allow us to usher in a new era of the Symbiocene. Kearney's Guestbook Project recently launched a major international project called "Hosting

[36] My comments here are drawn from an unpublished essay in progress which Richard Kearney has generously shared with me for the occasion. He delivered a presentation on these themes, entitled "Hosting Earth: Radical Ecological Hospitality" at the recent Guestbook "Hosting Earth" project, November 19, 2023, and it is forthcoming in a related collection entitled *Hosting Earth*, Routledge, London and New York, 2024.

Earth," appointing students and colleagues to present a series of webinars and colloquia throughout the 2022-23 academic year and inviting the creation of imaginative short films, all discussing a key question: what new possibilities can we imagine to save us from the coming crisis? A new edited volume, *Hosting Earth: Facing the Climate Crisis* (2024) make the results of this research available to a young generation of readers concerned with the future of our planet.

As his own contribution to this new ecological conversation, Kearney has expanded his hermeneutics still further in dialogue with the earth, whose interrelations can teach us new models of mutuality, whether seeking wisdom from the dynamic interactions of the solar system, the symbiotic interactions of tree-systems, or the circular repetition of human respiration. Kearney finds resources to challenge and reimagine our models of individualistic possession which causes such harm from the earth today in the many wisdom traditions of the world, not only in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity which he has turned to in prior work, but now also expanding to consider ancient indigenous culture and animist attitudes. For if our alienated, narcissistic relationship with the world grew out of a narrow scientistic rationality, a return to cultures of pre-scientific wisdom may well offer us paths of escape from this attitude of domination and objectification. Always drawing inspiration from the rich roots of Irish culture, Kearney has returned to his own roots, attending to panentheist interpretations of Celtic mystics like Eriugena and Duns Scotus, the Scotist-Franciscan poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the way these ideas can be interpreted in or alongside traditional Celtic culture. Such questions are ever-present in his new novel, *Salvage*, published in 2023, which explores the tensions between ancient Irish wisdom and new science, pagan remedies and Christian devotion, and the humble belonging to the earth and the scientific interrogation of it. The post-theist possibilities that Kearney first opened in *Anatheism* have thus expanded into a new and creative syncretism that refuses to rest in one place but seeks wisdom from the stranger, the voice excluded from the conversation, to expand the dialogue to the benefit of all.

Thus, in a sense, we can say that with this latest expansion of Kearney's work, he has found a new and deeper synthesis than ever before. The hermeneutics of stories and bodies, the transcendent and the psychological, poetry and science, pagan ritual, and mystical union, all of these strands are at play in Kearney's mature work. They can be traced back to the core insight that galvanized his early work. The aim of his writing from the beginning has been to challenge the forgetfulness of the imagination, in philosophy and in life. Imagination breaks down traditional disciplinary lines and encourages creativity, whether it results in art or story or action, or all of them at once.

Imagination helps free us from limits of the past and present to envision radical new possibilities for the future. For Kearney, this serves as a continual source of hope. Imagination gives us the power to escape our old divisions, whether religious, cultural, social, political, or personal; it frees us to begin again, to create new stories of mutual belonging, to envision new possibilities of peace and flourishing. While Kearney recognizes the power of imagination to heal and harm, he wagers on a hospitality that embraces the stranger with critical discernment. Imagination has also led Kearney to continually push for an expansion of hermeneutics beyond the text and into the liminal spaces of understanding, from the apophatic realms of religion to the mysteries of psyche and instincts of the gut. And from a hermeneutics which reflects on carnal "savvy," it is only a short step to reflecting on animal discernment, before turning to our corporeal belonging to the earth. At each stage of his development, Kearney's conversation partners have expanded, as he welcomes new voices to come in, sit down, have a seat at the table. Kearney's work thus bears out his own insight that imagination builds new paths and refines our power to bridge the distance between self and other, without collapsing or destroying our identity.

And in his case, we can see too, that many of these insights have grown out of the wealth of his Irish identity. It was in Ireland that Kearney first witnessed the danger of social, political and religious divides, and intimated glimmers of hope to overcome them. It was here he was immersed in a rich cultural imagination overflowing with stories and poetry and art. Not only was Kearney deeply shaped by growing up in Ireland, but in another sense, wherever he wandered, Ireland followed, from the Irish College in Paris that hosted his famous conference in 1979, to the Irish-American presence so visible in Boston. Ireland, after all, is a culture of wanderers who travel far, in adventure or in tragedy, without ever losing a sense of their home. And Ireland has never left Kearney's mind or work; most recently with his novel *Salvage*, but prior to it, on the centenary commemoration of the 1916 Irish Rebellion, when he joined with artist Sheila Gallagher for a multi-media production reflecting upon the many intertwining identities of Ireland. Entitled "Twinsome Minds," it toured theatres in Europe and North America to international acclaim. Given Kearney's most recent work, we would be remiss to think that these cultural and intellectual affinities with his homeland require us to pass over a more carnal sense of belonging. His intimate relationship with his native patch of earth is tangible in his literary passages discussing the beauty of the Irish landscape which he still calls home. He returns there every summer, swimming in the Atlantic Sea, sowing potatoes in his garden, returning again tanned by sun and wind, to write out fresh ideas with Irish dirt still under his fingernails and salt in his hair. In his later writing, Heidegger often speaks of the "Fourfold":

mortals, divinities, earth and sky, a balance he found in his hut in Todtnauberg. I always imagine that when Kearney thinks of the fourfold he thinks of West Cork. But like so many good Irish writers before him, Kearney's profound relationship to his home is one of welcome, a door that does not shut out, but invites in.

Hospitality Incarnate

And so, it is only fitting, after these travels through the landscapes and topographies of Kearney's words and deeds, to come back around to his doorstep. I recall as I write these words that it was on this very date, a decade ago, that I was included in a gathering of friends in West Newton to break bread and raise a glass in celebration of Richard's birthday. The door I entered that evening led into a home that was an extension of engagement and personality. Immediately to the left is the 'living room,' in the truest sense of that name. It takes little time to recognize that here is a home of intellectuals and artists. It breathes creativity. No place is not within reach of books, art, paper, pens, pencils, and brushes. In the corner a small antique desk, a working fireplace at another end of the room, lit to take the off the winter chill, a guitar in the corner, which on occasion Richard plays and raises his voice in song (another of his many talents). A spiral binder on a side table displayed photos of family and friends through the years, and the latest edition of the NYRB or New Yorker are close by. There are books, of course: on shelves, on end tables, and those in the middle of reading are sometimes on the floor near comfortable chairs, post-its and hand-written notes slipped between pages which have been embellished with marginalia, while notepads filled with more writing sit nearby. Paintings, drawings, and framed poetry spill over every wall and even into the washrooms, which brim with still more books. Nearly all of this art is original, most of it the handiwork of the Kearney family; Anne Bernard, Richard's extraordinarily gifted wife, is an artist, as well as a diarist and educator. And she is—I am far from the only one to say it—the very incarnation of hospitality itself. This place of living and gathering which welcomes quiet reading and working, is always tidy, warm, and ready for the extension of hospitality and conversation to guests welcomed in for drinks and hors d'oeuvres and the grace of conversation.

Soon, we move to the dining room, equally alive with a small jungle of houseplants and colorful pottery. There is something truly magical that transpires in this place, a sharing of meals, a sharing of friendships, of questions, of life. On this occasion, Anne has prepared Richard's favourite dish, with the self-conscious proviso

that though her mother is Irish, it is not part of her native Parisian repertoire. For me, it is a moment of hermeneutic astonishment: the familiarity of her description is confirmed as she brings the dish into view, wafting a well-known aroma, and with the first bite I am flooded with Proustian memories of childhood. This particular dish, a dish I had not tasted since the passing of my parents, was a family specialty: a broiled salmon dinner with an egg based creme sauce. A recipe, I realize, that must have been passed down through the part of my own family that came from Ireland generations ago, and who are from the very same region as the Kearney ancestors. One can only imagine all of the occasions and celebrations that this dish evokes for Richard, and the memories of the hands that prepared it. And now in this moment of sharing of Richard's life and all he has accomplished, a dish passed down from generations and passed over into the new world opens up a homecoming, for me, surely, and for all gathered. This ordinary event of culinary hermeneutics was a perfect moment of micro-eschatology, a communion shared in the humble human moments of breaking bread and sharing drinks, where the past flows into the present, where the carnal flows into the spiritual and the already mingles with the not-yet. Each in our own way, all of us friends and students and readers have been invited into the hospitality of the conversation begun by Richard Kearney, in his unique and distinctive voice, through his unwavering dedication to pursuing meaning through the interpretation of words and stories, rising and returning to the ongoing event of life, with the invitation of hope to imagine new possibilities of peace and community.

And now, as my decade of conversation with Richard Kearney comes to a close, I raise my glass again, to toast the man and his work, and the mercy of the current that brings us together, and the blessed questions that bind.