

# THEOLOGY AT THE LIMIT?

An investigation of Richard Kearney's philosophical hermeneutics in search of a responsible theological hermeneutic

by

Helgard Meyer Pretorius

*Thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Theology in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University*



Supervisor: Prof. Dirkie Smit

Cr tkl'2015

## **Declaration**

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

Helgard Pretorius

March 2015

Copyright © 2015 Stellenbosch University

All rights reserved

## Abstract

Is theology at the limit possible? This study explores the question of the limits and possibilities of doing theology “at the limit” through the hermeneutic philosophy of Richard Kearney, author of the trilogy, “Philosophy at the Limit.” It tries to understand Kearney’s attempt to think at the limit through three focal points. Each focal point illuminates a different aspect of his thought and sheds light on the dialogical detours through which Kearney’s own position takes shape.

Chapter One, *Facing the Limit: Kearney’s phenomenological-existential heritage*, investigates how Kearney’s phenomenological heritage, inaugurated by Edmund Husserl and developed by Martin Heidegger, facilitates a decisive turn to “face the limit.” In doing so, it gives an account of how Kearney appropriates some of the tradition’s central insights in his own thought. These include: a high regard for human freedom and responsibility, a privileged appreciation for possibility over actuality, and a desire to situate philosophical reflection in the life world of human existence as a “being interpreted.” Following this, the discussion extends to Kearney’s phenomenological account of the *persona* to reveal how he extends a logic of *relatedness*, thus stretching phenomenology to confront its own limits. The result is a more personal, embodied and relational sense of what it means to “face” the limit.

Chapter Two, *Transfiguring at the Limit: Kearney’s hermeneutic imagination*, shows how phenomenology undergoes a decisive transformation via the work of Paul Ricoeur to become a *hermeneutic* phenomenology. It explores how Ricoeur’s work informed Kearney’s “hermeneutic imagination” which can be understood as a proposal for rediscovering and reviving the creative potential of the human imagination – at the limit – as fragile, fallible, finite beings, “resolving to recover, in spite of the odds, the *yes in the sorrow of the finite*” (Kearney, 2003a: 231). This is done in three parts: the *first* of these (*Transfiguring Imagination*) offers a reflection of Kearney’s hermeneutic approach to human creativity at the *linguistic* level of symbol, metaphor and narrative, while the *second* (*Transfiguring the Social Imaginary*) situates this creative capacity, and its tendency to serve ideological interests, in the world of *culture* and *politics*. The *third* part (*Transfiguring God*) explores how Kearney’s hermeneutic imagination interprets the *sacred* by retracing his readings of a number of biblical texts (for e.g. Exodus 3; Luke 9; Mark 10).

Chapter Three, *The Limit as Threshold? The stranger and Kearney’s diacritical hermeneutics*, narrows the focus somewhat to consider how Kearney’s hermeneutic imagination deals with the

challenges posed by *alterity* or *strangeness* and more specifically how this manifests in our dealings with strangers in interpersonal and broader political contexts. It reflects on Kearney's engagement with other continental philosophical accounts of the stranger (Levinas, Derrida, Kristeva) and presents his own *diacritical hermeneutic* response as a way of becoming more hospitable to strangers and more capable of critical (self)discernment. Thus, Kearney steers a way between transcendent and immanent extremes to transfigure the limit into a *threshold* where strangers may be encountered.

Finally, the *concluding chapter* sketches a number of hermeneutic lines, internally, between the various focal points and then externally, to the question of *theology* at the limit. It enters the dialogue about the basic options, conditions and tasks of a theology at the limit, by rephrasing the question in a more personal key: *who* is a *theologian* at the limit? Drawing from the preceding discussions a description of a "theologian at the limit" is then tendered in three complementary images: the theologian i) as a *dialogical*, yet *critically involved* interpreter, ii) as a *translator* serving authentic encounters *at the threshold*, and iii) as a *poet* who "gently shifts the potency" of God-talk "from the propositional to the imaginal" (Keller, 2004: 890) – serving greater nuance, mystery, freedom and responsibility, catholicity and "the other".

## Opsomming

### TEOLOGIE OP DIE GRENS?

#### **'n Onderzoek van Richard Kearney se filosofiese hermeneutiek op soek na 'n verantwoordelike teologiese hermeneutiek**

Kan 'n mens van teologie op die grens praat? In *Theology at the Limit?* word die moontlikhede en grense van 'n teologie “op die grens” ondersoek deur middel van die hermeneutiese filosofie van Richard Kearney, outeur van die trilogie, “*Philosophy at the Limit*.” Dit verstaan Kearney se poging tot “filosofie op die grens” met behulp van drie hermeneutiese sleutels. Elkeen van hierdie sleutels werp lig op 'n aspek van Kearney se denke en elkeen breek 'n ander gesprek oop waardeur Kearney se eie posisie tot stand kom.

Hoofstuk Een, *Facing the Limit: Kearney's phenomenological-existential heritage*, ondersoek Kearney se fenomenologies-eksistensiële erfenis soos dit deur Edmund Husserl tot stand gekom het en deur Martin Heidegger verder ontwikkel en verdiep is. Dit argumenteer dat Kearney se omgang met hiërdie fenomenologiese tradisie 'n toetrede van die grens fasiliteer. Sodoende wend Kearney ook van die tradisie se kern insigte in sy eie denke aan – insigte soos: 'n hoë agting vir menslike vryheid en verantwoordelikheid, 'n besondere waardering vir die moontlike bo die werklike en 'n soeke na filosofiese nadenke binne die menslike bestaanswêreld. Maar Kearney onthul ook die grense van die fenomenologiese tradisie self deur 'n logika van “in-verhouding-wees” te bevorder en deur sodoende “die grens” in meer persoonlike, beliggaaamde en relasionele terme te omskryf.

Hoofstuk Twee, *Transfiguring at the Limit: Kearney's hermeneutic imagination*, voer die argument verder deur aan te toon hoe fenomenologie deur die denke van Paul Ricoeur 'n gedaanteverwisseling ondergaan om as 'n *hermeneutiese* fenomenologie na vore te tree. Dit verken die reuse invloed van Ricoeur op Kearney se sogenaamde “hermeneutiese verbeelding.” Laasgenoemde kan gesien word as 'n voorstel vir die herontdekking and oplewing van die mens se potensiaal tot kreatiwiteit – op die grens – juis ás weerlose, feilbare, nietige wesens wat verlang, soek en uitsien na 'n “ja” in die hartseer van die eindigheid (Kearney, 2003a: 231). Hierdie verkenning word in drie dele bewerkstellig: *Eers*, deur 'n refleksie op Kearney se hermeneutiese benadering tot menslike verbeelding op die *semantiese* vlak van simboliek, metafoor en narratief (*Transfiguring Imagination*). *Tweedens* word aangetoon hoe Kearney die

menslike verbeeldingskrag vanuit 'n *kulturele* en *politieke* oogpunt benader om sodoende ook die neiging tot ideologiese misbruike te ontmasker (*Transfiguring the Social Imaginary*). Laastens, word 'n oorsig gebied van hoe Kearney se hermeneutiese verbeelding die *heilige* in 'n aantal Bybelse geskrifte interpreteer (soos byvoorbeeld, Eksodus 3; Lukas 9 en Markus 10).

Hoofstuk Drie, *Transfiguring at the Limit: Kearney's hermeneutic imagination*, lê die klem op hoe Kearney se hermeneutiese verbeelding omgaan met die filosofiese (asook maatskaplike en politieke) uitdagings wat deur “die vreemde,” “die ander” of “die vreemdeling” opgeroep word. Dit reflekteer op Kearney se debatte met ander kontinentale benaderings tot die kwessie (soos dié van Levinas, Derrida en Kristeva), om uiteindelik by sy eie bydrae tot die debat uit te kom, by name: 'n *dia-kritiese hermeneutiek* wat gasvryheid aan die vreemdeling én 'n vermoë tot kritiese (self)onderskeiding bevorder. Uiteindelik baan Kearney 'n middelweg tussen transendente en immanente ekstreme om absolute én skynbare grense as 'n *drempel* te herontdek – 'n drempel waarby vreemdelinge mekaar mag en kan ontmoet.

*Ten slotte* word 'n aantal hermeneutiese lyne geskets, eers na binne, om die verskeie sleutels met mekaar te verbind en dan na buite, met die oog op die openingsvraag na die moontlikheid van 'n *teologie* op die grens. Om die dialoog te betree oor die basiese opsies, kondisies en take van 'n teologie op die grens, word die vraag op die volgende, *persoonlike* manier nuut gestel: wé is 'n *teoloog* op die grens? In reaksie hierop word 'n voorstel in drie komplementêre beelde aangebied wat elkeen op sy beurt inspirasie trek van die voorgaande gesprekke: die teoloog i) as 'n *dialogiese*, dog *krities-betrokke* hermeneut; ii) as 'n *vertaler* wat – oor die drempel heen – in diens staan van egte ontmoetings tussen vreemdelinge; en iii) as 'n *digter* wat versigtig die klem van ons God-spraak aanpas om reg te laat geskied aan die rol van die verbeelding, om sodoende ook beter in diens te staan van fyner nuanse, misterie, vryheid en verantwoordelikheid, katolesiteit en “die ander”.

## Acknowledgements

A word comes to mind: gift.

This thesis is laced with gifts that I have received “as if from God’s hand” over the past two years (Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 27). In some way it is a documentation of the gift. The Heidelberg Catechism tells us that thankfulness – said and lived – is the appropriate response to such overflowing grace. Here follows the “said” part, at least:

To my supervisor, Professor Dirkie Smit: thank you for your enthusiasm and interest, for saying that we are doing it together, for encouraging me and having greater faith in my abilities than I had, and for teaching me the value of simply trying to understand.

To the departmental administrator, Mrs. Wilma Riekert: thank you for all your help – always at service and always with a smile – and for celebrating with me.

The last two years would not have been possible without the generous financial and institutional support from various benefactors: Thank you to the Dutch Reformed Church’s Curatorium at Stellenbosch University for their bursary in 2013. Thank you to the International Offices of both Stellenbosch University and *Vrije Universiteit* in Amsterdam for arranging the exchange to Amsterdam, and to the former for their travel bursary. Thank you to the *Stichting Studiefonds voor Zuid-Afrikaanse studenten* for their very generous scholarship in 2014, making my stay in Europe as much a memorable cultural experience as a rich academic voyage. *Spesiale dank aan Tineke Dorr – ek sal altyd jou vriendelike gasvryheid en liefde vir Afrikaans onthou.*

Thank you to my friends and teachers at the *Vrije Universiteit* – to Professor Eddie van der Borcht for making the initial arrangements for my exchange and to Professor Willie van der Merwe and Laurens ten Kate for your warm hospitality and for including me in the *Metamorphoses* project. Thank you Willie for telling me about Richard Kearney at that first *Nederlandse borrel*. Thank you to the Masters and Doctoral students for including me in your numbers and to the lecturers for introducing me to two fine classics.

Thank you to Professor Anton van Niekerk of Stellenbosch University’s Department of Philosophy and the Honours of Philosophy class of 2013 for giving me a fine introduction to philosophical hermeneutics.

Thank you to the many friends with whom I could speak about these matters to let off some of my enthusiasm and gain some clarity. Thank you in particular to Gys Loubser for sharing his “office-space” and for reading through some of the early manuscripts.

Thank you to my wife, Erin, for all your love and support and for stressing on my behalf when time started running out. Your beautiful mind inspires and challenges me like no other.

Thank you to all my parents, brothers and sisters for your love and support.

Thank you to everyone on the examination committee for the gracious way in which my defence was conducted and for the interest with which you clearly read my work.

Thank you to Professor Richard Kearney for including us in your many dialogues through your papers and books. One day, when I shared my enthusiasm about your work with a friend of mine, she said that it is a wonderful thing when, through research, someone else’s thoughts become like a safe harbour, a place to which one returns time and again to be nourished and equipped, only to depart on another voyage into the unknown. It may be that your thoughts have become such a place for me. Your passion for the possible, love for God and sharp intellect has enriched and challenged me deeply and I am sure that it will continue to do so in the years to come. I hope to one day extend my gratitude in person.

I dedicate this work to the late Gerrit Brand. I think he would have liked it, but I am even more sure that he would have asked some interesting and difficult questions.

*Soli Deo gloria.*

Helgard Pretorius

29 January 2015,

Stellenbosch



# Table of Contents

Declaration .....	1
Abstract .....	2
Opsomming .....	4
Acknowledgements .....	6
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Chapter One: Facing the Limit Kearney's phenomenological-existential heritage .....</b>	<b>22</b>
1.1. Introduction .....	22
1.2. Kant's Copernican Revolution .....	24
1.3. Edmund Husserl .....	26
1.4. Martin Heidegger .....	32
1.5. Kearney's Contribution towards a Phenomenology of the <i>Persona</i> .....	46
<b>Chapter Two: Transfiguring at the Limit Kearney's hermeneutic imagination .....</b>	<b>54</b>
2.1. Introduction .....	54
2.2. Transfiguring Imagination .....	56
2.3. Transfiguring Social Imaginaries .....	69
2.4. Transfiguring God .....	79
<b>Chapter Three: the Limit as Threshold? The Stranger and Kearney's diacritical hermeneutics .....</b>	<b>90</b>
3.1. Introduction .....	90
3.2. Introducing the Stranger .....	91
3.3. The Stranger and Kearney's Diacritical Hermeneutics .....	104
3.4. The Divine Stranger .....	117

<b>Conclusion: Theology at the Limit?</b> .....	<b>123</b>
4.1. Introduction .....	123
4.2. At the limit? .....	123
4.3. Theologian at the limit? .....	128
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>137</b>

# Introduction

Is theology at the limit possible? The aim of this study is to explore the possibilities (and limitations) of theology at the limit. This exploration will be done via the hermeneutic philosophy of Richard Kearney, as someone who has made a recent attempt to do “philosophy at the limit” with a trilogy that goes by that title.

The question is of course: what is meant when the qualifier “at the limit” is added to philosophy or, in our case, theology?

In the *first* instance, “the limit” may refer to *the possible end of a discipline, intellectual enterprise or conversation*, as one encounters in the contemporary “end of philosophy” debates<sup>1</sup>, or to suggest a theological equivalent, “the death of God” debates. In such cases, “at the limit” suggests that philosophy or theology *as such*, for whatever reason, has reached its end or limit and could not continue. Of course, what is meant by “as such” is the crucial question, illustrated by the exchanges taking place in the strongly contested “end of philosophy” debates. For some proponents of the debate, the limit refers to the end of Philosophy (capital P referring to a particular understanding of philosophy), suggesting that things cannot go on as they have thus far, that philosophy is at a crisis or turning point and that a (radical) transformation is called for (Baynes, Bohman & McCarthey, 1987: 2-3). The type of transformation in mind may differ, ranging from more systematic proposals (as those by Habermas or Karl-Otto Apel) to proposals that incorporate hermeneutics, rhetoric and narrative (as with Gadamer, Ricoeur, MacIntyre and Taylor).<sup>2</sup> For others, the limit refers to the end of philosophy period. Proponents of this view, make the claim that philosophy has “outlived its usefulness” and is better left dead, with the void either already (or soon to be) filled by some alternative or simply to be entered and entertained as

---

<sup>1</sup> For a brief overview of the “end of philosophy” debates see Baynes, K., Bohman, J. & McCarthey, T. 1987. “General Introduction.” In K. Baynes, J. Bohman, & T. McCarthy, eds. *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* Massachusetts: MIT Press, pp. 1–18.

<sup>2</sup> To use Baynes, Bohman and McCarthey’s rough distinction, which they admit may be somewhat artificial.

void (as with Derrida or Rorty) (Baynes, Bohman & McCarthy, 1987: 2). One way of approaching such a debate about limits or ends is by viewing it as a fruitful, if contentious and disorderly, exchange about the basic options for doing, or not doing, philosophy “at the limit.”

This understanding of “the limit,” as the limit of an intellectual enterprise, is only partly in Kearney’s line of sight in his trilogy entitled “Philosophy at the Limit.” Yet, if one were to categorise Kearney’s contribution to the “end of philosophy” debate, he would certainly fall within the class that seeks a transformation of philosophy, and more specifically a transformation towards a *hermeneutic* philosophy. For such a hermeneutic philosophy, “the limit” represents a necessary challenge to rethink the basic premises of reflection in hermeneutic terms, while maintaining the basic claim that “reflection on the conditions of knowing, understanding, speaking leads to a deeper and more adequate self-understanding, one with moral-practical implications” (Baynes, Bohman & McCarthy, 1987: 9-10). I believe that this is true of Kearney’s philosophy at the limit, even if he rarely if ever, frames his own project in terms of the “end of philosophy” debate.

A *second*, related, yet more fundamental way of approaching “the limit,” is as *the limit of human understanding generally*. Once again the limit may be delineated in various ways, and as with the first instance, the demarcation of the limit is a contentious matter, open to debate. Are we speaking of the limits of reason in purely intellectual terms? Or are the physical limits of embodied living included? What of the cultural, moral or ethical limits that emerge from the complexities of social life? How does one factor in the capacity of human language to define, redefine and even go beyond certain limits? And where do the limits of language lie? Kearney’s hermeneutic philosophy explores these questions, proposing a way forward that is informed primarily by the phenomenological hermeneutic approach of Paul Ricoeur, while engaging also with other attempts to think at the limit. Commenting on his trilogy “Philosophy at the Limit,” Kearney (2002: 187n) says:

“Each [volume] deals, in its different way, with experiences of extremity which reside at the edge of our conventional understanding, seeking to address phenomena beyond the strict frontiers of reason alone in efforts to imagine new possibilities of saying and being.”

As the quote above reveals, this understanding of the limit may be expressed in terms of particular “limit experiences” or “limit situations.” Yet, one could argue that all these situations

and experiences share the deeper underlying reality of an ultimate limit to human understanding. Thus, while we will certainly engage with Kearney's attempt to address "limit experiences," the focus will remain on his hermeneutic philosophical approach, in the hope that this may help theology as it attempts to "think at the limit."

And what do we say of *theology* at the limit? In light of the first definition of "the limit" we could safely say that theology as a discipline and intellectual enterprise has been under threat ever since the Enlightenment. Or has Christian theology perhaps suffered a fractured existence since its earliest beginnings, if we recall Paul's recognition that the cross is "foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews"? (1 Cor. 1: 23). In any case, where theology has succumbed to the Enlightenment ideals of universal reason and the quest for certainty, it has followed philosophy down the rabbit hole to face the similar threat of its own "end." Should it surprise us when theology, like contemporary philosophy, seems to have become "preoccupied with its own continued existence" (1987: 1)? By choosing to address this question via Kearney's hermeneutic philosophy, we have already suggested that theology at the limit need not necessarily be an abrupt and decisive end, but may hold the possibility of a transformation.

In terms of the second sense, as the limit of human understanding generally, one would have to say that such critical self-awareness should not be anything new to theology. Whether one defines theology as "faith seeking understanding," as "God-talk," or as "critical reflection on God-talk" one could argue that, by its very nature, theology is challenged to think *at the limit*: "God's ways are not our ways" and even when and where by the grace of God they are, language has proven to have its limits. In as far as theology is practiced by humans (and not animals or angels) it is obliged to address those experiences (positive and negative) that demarcate the limits of human existence. John de Gruchy (2013: 24–25) speaks of these experiences as "loop-holes through which we glimpse mystery" and behind which reason "inevitably lags behind."

The *aim* of this study, to be clear, is not to establish whether or not theology is at the limit in either the first or the second sense provided. Rather, it is to explore Richard Kearney's hermeneutic philosophy as it consciously attempts to think at the limit, in the hope that such an exploration may provide insight into the challenges and possibilities of doing *theology* at the limit. In order to situate Kearney's work contextually and provide the reader with an overview

of his work, a biographical introduction will be given before addressing methodological issues and providing an outline of this study.

\*\*\*

Currently, Richard Kearney holds the Charles B. Seelig Chair of Philosophy at Boston College and has served as a Visiting Professor at the University College Dublin, the University of Paris (Sorbonne), the Australian Catholic University and the University of Nice.<sup>3</sup> He is a prolific academic writer, a novelist, and considered by many to have been a influential public figure, being actively involved in politics and public life in Ireland from the late 1970's to the late 1990's, and also in the United States since he moved there in 1999 to take up his current position at Boston College. In more recent years he is possibly most renowned for his stimulating contribution to contemporary debates in continental philosophy of religion and philosophy of literature.

Kearney was born in 1954 in Cork, Ireland. His secondary school education at Glenstal Abbey, a boarding school run by Benedictine monks, already had a profound effect on his philosophical and religious formation. Kearney speaks fondly of the monks, who not only introduced him to the Christian faith, exemplifying the discipline of hospitality towards the stranger, but who also used any excuse to include philosophy into any of the subjects they taught. Kearney (2010: xii) recalls how his first Christian doctrine classes were begun by reading cogent arguments against the existence of God by such renowned atheists as Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Sartre and Russell. Thus, at an early age, Kearney received an interdisciplinary introduction to philosophy that would remain with him throughout his career. Reflecting on those formative years, Kearney says that “the main questions that lit bonfires in my young imagination were those relating to the philosophy of religion and the philosophy of literature” (Murchado & Kearney, 2004: 667–8).

After graduating with a 1<sup>st</sup> class Honours Bachelor of Arts degree at University College Dublin in 1975, Kearney went on to complete an M.A. at McGill university with Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, in 1976. Already in his Masters research, Kearney worked on imagination,

---

<sup>3</sup> For biographical and bibliographical information a complete and regularly updated Curriculum Vitae of Richard Kearney can be accessed on his Academia.edu page: <https://bc.academia.edu/RichardKearney>, or one could access his personal website: <https://www2.bc.edu/~kearneyr/bio.html>. Both pages provide direct access to many of Kearney's articles and book chapters.

studying early expressions of the concept in the classical Hebraic and Hellenic traditions.<sup>4</sup> Due to his interest in the contemporary French phenomenological philosophers, he was encouraged by Taylor to continue his education in Paris. Following Taylor's advice, Kearney took up his Ph.D. at the University of Paris-X under the supervision of Paul Ricoeur, with Emmanuel Levinas as his external examiner. Kearney's early years in Paris had a major influence on his life and thought. Besides Ricoeur and Levinas, he also became personally acquainted with influential French thinkers like Stanislas Breton, Jean-Luc Marion, Bernard Henri Levi and attended lectures by Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze, Levi-Strauss, Beaufret and others. According to Kearney, however, his main philosophical influences from the French world would remain phenomenology, hermeneutics and deconstruction.

He completed his Ph.D. in 1980 with the thesis entitled *Poétique du Possible: Vers une Herméneutique Phénoménologique de la figuration* (published in 1984). *Poétique du Possible* explores the functioning of imagination in life and art, as Ricoeur redefined these concepts, from hermeneutic phenomenological perspective. In this work, Kearney conjoined imagination, or "figuration" as he preferred to call it, with the concept of "the possible," so central in the phenomenological tradition of Husserl and Heidegger. This interaction between poetics and the possible would come to inform most of his subsequent work, which Kearney recognises as a challenge to the traditional dualistic opposition held between possibility and actuality.

Although Kearney's research interests cover a wide range of topics, "imagination," understood broadly in terms of human creativity "in life as much as in art" is a golden thread that runs through all of his works. His earliest works in the 1980's and early 1990's dealt specifically with imagination or "poetics," drawing on a wide range of sources from the Western intellectual tradition to engage with late modern or post-modern Western culture.<sup>5</sup> During the same period Kearney published and edited a number of works on Irish culture, dealing particularly with the challenges facing Irish identity and politics in a post-nationalist context.<sup>6</sup> Scattered between

---

<sup>4</sup> Kearney's Masters research would later appear in the first two chapters of his *The Wake of Imagination* (Kearney, 1988: 37–78; 79–113) under the respective titles of *The Hebraic Imagination* and *The Hellenic Imagination*.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *The Wake of Imagination: Ideas of Creativity in Western Culture* (1988), *Poetics of Modernity* (1995), *Poetics of Imagining* (1992; 1998, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.).

<sup>6</sup> For books authored by Kearney on these matters see *Transitions: Narrative in Modern Irish Culture* (1988), *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (1997), and the later collection of his Irish essays in *Navigations: Collected Irish Essays, 1976-2006*. For books edited or co-edited by Kearney, see *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies*, vols. 1 (1982) & 2 (1987) with Mark Patrick Hederman, *The Irish Mind: Exploring*

these accomplishments, Kearney also managed to publish a number of works introducing European or Continental philosophy to an Anglo-Saxon readership, often through published dialogues or conversations.<sup>7</sup>

Over the years, Kearney has become well known as being an authoritative “Ricoeur scholar,” publishing articles and book chapters on Ricoeur’s work, delivering conference papers and incorporating Ricoeur’s insights into his own creative works. His many published dialogues with his mentor, accumulated over many years of friendship, have become a valuable resource for many being introduced to Ricoeur’s work. A selection of Kearney’s studies on Ricoeur’s work have recently appeared in his book *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (2004), which includes a new introduction to Ricoeur’s thought and a selection of their dialogues, conducted over three decades.

At the turn of the millennium, Kearney published three works, forming a trilogy, *Philosophy at the Limit*, to which we have already referred. In the first of these, *The God Who May Be* (2001), Kearney directs his attention specifically to the limit experience associated with the divine or religious. There, he engages with the so-called religious or theological turn in Continental philosophy to address the issue of an eschatological notion of God, attempting to think God in terms of “the possible” in order to restore the imbalance of a metaphysical tradition that has privileged actuality over possibility for centuries. This was followed shortly after by *On Stories* (2002), where Kearney addresses the limit experience of unnarrated trauma, individual and social, from the perspective of narrative’s capacity to retrieve repressed memories and assist in some form of healing. Finally, in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003a), Kearney addresses a wider range of limit experiences associated with the question of good and evil and how this question is often dealt with in relation to the stranger.

Following the wide-spread reception of his trilogy and the debates and research stimulated by his thought, Kearney not only became established as a thinker at the forefront of Continental philosophy’s “turn to religion,” but also came to be seen as a respected participant in

---

*Intellectual Traditions* (1984), *Across the Frontiers: Ireland in the 1990’s* (1988), and *Migrations: The Irish at Home and Abroad* (1989).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (1984), *Modern Movements in European Philosophy* (1987; 1994 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), *Visions of Europe: Conversations on the Legacy and Future of Europe* (1993), *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (1995), and the later *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers* (2004).



philosophical debates surrounding questions of alterity or “otherness,” as a growing concern in a globalising world. This is evidenced by the many journal issues, published panels and symposia held on Kearney’s trilogy<sup>8</sup>, as well as two books published on Kearney’s work, namely *After God: Encountering Richard Kearney* (2006b) and *Traversing the Imaginary: Richard Kearney’s Postmodern Challenge* (2007). After the terrorist attacks in New York on 11 September 2001, issues of religion and the stranger merged in a remarkable way, stimulating a great diversity of responses with the effects arguably still being felt today. Suddenly, questions regarding the “religious stranger” gained new impetus and Kearney responded almost immediately with talks, interviews and articles, in both academic settings and the public media.<sup>9</sup>

In 2009, many of the central concerns and thoughts behind these contributions emerged in the form of a book entitled *Anatheism*, which has received similar acclaim to his earlier works.<sup>10</sup> In this stimulating work Kearney explores the possibility of returning (*ana-*) to God *after* (*-ana*) the God of metaphysical certainty, *after* the God of ecclesiastic sovereignty, *after* the horrors and traumas of the Holocaust, Hiroshima and the gulags, *after* the rise of religious fundamentalism and terror etc. As such, *Anatheism* attempts to prepare the ground philosophically upon which renewed commitment *to* God, and dialogue *about* the sacred, may possibly take place. The essence of the ‘return’ explored in *Anatheism* is a return to the inaugural narratives within the Abrahamic religious traditions, which in their different ways speak of welcoming the stranger as a sacred act. Kearney’s hermeneutic retrieval of these narratives, in dialogue with philosophy, literature and art, looks to restore an ethos of hospitality to the stranger as a vital ingredient of a responsible life of faith today.

---

<sup>8</sup> See the following journal issues: *Journal of the International Crossroads*, Vol. 4, Spring 2006; *Interpretando La Experiencia de la Tolerancia* (Interpreting the Experience of Tolerance), ed. Rosemary Rizo-Patron, Fondo editorial de la Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Peru, 2006; *Acta Fenomenologica Latinamericana*, 2005; reprinted as ‘Interpreting Otherness’ (Tolerancia) in *Interpretando la Experiencia de la Tolerancia* (Lima, Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Peru, Fondo Editorial, 2005); *Metaphilosophy*, vol 36, no. 5, 2005; *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol 30, no 7, 2004; *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, vol 60, no 4, 2004; *Philosophy Today*, vol 48, Spring 2004; *Research in Phenomenology*, vol 34, 2004; and *Modern Theology*, Vol 18, no 1, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> To name only a few articles and book chapters, see Kearney’s “Terror, Philosophy and the Sublime: some philosophical reflections on 11 September,” in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol 29, no, 1 (2003); “Thinking After Terror: An Interreligious Challenge,” in *Journal of the Interdisciplinary Crossroads*, 2(1), pp.1–96. (2005); “Interreligious Discourse: Hermeneutics and Fundamentalism,” In WCC, ed. *Violence and Christian Spirituality: An ecumenical conversation*. Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, pp. 47–55 (2007); and “Beyond Conflict: Radical Hospitality and Religious Identity,” In N. E. C. Yates, ed. *Philosophy and the Return of Violence*. New York: Continuum, pp. 101–111 (2011).

<sup>10</sup> See for e.g. the forthcoming, *Re-Imagining the Sacred: The Anatheist Debate*, edited by Jens Zimmerman to be published in 2014 by Columbia University Press: New York.

Our brief survey of Kearney's major works may have already alluded to something of Kearney's style as a philosopher and writer. Kearney's works reveal a thinker who is humble and gracious to his interlocutors, even where he disagrees strongly with their views. This is especially evident in Kearney's earliest works and dialogues where less of his own voice is heard, allowing him to display a special ability, as André Van de Putte commented, to "freshly illuminate the written work of his partners in conversation" (Ryan, 2006: 14). Even in Kearney's most original works, he remains a *dialogical* thinker, influenced by the great hermeneutic thinkers Gadamer and Ricoeur who "emphasised the Platonic dialogue as a model for philosophy; as that space where different points of view work their way towards a new point of view" (Ryan, 2006: 18). Kearney also attributes this dialogical character of his work to the experience of growing up in Ireland, "between two cultures, two religions and two languages, two poles of North and South": "I realized," says Kearney, "that if I am without dialogue, then I am somehow forced to align myself with one side against another" (Ryan, 2006: 18).

If Kearney is a dialogical thinker, open to the other and always hoping to find a middle way between extremes, he is no less a *critical* one. Kearney is suspicious of any attempt to find closure or a synthesis of opposites, placing great impetus on critical vigilance and the need for continued discernment. Thus, Kearney describes his own hermeneutic approach as *diacritical hermeneutics*, combining dialogical openness to the other and the emergence of ever new interpretations, with the critical functions of interrogation, discernment and diagnosis.<sup>11</sup> Another characteristic that stands out when one engages with Kearney's work is the ease with which he transgresses disciplinary boundaries. Kearney readily introduces literature, poetry, politics, theology, art and film in his works and his writing style is marked by an attractive literary quality and contagious enthusiasm.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> For his most recent articulation of the tenets of diacritical hermeneutics see Kearney's 2012 article, "Diacritical Hermeneutics," In M. Portocarrero, L. Umbelino, & A. Wiercinski, eds. *Hermeneutic Rationality / La rationalité herméneutique*. Berlin: Lit Verlag, (pp. 177–196).

<sup>12</sup> One of Kearney's regular interlocutors and friend, John D Caputo gives a moving description of his style: "Richard Kearney is a genuine 'enthusiast'—in the best sense of the word. His writings are contagiously enthusiastic, so charged and exciting, so moving and inciting, so full of prayers and tears that it is he, not I, who should have written a book with a title like [*The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* - Caputo, 1997]. His beautiful and powerful prose is a perfect testimony to what his friend Seamus Heaney meant when Heaney said that the Irish are a people who took over their invader's tongue and improved it for them. His words leap from the page. His thoughts dance, his erudition dazzles us. His imagination—no wonder this is his favorite theme—races far ahead of the rest of us who are left in his dust, running as fast as we can lest we lose sight of him altogether, occasionally leaning against a post to catch our breath. Richard, one of the truly great readers of Levinas, has a glorious and

If Kearney's literary enthusiasm at times blurs the lines between Kearney the novelist and Kearney the intellectual, Caputo (2002: 87) extends this reference by adding that Kearney "is an enthusiast in the ancient and literal sense of *en-theos*, a man filled with God, driven by a passion for God." The passion Caputo speaks of here is undisputed in terms of an intellectual passion to understand the mystery that is called God and to engage in the debates that emerge from such a quest. However, Kearney's works and biography also reflect an existential passion and commitment to God, to the extent that some interlocutors accuse him of trading in philosophical agnosticism for theological faith. Indeed, Kearney's hermeneutic approach compels him to lay bare his existential, religious commitments at the outset, as in the introduction of *The God Who May Be*:

"Religiously, I would say that if I hail from a Catholic tradition, it is with this proviso: where Catholicism offends love and justice, I prefer to call myself a Judeo-Christian theist; and where this tradition so offends, I prefer to call myself religious in the sense of seeking God in a way that neither excludes other religions nor purports to possess the final truth. And where the religious so offends, I would call myself a seeker of love and justice *tout court*" (Kearney, 2001: 6).

This quote, while revealing that Kearney would "rightly pass as an Irish Catholic," also witnesses to his sensitivity for the context within which he speaks: *personally*, as someone who has experienced a thirty year period of religious arrogance and sectarian violence in Ireland; *philosophically*, where it is necessary to maintain critical distance and agnostic rigor to the matter at hand; and *politically*, after the renewed outbreak of war in the Middle East and religiously charged rhetoric following the catastrophe of 9/11. Elsewhere, in the preface to *Anatheism*, Kearney (2010: xiv-xv) describes his faith as "an odyssey of widening circles," recounting how he had been deeply influenced by Protestant mentors like Ricoeur, and beyond the Christian circle, through dialogues with Jewish thinkers, extending later to the Islamic tradition and, more recently, via encounters with Buddhist and Hindu thinkers in Bangalore.

If anything, the quote of Kearney relating his religious affiliations reveals a deep commitment to "love and justice." Alongside the ethical deliberations ever present in his academic work, something of Kearney's commitment to social justice, peace and reconciliation can be seen in his various forms of public involvement. In 1983, 1993 and 1995 Kearney was involved in drafting

---

productive case of insomnia, which keeps him up at night reading everything and writing about it until the cock crows" (Caputo, 2002: 87).

several proposals for the Northern Irish Peace Agreement, helping to articulate “a new and spacious sense of Irish identity” that eventually played a part in the 1998 peace accord that helped still sectarian violence in Belfast (Bole, 2008: 42). Kearney was often featured on British and Irish television and radio series on philosophy and culture, and is still an active participant in US, British, French and Irish media. At present, Kearney’s commitment to bridging conflict-laden and traumatised divides on a grass-roots level is expressed in his launching and directing a global project sponsored by Boston College, called *The Guestbook Project*.<sup>13</sup>

\*\*\*

Having introduced the subject of our study, we may turn to methodological considerations. The methodological approach taken up in this thesis may be described as *literary, interpretive and constructive*. As such, it attempts a hermeneutic reading of a selection of Kearney’s most relevant texts with the purpose of ultimately making constructive suggestions for a theology at the limit. Kearney’s earlier works (especially *Poetics of Imagining*, 1998 and *Poetics of Modernity*, 1999) and works on Paul Ricoeur (collected in *On Paul Ricoeur*, 2004) are vital for understanding the development of his thought and provide helpful clues regarding his self-understanding. His trilogy “Philosophy at the Limit” (2001, 2002, 2003) also plays a central role as an explicit attempt to think at the limit. Where necessary, attention will be given to the contextual horizon(s) within which Kearney’s thought emerges, while bringing his work into dialogue with my own reading of current theological discourses surrounding hermeneutics. This will require that a number of secondary sources appropriating or responding to Kearney’s work be considered.

Any interpretive study requires transparency of the vantage point from which it emerges, declaring how it is determined by contexts of prejudice, commitment and institutional discourse. The author of this study is an Afrikaans speaking South African, a pastor in the Dutch Reformed Church, and a student of theology at the University of Stellenbosch. Having lived most of my life in the early years of a post-apartheid South Africa, I am (partly) aware of major transformations that the changed socio-political situation has brought about in my personal narrative, but also more broadly, in the narratives that I share with others. While I am mostly in the dark about how to think of my own “situatedness,” I am often reminded by my environment

---

<sup>13</sup> For more information on *The Guestbook Project*, visit: <http://www.bc.edu/schools/cas/guestbook/mission.html>

that I share in privileges passed down to me because of the colour of my skin, on the one hand, but *also*, that I share in privileges that were withheld from much of my parents and grandparents lives, such as the privilege of being part of a community where skin colour, language and culture no longer need to be the most determinative factor of one's identity and life with others.

The new socio-political context has also brought about important changes in the narrative of my church and Reformed theology in South-Africa. Besides having to address relevant, local challenges such as peace, unity, justice, reconciliation, identity, cultural diversity and so on, Reformed theology, in its academic and congregational settings, also became rapidly exposed to the many benefits and challenges of a modern globalising world. These include material, technological and socio-economic changes, but also major shifts in culture, worldview and philosophical outlook. In my local context as a pastor I had the experience that the language of faith handed down to me, while being an infinitely rich source of wisdom and grace, often falls short in responding to challenges faced by myself and my fellow believers – not to mention friends outside my immediate community of faith. In some cases, it even functioned to maintain and aggravate problems and injustices.

It is from these experiences of coming up short that I first became interested in philosophical hermeneutics. My interest was fuelled by a desire to explore new ways of reading, thinking, speaking and being in the Reformed theological tradition that I belong to, but perhaps also broader, in the hope that such an exploration might help me relate better with those who find me to be strange. When Professor in philosophy of religion at the *Vrije Universiteit* in Amsterdam, Willie van der Merwe, introduced me to the work of Richard Kearney while I was on a study break there, I could immediately relate to the questions that he was posing and the creative ways in which he went about addressing them.

In short, one could say that I am interpreting Kearney as a South African, Reformed theologian and minister, with a keen interest in new ways of speaking about God, in the hope that this may better serve God's presence in our fractured lives.

\*\*\*

This thesis is made up of four chapters, each revolving around a particular focal point emerging from Kearney's thought:

**Chapter One**, *Facing the Limit: Kearney's phenomenological-existential heritage*, investigates how Kearney's phenomenological heritage, inaugurated by Edmund Husserl and developed by Martin Heidegger, followed in the wake of Immanuel Kant to facilitate a decisive turn to "face the limit." The chapter explores how Kearney appropriates some of the tradition's central insights into his own work, giving a more personal, embodied and relational meaning to our chapter title "facing the limit."

**Chapter Two**, *Transfiguring at the Limit: Kearney's hermeneutic imagination*, picks up where Chapter One left off, showing how phenomenology undergoes a decisive transformation via the work of Paul Ricoeur to become a *hermeneutic* phenomenology. It explores how Ricoeur's work influenced the development of Kearney's hermeneutic imagination in three parts: the *first* of these reflects on Kearney's hermeneutic approach to human *creativity* (*Transfiguring Imagination*), the *second* situates this creative capacity, and its tendency to serve ideological interests, in the world of culture and politics (*Transfiguring the Social Imaginary*), while the *third* explores how the hermeneutic imagination relates to the sacred (*Transfiguring God*).

**Chapter Three**, *The Limit as Threshold? The Stranger and Kearney's diacritical hermeneutics*, will narrow the focus somewhat to consider how Kearney's hermeneutic imagination deals with the challenges posed by alterity or strangeness and more specifically how this manifests in our dealings with strangers. It will reflect on Kearney's engagement with a number of other contemporary philosophical accounts of the stranger and present his own *diacritical hermeneutic* response as a way of becoming more hospitable to strangers and more capable of critical (self)discernment.

Finally, a **Conclusion** will draw hermeneutic lines, internally, between the various focal points and, externally, to the question of theology at the limit in order to make some tentative proposals for doing theology at the limit.

# Chapter One: Facing the Limit

## Kearney's phenomenological-existential heritage

### 1.1. Introduction

It is impossible to read the work of Richard Kearney without being struck by his profound self-awareness as a philosopher within the phenomenological-existential tradition. This self-understanding permeates his work, from his earliest interest in imagination to his later works on God and the Stranger. In one of his most recent works, *Anatheism* (2010), Kearney gives the following self-description of his philosophical approach:

“... the particular type of philosophy I speak from [is] ... one nourished by *the modern theories of phenomenology and existentialism*, on the one hand, and by postmodern ideas of poststructuralism and deconstruction, on the other. From the former I acquired, during my studies in Paris in the 1970's, an irrevocable respect for personal responsibility, choice, and agency; a belief in the possibility of thinking from concrete embodied experience; and a faith in the power of human imagination and action to transform our world” (Kearney, 2010: xvi; my emphasis).

The second part of the quote indicates the extent to which his thought has been “nourished” by his phenomenological-existential heritage in respect to the three great questions of philosophy: the epistemological, the ontological and the ethical. This heritage did not only inform his philosophy but also nourished and shaped him as a *philosopher* – as a thinker able to negotiate the spaces between the theory and praxis of life with *phronesis*.

One of the aims of this study is to come to a proper understanding of Kearney's hermeneutic philosophy. One may rightly ask why it is necessary to include this chapter on Kearney's phenomenological heritage when chapter two will deal more explicitly with Kearney's hermeneutic as inspired by his mentor, and great hermeneutic thinker, Paul Ricoeur. Why not restrict the study to Kearney's appropriation of Ricoeur's work?



The answer to this question comes from Ricoeur himself. In an important article called *Existence and hermeneutics*, Ricoeur uses an agricultural (and Biblical) metaphor to speak of the grafting of the *hermeneutic problem* (as an old slip) onto the *phenomenological method* (as a young plant). Ricoeur traces the history of the hermeneutic problem from its earliest beginnings as an exegetical problem; to its emergence as a philosophical problem with Schleiermacher and Dilthey (where understanding becomes first psychological and then historical understanding); before Heidegger deepens the hermeneutic problem ontologically to recover understanding “no longer as a mode of knowledge, but rather as a *mode of being*” (Ricoeur, 1980: 239, my emphasis). With Heidegger thus, “[T]he hermeneutic problem ... becomes a problem of the Analytic of this being, *Dasein*, which exists through understanding” (Ricoeur, 1980: 239).

Ricoeur sees such an ontology of understanding as the goal or rather the “desire” that animates his own hermeneutic enterprise, yet in contrast to Heidegger’s “sudden reversal” of the hermeneutic question, he proposes to take a longer route that is more sensitive to methodological considerations called up by language and “the circle of interpretation whose theory this ontology formulates” (1980: 239). It is to these matters, epitomised by Ricoeur’s famous use of the *detour*, that we will turn in Chapter Two. In spite of these qualifications, Ricoeur still understands his hermeneutics as one that is “touched,” “animated” and “inspired” by an ontology of understanding (1980: 239). This chapter will try to understand what this entails and how it has come to inform Kearney’s hermeneutics.

Kearney is widely considered to be one of Ricoeur’s most gifted disciples and one could argue that his hermeneutics is also *touched*, *animated* and *inspired* by an ontology of understanding. While Kearney follows Ricoeur in taking a longer route (contra Heidegger’s short route) to this common goal, Kearney, like Ricoeur, shares in Heidegger’s vision that an ontology of understanding is the “desire” that animates the journey. The intention of this chapter is to pause long enough, as Ricoeur does in his article, in order to come to an understanding of the phenomenology upon which Kearney grafts his *own* hermeneutic approach. In response to the question posed above, one could thus say that understanding what Kearney means when he identifies himself with the phenomenological tradition is vital for understanding his hermeneutics.



This chapter will be structured as follows: The first three sections (1.2; 1.3; and 1.4) will attempt to give a brief account of the early development of the phenomenological tradition, mostly as Kearney himself understands it, asking what it means to say that Richard Kearney stands within the phenomenological tradition. This will be done by tracing the rise of phenomenology with Husserl and then Heidegger in the wake of Immanuel Kant's modern legacy. In particular, attention will be given to how Kearney appropriates this tradition in the development of his own phenomenological and hermeneutic approach.

Following this, 1.5 will show how this phenomenological imagination of Kearney's comes to find expression in his own voice. While Kearney gives phenomenological readings of phenomena as diverse as melancholy and desire, the stranger and the possible, one of his most instructive and influential phenomenological accounts is his phenomenology of "the *persona*" in *The God Who May Be* (2001). By reconstructing Kearney's reading of the *persona* here I hope to illustrate how this phenomenological-existential heritage informs his own hermeneutic "at the limit."

In our exploration of Richard Kearney's philosophy at the limit, this reflection on his phenomenological-existential heritage is an important first step. As the subtitle of this chapter suggests, it is in his engagement with this tradition that Kearney turns to *face* the limit. Before we may adequately deal with the possibilities of transcending boundaries hermeneutically (as we will in Chapter Two), it is necessary to *confront* the limit and give it its due – to recognise and describe with frankness, the intellectual, existential and ethical limitations that constitute human existence. This step will also be vital preparation for our discussion in Chapter Three where we consider how phenomenology is brought to its limit before the stranger.

## 1.2. Kant's Copernican Revolution

Kearney's earliest work was on imagination and it is primarily from this perspective that Kearney engages with the great phenomenologists Husserl and Heidegger as they picked up and developed the insights of Immanuel Kant. In the opening essay of his book *Poetics of Modernity: Toward a Hermeneutic Imagination* (1995) Kearney makes an effort to show how the phenomenological tradition emerged from Kant's pioneering work. It is therefore a good place to start this retracing of Kearney's phenomenological heritage.

Kant represents for Kearney a Copernican revolution in Western thought as he “ushered in a modern view of being.” What characterises this modern view is that the “subjectivity of the subject ... becomes the condition of the objectivity of the object” (Kearney, 1995: 2). Along with this new conception of being came a renewed appreciation of *imagination*. Imagination would no longer function as an “intermediary faculty between our sensible and intelligible experience”, but rather as “the primary and indispensable precondition of all knowledge” (Kearney, 1988: 157–158).

The rise of modernity meant the surpassing of what Kearney called the *mimetic paradigm* of imagining by the *productive paradigm*, a transition strikingly symbolised by Yeats’s exclamation that the “mirror turned lamps” (Kearney, 1988: 158). As this image suggests, the imagination was no longer considered to be a mere reproduction of a given reality, but an authentic production of human consciousness; the image no longer a static deposit, but a “dynamic creative act”; and the imagination no longer a mediator between body and soul, but an “inner transcendental unity which resists this very duality” (Kearney, 1988: 156). The impact of such a revolution would prove to be wide-ranging and deeply influential. While its influence was restricted, for the most part, to the development of German Idealism and Romanticism in general, epistemology, aesthetics and ontology would be radically influenced by the new, central position taken in by imagination (Kearney, 1988: 157).

To understand how this revolution took place, Kearney takes us to a section of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* entitled “Transcendental Logic” where a rejection of the ontological proof for the existence of God is being given (1995: 3–8). In response to the ontological argument first articulated by Anselm, Kant contests the fundamental claim that God’s existence could be derived from God’s essence as “the most perfect being” on the grounds of his central thesis that “being is not a real predicate” (Kearney, 1995: 4). Kearney (1995: 4) interprets Kant’s detailed exposition of this thesis to mean that “being” is not a *predicate* of something that can be derived or extrapolated from the concept, but rather “the *position* of a thing” that “supervenes upon our concept.”

This leads to what Kearney sees as a “fundamental Kantian distinction” between *reality* and *actuality* (1995: 4). Here *reality* refers to the *thingness* of a thing (*Sachheit*) or quite simply to “the what-contents of possible entities regardless of whether they exist or not” (1995: 4). Reality

has to do with the *quality* of something and it is within this category of quality that it makes sense to ascribe a predicate to a subject. By contrast, *actuality* (or existence) has to do with the *modality* within which something stands. Within the category of modality something could either be “actual” (i.e. exist), “possible” or “necessary.” Within the logic of this category, actuality does not define the real content of something, but rather its existence as one modality amongst others (possibility or necessity). The categories of reality and modality are thus independent of each other as there is no direct relation between whether or not something exists (its *modality*) and the what-content of that something (its *reality*).

It is here that our first insight into Kearney’s phenomenological heritage emerges. Kearney (1995: 5) sees Kant’s distinction as a key point in modern philosophy and more specifically in the development of the phenomenological method:

“Does Kant’s quality/modality distinction not anticipate, and in some respects vindicate, Husserl’s claim that the phenomenologically ‘reduced’ world – resulting from the bracketing of existential judgment concerning the actuality of things and the resultant free variation in imagination of its essential structures – yields intuitive access to the real truth of things? The phenomenological attitude, as outlined by Husserl, could thus be said to deal with the quality of things rather than with their modality; it suspends the existential question regarding the actual being of things in order to describe their essential (real) contents.”

It is to Husserl’s phenomenological reading of Kant’s thesis and his important notion of phenomenological “bracketing” that we now turn.

### 1.3. Edmund Husserl

Two different interpretations followed of Kant’s thesis that being is position. While both interpretations recognised the productive role of the human imagination in positing being as *perception*, they differed markedly in their understanding of what perception means. The *empiricist*<sup>14</sup> interpretation of Kant “understood perception as a psychological rapport between representation and sensation,” thus reducing what is actual to “what is perceivable by our senses” (Kearney, 1995: 7–8). By contrast, the *phenomenological* reading of Kant’s thesis understood “being as meaningful appearance to consciousness”, thus extending “the understanding of perception beyond the empirical” (1995: 7–8).

---

<sup>14</sup> Represented most prominently by the British empiricism of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873).

Building on the work of his mentor Franz Brentano, it was Edmund Husserl, widely regarded as the father of the phenomenological movement in philosophy, who inaugurated the movement with his influential work *Logical Investigations* (1900). Husserl's project articulated the phenomenological reading of Kant given above and began sketching out the central aims and methods of phenomenology.

Kearney's thought is most indebted to Husserl with regards to his insights into imagination and it is here that the phenomenological approach distinguished itself most radically from other strands of modern philosophy.<sup>15</sup> Following Brentano, Husserl understood consciousness as functioning through different modes of *intentional* acts (Kearney, 1984: 3, 1998: 15). By "intentionality" Husserl meant that "consciousness is always consciousness of something other than itself: it now reveals itself as a dynamic act forever projecting itself beyond the idealist enclosures of the mind towards horizons of transcendent meaning" (1984: 3). In Kantian terms, one could say that an intentional act conjoined the *what* of something (Kant's category of *quality*) and the *how* of its perception (Kant's category of *modality*) into a single intentional *actus* (Kearney, 1998: 15). Seeing something was thus redefined as *seeing as*. With this redefined understanding of perception the foundation was laid for being as perceiving to become being as *interpreting*.

Four features of Husserl's phenomenology are especially important for Kearney, who picks up and develops each in his own way:

### 1.3.1. The emergence of the *Lebenswelt*

One of the major developments brought about by Husserl's theory of intentionality was "the discovery that consciousness as a *reflective* logical operation already presupposes a *prereflective* lived experience (*Erlebnis*) of the world. Husserl called this the 'life-world' (*Lebenswelt*)". The fundamental connection between consciousness and the world *prior* to all knowledge meant that all essential meaning arises out of the human life-world (Kearney, 1998: 19). By contrast, the naturalist view held that consciousness and world are "two 'natural' entities mechanically conjoined by causal laws" (Kearney, 1998: 19). This discovery implied that the correlate of the intentional subject was no longer nature, but a *field of meanings*, thus posing a significant

---

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Chapter 1 of Kearney's *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Post-modern* (1998) for his account of what imagination and phenomenology do for each other respectively in the work of Edmund Husserl (pp. 13-45).

challenge to claims of objectivity made in both the natural and the human sciences (Ricoeur, 1980: 241).

While this “field of meanings” remained largely subjective in the early work of Husserl (*Logical Investigations* and *Cartesian Meditations*), there is an important development that takes place in Husserl’s later thought and especially in his last work, *The Crisis* (1938) that set phenomenology on a new path beyond idealism and subjectivism. Ricoeur (1980: 241) captures the crux of this shift when he says:

“It is in spite of itself that phenomenology discovers, in place of an idealist subject locked within its system of meanings, a living being which from all time has, as the horizon of all its intentions, a world, the world... Before objectivity, there is the horizon of the world, before the subject of the theory of knowledge, there is operative life...”

Ricoeur’s qualification, “in spite of itself,” reminds us that such a revolt against the subject-object relation was not Husserl’s original intention. However, it is this development in Husserl’s project that would later be picked up by Heidegger as he reworked Husserl’s method “in the direction of a more existential ontological analysis of meaning” beyond the subject-object dichotomy (1984: 4).

More will be said on the influence of this discovery on Kearney when Heidegger is discussed below. For now, one must also make reference to another of Husserl’s earliest disciples, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who further developed the consequences of this turn in Husserl with his description of existence as *embodied* existence. While Husserl did broach the theme of the “living body” (*Leib*) by proposing to apply the phenomenological method to the experience of embodied existence, he “remained caught in the nets of transcendental idealism and never quite escaped the limits of theoretical cognition” (Kearney, 2010: 88). According to Kearney (2010: 88) it was only with Merleau-Ponty that a fully fledged *phenomenology of the flesh* was witnessed<sup>16</sup>.

### 1.3.2. Husserl’s *epoché* or phenomenological reduction

If knowledge is grounded in a more fundamental relation between consciousness and world than what the subject-object relation could conceive of, Husserl’s phenomenological method is

---

<sup>16</sup> Kearney, especially in his later work, is deeply influenced by Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the flesh. In *Anatheism* (2010), for example, Kearney shows how Merleau-Ponty’s sacramental vision of the everyday offers fresh insights into the *eucharistic* character of the sensible (Cf. 2010: 87–96).

intended to describe and intuit this essential functioning of consciousness as an activity of intentionality (Kearney, 1984: 3). Kearney (1984: 4) sees phenomenology as an attempt to return to and investigate “this creative nexus *between* consciousness and world, where reality originally and primordially *appears* to us (qua *phenomenon*) in our intentional, lived experience.” The phenomenological claim is that such an investigation allows one to arrive at “an intuition of essential truth: the true essences of things in themselves” (Kearney, 1984: 4).

According to Kearney (1998: 19) the phenomenological method does this “by (1) suspending the naturalistic prejudice which reduces human experience to empirically observable data; and (2) by acknowledging imagination as an indispensable agency for the disclosure and intuition of meaning.” In the Kantian terms used above, this suspension of prejudice (1) involves a temporary bracketing of the “how” question (Kant’s *modality*) in order to wrestle with the “what” question (Kant’s *quality*). Husserl held that such a temporary lifting up of actuality allowed phenomena to “speak for themselves,” thus making it possible to apprehend things in their essence (*eidos*) (Kearney, 1998: 19). In a reverse of the positivistic reduction of meanings to facts, “phenomenological *reduction*” (famously called Husserl’s *epoché*) involves a “leading back (*re-ducere*) to the essential essences of phenomena” (Kearney, 1998: 22).

It is here that imagination plays a vital role (2), not only in creating these “reduced” conditions, but also in a process that Husserl calls “free variation” or “ideation.” In the process of ideation the thing under investigation is allowed to “float freely as an ‘imaginary irreality’ ... amidst an infinitely open series of possibilities,” thus disclosing the essences of the “things themselves” (Kearney, 1998: 23). It is with this central role of the imagination in mind that the following curious statement of Husserl’s should be understood:

“the element which makes up the life of phenomenology, as of all eidetical sciences, is *fiction*, ... fiction is the source whence the knowledge of eternal truths draws its sustenance,” (Kearney, 1998: 19).

This vital move in the phenomenological approach plays an important role in Kearney’s own philosophical approach and is usually what he has in mind when he gives a phenomenological self-description as he does, for example, in *The God Who May Be*:

“Philosophically I would say that I am speaking from a phenomenological perspective, endeavouring as far as possible to offer a *descriptive account* of such phenomena as

*persona*, transfiguration, and desire, before crossing over to hermeneutic readings” (Kearney, 2001: 5 - my emphasis).

By “descriptive account” Kearney does not only mean the bracketing of normative considerations, but also the temporary bracketing of questions of existence in order to give an account of the possible *meaning* of the phenomena in question.<sup>17</sup>

### 1.3.3. Possibility over actuality

The freedom that Husserl’s phenomenological reduction provides for the imagination is best articulated in terms of an *as if* mode of consciousness. According to Kearney (1998: 16), the imagination is “a power capable of intending the unreal *as if* it were real, the absent *as if* it were present, the possible *as if* it were actual.” This *as if* attitude enables the imagination to “detach itself from perceptual data and reflect upon them” in ways that “can be alternated and adjusted at will for the purposes of clarity and definition” (Kearney, 1998: 22). Husserl’s famous example of a geometer (who imaginatively creates geometric models) illustrates the benefits of such an *as if* attitude for conceptual thinking and scientific knowledge (Kearney, 1998: 23). In this light Kearney (1998: 23) makes reference to Husserl’s dictum that “the science of pure possibilities precedes the science of actualities and alone makes it possible as a science.” Husserl thus anticipates Heidegger’s famous statement in *Being and Time* that “for phenomenology possibility stands higher than actuality” (Kearney, 1998: 23).

However, for Kearney this phenomenological principle goes further than simply being a methodological tool and its benefits reach beyond the confines of providing clarity in conceptual thinking. Husserl’s rethinking of the notion of possibility paves the way for Heidegger’s project of “overcoming” metaphysics “by dismantling the traditional priority of actuality over possibility” (Kearney, 1995: 35). This would in turn have a major impact on Kearney’s explorations of a poetics of the possible in his doctoral thesis *Poétique du possible* (1984) and later his search for an eschatological notion of God in *The God Who May Be* (2001). While Kearney ultimately finds Husserl’s teleological notion of the possible to be inadequate for his

---

<sup>17</sup>On various occasions, Kearney makes creative use of Husserl’s concept “*epoche*” by hermeneutically extending its meaning to other contexts than what Husserl would have had in mind. At one point in *Anatheism* he uses the idea as an important step in the life of faith similar to Socrates’ *docta ignoranta*: a confession of not-knowing that precedes any worthwhile coming-to-know (Kearney, 2010: 8). Later, following the lead of Raimon Panikkar, he uses it in an equally creative way as a lens through which to re-interpret “the secular” and “secularisation,” not only as threat to faith but as “a privileged position to save religion from itself by liberating it into a fidelity to the sacredness of this life” (Kearney, 2010: 141).



purposes<sup>18</sup> it nevertheless marks a turning point in Western thought in as far as it contests the classical “metaphysical opposition between the divinely real and the non-divinely possible” (Kearney, 2001: 83–84).

#### 1.3.4. Human freedom and responsibility

As mentioned above, Kearney does not understand “ideation” or, if you will, imagination’s capacity to consider and play out various possibilities, as just another stage in a philosophical method. For him it also operates at a pre-philosophical level of lived experience, acting as a “guarantor of human freedom” in as far as it enables people to transcend their present state of affairs and envision alternative possibilities of existence (Kearney, 1998: 23). The opposite is also true: in as far as we lose the ability “to envision alternative modes of experience transcending our present state of affairs, we despair – we fall back into unfreedom” (Kearney, 1998: 23).

If phenomenology’s high regard for imagination grants absolute freedom, it also calls humans to absolute *responsibility*.<sup>19</sup> Husserl’s notion of the telos as possibility is radically opposed to a necessary teleology (determinism) that would restrict freedom and choice (Kearney, 1998: 32). This notion of the telos as possible finds profound expression in Husserl’s distinction between *motivation* and *causality*. According to this distinction, “humans ... are motivationally ‘directed’ rather than causally ‘determined’ by the telos” (1998: 32). This indicates for Kearney “that the most sovereign possibility of our transcendental consciousness is such that we are entirely at liberty to realise it *or not*” (1998: 31–33, my emphasis). Thus, Kearney’s phenomenological heritage gives him the vision to recognise that the powers of imagination cut both ways: it holds humans ultimately responsible for evil, while endowing them with the ability to realise freedom and transform the world.

It is hard to overestimate the central role of this aspect of Kearney’s phenomenological heritage in his thought. If one considers Kearney’s personal sense of responsibility, as our biography of him illustrates, one could add that this notion of responsible humanity has spilled over into, or

---

<sup>18</sup> Husserl’s teleological notion of the possible remains elusive and ambivalent and is never given an adequate phenomenological account (Kearney, 1998: 33, 2001: 86). Furthermore, it remains a teleology of *universal reason* and so has little to do with an eschatological God that Kearney has in mind (Kearney, 2001: 87).

<sup>19</sup> The phenomenological-existential tradition’s focus on freedom and responsibility reaches a peak in Sartre’s existential imagination, which is well documented and criticised by Kearney in *The Wake of Imagination* (1988: 218–248) and *Poetics of Imagining* (1998: 56–86).



perhaps rather *from*, his lived experience. As we will see in the discussion that follows, Kearney extends this ethical claim on human freedom to his choice for an eschatological notion of God as *promise*; who, as promise, “remains powerless until and unless we *respond* to it” (Kearney, 2001: 4).

## 1.4. Martin Heidegger

Heidegger was one of Husserl’s first generation disciples and his landmark work, *Being and Time* (1927) was dedicated to this influential mentor of his. As already mentioned, Heidegger would advance Husserl’s phenomenology in order to expose the ontological and existential consequences thereof. Contrary to Husserl, who “tended to confine his analyses to an enquiry of the scientific and logical foundations of truth, Heidegger broadened their scope to include a concrete description of man’s finite being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-Sein*)” (Kearney, 1984: 4). In this sense, Heidegger’s initial project of a “fundamental ontology” is rightly described as an overlap between Husserl’s phenomenological approach and Aristotle’s concern for the ontological question (cf. Taminiaux, 1994: 39–47).

When dealing with Heidegger it is important to take account of the important “turn” that took place in his thought in the 1930’s. In what follows, we will attempt to trace the most important developments in Heidegger’s thought, making a distinction between his initial appropriation of Husserl and Aristotle in his project of a “fundamental ontology” (Heidegger I); and the writings that followed his famous “turn” (Heidegger II). As before, the point is by no means to provide a systematic or complete account of Heidegger’s thought, but to highlight the most relevant contributions made by Heidegger to the phenomenological/existential tradition that has been so influential for Kearney’s hermeneutic philosophy. As far as possible, the focus will be on Kearney’s own interpretation and use of Heidegger’s writings.<sup>20</sup>

### 1.4.1. Heidegger I - fundamental ontology

The publication of *Being and Time* (1927) marks a significant point in the articulation of Heidegger’s initial project and comprised the development of what he called a “fundamental

---

<sup>20</sup> Besides the many references to Kearney’s work, the following discussion of Heidegger draws heavily on Jacques Taminiaux’s introduction to his thought in Volume VIII (Continental Philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century) of the *Routledge History of Philosophy* (1994: 38-73). Richard Kearney was the editor of that particular volume. Taminiaux is also the author of *Heidegger and the Project of Fundamental Ontology* (1989) and *La fille de Thrace et le penseur professionnel: Arendt et Heidegger* (1992).

ontology.” As mentioned above, this project constituted an appropriation of the work of his mentor Husserl and the great Greek philosopher Aristotle. Heidegger was inspired by Aristotle’s privileging of the question of being to investigate the ontological foundation of the logical. At the same time he was convinced that Husserl’s phenomenological method would be the approach to be taken (Cf. Taminiaux, 1994: 39–47).

Taking Aristotle’s understanding of truth (*alētheia*) as his point of departure, Heidegger provides an ontological reappropriation of three of Husserl’s discoveries: “intentionality”, “categorical intuition” and the “*a priori*”.

In contrast to the correspondence notion of truth, Heidegger follows Aristotle by saying that truth is “the unconcealment of beings for an unconcealing being”. For Heidegger thus, truth is a matter of life or existence and *unconcealing* is characteristic of the “human way of being” (Taminiaux, 1994: 43). It is in this light that Heidegger reinterprets Husserl’s discovery of *intentionality* as the structure of the various modes of consciousness. For Heidegger this discovery revealed consciousness as *relatedness* – a relatedness that goes well beyond the structure of consciousness itself, to include “the fundamental character of the very life of each human being” (Taminiaux, 1994: 40). Thus, the quest for truth required an investigation beyond the traditional confines of logic towards a phenomenological investigation of the *de facto* life of an existing human being – as essentially *related*.

This leads to Heidegger’s *second* major reappropriation of Husserl – this time of his concept of *categorical intuition*. One of the categorical intuitions mentioned by Husserl finds expression in the uniquely human question of “the meaning of being” (Taminiaux, 1994: 41). Heidegger interpreted this to mean that an understanding of being is included in *de facto* human existence. A phenomenology of “the human way of being” (*Dasein*) thus reveals the human being as *that being which exists through understanding* – through interpreting itself “in terms of being” (1994: 41–43).<sup>21</sup> The question of the being of beings therefore becomes with Heidegger “inextricably related to the question of existence understood hermeneutically as *Dasein*” (Kearney, 1995: 13–14). With this important development “being as perception” (Husserl) becomes “being as *interpretation*.” With Heidegger, an ontology of human existence becomes a hermeneutics.

---

<sup>21</sup> According to Kearney (1995: 14), “Heidegger equates the temporalizing/projective powers of *Dasein* with those of what Kant called ‘productive imagination’.” This leads him to argue that Heidegger’s “*Dasein*, like its pseudonym, imagination, is a poetics of the possible” (1995: 17).

The *third* major discovery of Husserl's that Heidegger picks up on is his notion of the *a priori* and its inherently *temporal* consequences. In Husserl's terms the *a priori* character of intentional consciousness requires that consciousness itself must be temporal.<sup>22</sup> Once again Heidegger deepens a Husserlian notion to explore its ontological consequences, this time in order to demonstrate "that temporality is the only horizon within which we understand the meanings of Being" (Taminiaux, 1994: 42). For Heidegger, *Dasein*'s existence as a "being-in-the-world" (*in-der-Welt-sein*) discloses existence as *a priori* and therefore fundamentally temporal:<sup>23</sup> as a pre-given reality, being in "the world" implies a *past*, while on the other hand, the world as something "for which" (as a horizon of possibility) suggests that *Dasein* also anticipates the world as a *future*. Likewise, *Dasein*'s "being in" the world also discloses its temporality.<sup>24</sup> *Dasein* finds itself to be *thrown* into a world (*Befindlichkeit*) implying that existence includes "having been." On the other hand, *Dasein* exists through understanding (*Verstehen*) and does so by *projecting* itself towards a future.

Taminiaux (1994: 43) summarizes the three ontological "reappropriations" discussed above as follows:

"The ontological reappropriation of Husserl's discovery of intentionality taught him that human existence as such is a *relatedness to*. The reappropriation of Husserl's discovery of categorial intuition taught him that human existence, in its relatedness to, understands Being. Likewise, the appropriation of Husserl's discovery of the *a priori* taught him that time is at the core of the understanding of Being."

According to him (1994: 43) the three reappropriations of Husserl are all oriented by a single question, namely, "where is the source for the understanding of Being to be found?" In response to this question, Heidegger provides "an analysis of *Dasein* as the being who understands Being" (1994: 43). By thus locating the question of being in the meaning of human existence Heidegger's so-called "fundamental ontology" reorients Aristotle's contemplation (*theoria*) on

<sup>22</sup> As Taminiaux says, "for Husserl ... in order to be able to intend any intentional correlate, consciousness has to be a 'living present', a present which constantly articulates the 'retention' of what is just past with the anticipation (or 'protention') of what is going to happen" (1994: 42).

<sup>23</sup> Husserl's important notion of the *Lebenswelt* turns out to be foundational for Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* as a "being-in-the-world." *Da-sein* is a being there and then, "thrown" into a place and time where something can happen (1994: 43). Being-in-the-world refers to the fundamental experience of relatedness in which "the world" is not simply something "present-at-hand" but rather a "readiness-to-hand" (*Zuhandenheit*) and thus *Dasein*'s very *horizon of possibility*. As such "the world" refers to *Dasein*'s *a priori* "concern with an environment" implying that for *Dasein* an entity in the world is in the first place something "in-order-to" (1994: 49).

<sup>24</sup> Heidegger understands the "being-in" character of existence in terms of three *existentialia*: disposition (*Befindlichkeit*), understanding (*Verstehen*) and discourse (*Rede*).

being “exclusively towards the finite being of *Dasein* and its finite temporality” (Taminiaux, 1994: 46).

In his analysis of *Dasein*’s unique way of being, Heidegger once again returns to Aristotle; and in particular to the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle discusses the intellectual virtues and organises them hierarchically (Cf. Taminiaux, 1994: 43–46). Among Aristotle’s lower, *deliberative* excellences one comes across the two virtues of *techne* and *phronesis* with their respective correlates *poiesis* and *praxis*. *Techne*, or artistic knowledge, discloses truth (*aletheia*) in a particular manner that ultimately finds expression in a productive manner of being, namely, *poiesis*. For Aristotle *poiesis* is a way of being that “aims at an end *distinct* from itself,” and as a result produces *ta poioumena*: “those things shaped or formed by human acts” (Kearney, 1995: xii). *Techne*, as a form of knowledge, is contrasted with *phronesis* (practical knowledge). While *phronesis* is also a way of disclosing truth, it leads to *praxis*, i.e. that activity by which a person conducts his or her own life. Thus, in contrast to *poiesis*, *praxis* contains its end within itself: *Dasein* is its own *praxis*.

Heidegger made use of these distinctions between *techne-poiesis* and *phronesis-praxis* to conceptualise his own ontology of *Dasein*. According to him Aristotle was correct in placing *phronesis* above *techne* because *phronesis*, in accomplishing an end *within* itself (*praxis*), was ontologically superior to *techne* which is merely concerned with ends *outside* itself (*poiesis*) (Taminiaux, 1994: 44). This distinction became fundamental for Heidegger as a way of distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic existence of *Dasein*. According to Heidegger existence becomes inauthentic (*Uneigentlich*) when *Dasein* becomes preoccupied with ends outside of itself requiring various means or tools in order to achieve them. By contrast “*Dasein* authentically (*Eigentlich*) becomes a Self by confronting its ownmost potentiality for Being” in the manner of *phronesis* as “the resoluteness to exist in the highest possible manner” (Taminiaux, 1994: 44–45).<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> As Taminiaux (1994: 48) remarks the German words *Eigentlichkeit* and *Uneigentlichkeit* do not have a moral connotation, but rather refer to whether or not someone is properly their own being. For Heidegger inauthenticity is associated with “everydayness” as that mode of being which distracts *Dasein* from confronting its own existence by rather conforming to *Das Man*, the notorious “They,” who rule the realm of everydayness where “everybody is nobody” (Taminiaux, 1994: 44). By contrast *authentic* existence entails a withdrawal from the mode of everydayness in order to confront one’s own existence in its own-most possibilities (1994: 44).

It is at this point that *Dasein* has to confront its *finitude*. If authentic existence entails a confrontation with its ownmost being and potentialities, *Dasein* must also face the limits of its existence, namely, birth and death. As “a project which is thrown,” *Dasein*’s birth represents more than merely a moment in time when one began to exist, but its very “thrownness” as that which conditions its being and potentiality (Taminiaux, 1994: 51). Similarly, *Dasein*’s own end represents its *ultimate* possibility and thus is not simply an external limit to its existence (1994: 51). Death permeates existence and *Dasein* becomes an authentic self in as far as it takes ownership of its own finitude and thus becomes a being-towards-the-end (1994: 51). It is within this finite frame that temporality itself should be understood. Heidegger criticises Aristotle’s concept of time as an infinite, free-floating, sequence of “nows” and shows that *temporality itself is essentially finite* (1994: 53). Taminiaux (1994: 52-53) phrases it well:

“[Temporality] is the very process through which an intrinsically finite mode of Being opens itself to its own potentiality for Being and to other modes of Being. For the same reason, it is not enough to say that *Dasein*’s existence is temporal. Rather, *Dasein* *temporalizes*. Genuine time is temporalization and even self-temporalization. In its ownmost Being, *Dasein* exists in such a way that it runs ahead towards its own end (*Vorlaufen*), retrieves its own thrownness (*Wiederholung*), and renders present its own situation (*Gegenwärtigung*).”

For Heidegger, finite temporality as a “running ahead”, “retrieving” and “rendering present” is understood in terms of *ecstasis*. *Ec-stasis*, literally means “standing outside” and denotes for Heidegger the openness of *Dasein* towards the horizons of past, present and future. In accordance with Husserl’s notion that possibility takes priority over actuality, the three *ecstases* are united in the primacy of the future as *Dasein*’s fullest horizon of possibilities (Taminiaux, 1994: 52). Thus, according to Kearney (1995: 37), Heidegger’s fundamental ontology reveals time “as a horizon of possibilities which grounds the present, as an absence which possibilizes our being-present.” Thus, if Heidegger’s fundamental ontology bids us turn and face the limit of our existence as “thrown”, finite and temporal beings, it also invites us to discover that possibility is the site of actuality; that the horizon of possibilities is what grounds the present (1995: 37).

With the recognition of finite temporality and the discovery of possibility’s priority over actuality, it becomes clear why Heidegger understood his project of a fundamental ontology as a *Destruktion* or deconstruction of traditional metaphysics. By rediscovering the fundamental

relation between being and temporality, Heidegger sought to “overcome the standard metaphysical definitions of existence in terms of presence” (*ousia, existentia, substantia, res cogitans* etc.) and thus reverse “the traditional metaphysical priority of presence over possibility” (Kearney, 1995: 37). In addition, by demonstrating that the basic concepts of ancient philosophy, and the subsequent history of metaphysics, originate and find meaning in Dasein’s productive activity, Heidegger made this interpretive structure of being more explicit (1995: 36).

For Kearney, in particular, Heidegger’s notion of *Möglichkeit* in *Being and Time*...

“...represents a post-metaphysical understanding of the possible that shatters the notion of being as solid and substantial self-presence, exposing it to the temporalizing projects of transcendental imagination. I am a being who is always transcending myself toward my possibility because I am a being who marks time. Metaphysics hid the truth of being in hiding this fundamental liaison between being and time” (1995: 39).

A central part of the metaphysical tradition that succumbs to Heidegger’s deconstruction is what he famously called “onto-theology.” Heidegger was highly critical of the metaphysical concept of *theos* as the “first cause” or highest being that grounds all of being. From as early as Plato’s *Eidos* and Aristotle’s *Telos* Heidegger witnesses a reduction of the ontological play of *Sein* to a single divine *Seiend* (Kearney, 1995: 52).<sup>26</sup> Onto-theology represents an equivocation which, Heidegger believed, was as harmful to theology as it was for ontology, as this quote from a 1950-51 lecture series reveals:

“Christian theology, as opposed to onto-theology, speaks on the basis of a faith in Revelation. The Catholic theory of creation has tended to go against this by rationalizing Revelation. And so doing, it often refers to Aristotle. This not only leads to falsehoods but is quite unnecessary. It is even a degradation of the authentically religious content of theology. Revelation has no need of Aristotle; and we must also be very wary of interpreting Greek philosophy in scholastic (Christian) terms” (quoted in Kearney, 1995: 54).

Heidegger’s deconstruction of metaphysics thus included a concern to demarcate, with proper distinctions, between “the biblical considerations of God as proper subject of theology ... [and] the metaphysical concepts of God as first cause or entity” (Kearney, 1995: 52). More will be

---

<sup>26</sup> According to Kearney (1995: 58–59) “[the] list of ontotheological formulations of being as substantified presence includes: the Platonic concept of *eidos* as timeless and immutable oneness; the Aristotelian concept of *telos* as self-thinking thought; the Augustinian concept of divine being as self-loving love (*amor quo deus se ipsum amat*); the Thomistic/scholastic concept of permanent subsistence (*ipsum esse subsistens*); the Cartesian and Spinozist concept of the *res cogitans* as a self-sufficient substance echoing the divine self-causing cause (*ens causa sui*); and the rationalist concepts of objectivity (*Gegenwärtigung*), representation (*Repräsentanz*), and presence (*Vorhandenheit*).”



said of this below when we consider Kearney's critical discussion of Heidegger's "god of the poets." Before we do so, it is necessary to consider the famous "turn" in Heidegger's thought.

#### 1.4.2. Heidegger II – Works after the 'Kehre'

In 1933 Heidegger made the decision to support Hitler and subsequently became the first National Socialist rector of the University of Freiburg. Heidegger's Rectoral Address reveals a shift in his thinking, primarily from *Dasein* as the being of the individual to *Dasein* as the being of a "people-in-a-state", in particular as the German people (Taminiaux, 1994: 58). While at this stage Heidegger's project of a fundamental ontology remained intact, it did undergo a "significant metamorphosis," according to Taminiaux (1994: 58). Central to this shift was an understanding of being itself as intrinsically polemical and historical, likened to the "overpower" of destiny in the Promethean myth. Such a shift required a different response from a people-in-a-state, as the "there" of being (*Dasein*), in order to offer an appropriate "metaphysical reply" (1994: 59). For this purpose, Heidegger created space for an "authentic" *techne*, which, no longer confined to the inauthentic state of everydayness, could be ontologically creative in its ability to "set-in-work Being itself in its unconcealment" (Taminiaux, 1994: 60).

This complicity with Nazism and its accompanying shift in thought should not be confused with Heidegger's so called *Kehre*. According to Taminiaux (1994: 61) however, it did represent the "metaphysical climax" of his fundamental ontology that would, ultimately, bring this project to a decisive end. The "turning" in Heidegger's thought took place during the late second half of the 1930's and is most clearly witnessed to by his works published after the Second World War<sup>27</sup>. While the turn in Heidegger's thought is complex and disputed, I will nevertheless attempt to name some of the most prominent shifts that it represents, especially as Kearney understands it.

At the outset, it is important to note that Kearney takes Heidegger's self-understanding of his turn seriously. With reference to an introduction written by Heidegger himself in WJ Richardson's *Heidegger: From Phenomenology to Thought*, Kearney notes that the "thought of Heidegger II is to be understood as a deepening of, rather than a deviation from, Heidegger I"

---

<sup>27</sup> Many reasons are given for why Heidegger gave up on his project of fundamental ontology and the question remains disputed. Nevertheless, what took place in the *Kehre* can be witnessed by comparing the successive versions of Heidegger's essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*, or by Heidegger's turn in the *Nietzschebuch*: from being in agreement with Nietzsche in his first lecture courses (1936-9) to being polemically opposed to him in the latter (1939-41). Hannah Arendt explains this polemical turn against Nietzsche as the unfolding of Heidegger's attempt to discard his own voluntarist inclinations (cf. Taminiaux, 1994: 63-4).

(1995: 44). What distinguishes Heidegger II most clearly for Kearney from the early Heidegger is that the notion of “the possible” is considered “in terms of Being itself rather than of the Being of *Dasein* or transcendental imagination” (1995: 43). What consequently takes place is a decentring of *Dasein* as subject in order to emphasise the extent to which *being itself* should be thought in terms of the possible. Thus, in his *Letter on Humanism* (1947), Heidegger supplements the temporalizing, and therefore possibilizing (*ermöglichen*) capabilities of *Dasein*, with the possibilizing of being itself (*vermögen*) as “the quiet power of the possible” that possibilizes *Dasein*:

“When I speak of the “quiet power of the possible,” I do not mean the possible of a merely represented *possibilitas*, nor the *potentia* as *essentia* of an *actus* of the *existentia*, but Being itself, which in its loving potency [*das Mögend*] possibilizes [*vermag*] thought and thus also the essence of man, which means in turn his relationship to Being. To possibilize [*vermögen*] something is to sustain it in its essence, to retain it in its element” (quote from Kearney, 1995: 44).

With this shift in perspective, there is also a change in the “overall tonality [of Heidegger’s writings after the Second World War] which is more meditative and open to enigmas than voluntarist and proclamatory” (Taminiaux, 1994: 61). The latest version of *The Origin of the Work of Art* witnesses an important shift from Heidegger’s early contempt for “everydayness” to a renewed appreciation for “dwelling” – no longer as that which obstructs thought, but as a strangeness in itself, inviting thought and meditation (1994: 62). A similar shift is seen in the notion of *truth* between earlier versions and the latest version of *The Origin of the Work of Art*: “whereas the early versions of the essay maintain the priority of *Dasein* regarding truth by making the *Dasein* of a people the locus of truth, the final version characterises unconcealment as a clearing (*Lichtung*) to which human beings belong and are exposed” (1994: 62).

Along with this, there is a change in the understanding of *Dasein*’s resoluteness and creativity, which, no longer seen exclusively as a project of the Self in terms of Promethean self assertion, becomes a receptive attitude before the concealment and unconcealment of being. Art is now seen as a “setting-into-work” of truth over against “the self-sovereign subject’s performance of genius” (Taminiaux, 1994: 63; Kearney, 1995: 48). Taminiaux (1994: 67) poignantly sums up the existential significance of this change: “Whereas in fundamental ontology the human *Dasein* was the lieutenant of nothingness, it is now the shepherd of Being. Whereas fundamental ontology somehow conflated thinking and willing, thinking is now a matter of not-willing, of



letting-be (*Gelassenheit*), and even of thanking.” With this move from *Dasein* to *Being*, Heidegger II provides a critique of modern subjectivism, humanism and the *Gestell* of modern technology – in which thinking had become replaced by calculation (1994: 66-67).

### 1.4.3. Kearney’s critical appropriation of Heidegger

It is important to note, once again, that Kearney, in his hermeneutic appropriation of Heidegger makes an attempt to balance Heidegger’s early work in *Being and Time* with the enigmatic insights of the latter; and to reinterpret Heidegger’s later emphasis on being itself in light of the initial project of fundamental ontology. This brings us to the important question of what exactly Kearney came to learn from Heidegger. We suggested in the introduction of this chapter that Kearney’s hermeneutic philosophy is touched and inspired by Heidegger’s ontology of understanding – but could we say in what way? Three engagements with Heidegger stand out.

#### 1.4.3.1. *The Hermeneutic Circle*

Heidegger’s contribution to the phenomenological tradition is uniquely influential in as far as his fundamental ontology facilitates a radical transformation from philosophical hermeneutics to *hermeneutic philosophy*. It is primarily here, in its hermeneutic consequences, that Heidegger’s thought most influenced Kearney’s phenomenological inheritance.

Husserl’s phenomenology, for the most part, remained trapped in the “I” of subjective consciousness and his “return to the things in themselves” (*reducere*) remained idealistic in its presumption that pure immanence could be reached by bracketing the contingencies of the natural world. According to Kearney, Heidegger’s phenomenological description of man’s finite being-in-the-world brings this ideal of knowledge to its limits by laying bare the radical finitude of consciousness and humanity’s rootedness in “a historical horizon of language whose meanings precede our own subjective creations” (Kearney, 2004: 16).

Thus, with his reformulation of the “hermeneutic circle,” as a characteristic of *Dasein*’s unique manner of being in the world with others, Heidegger profoundly challenged idealist phenomenology and surpassed it *towards hermeneutics*. According to Kearney (2004: 16):

“Heidegger’s phenomenological ontology clearly showed [that] consciousness is bound by a relation of *belonging* to past sedimentations and future projects of meaning, a ‘hermeneutic circle’ wherein each subjectivity finds itself already included in an intersubjective world who’s (sic) significations encompass it and escape it on every side.

Consequently, it is not sufficient simply to describe meaning as it *appears*; we are also obliged to interpret it as it *conceals* itself. This leads us inevitably beyond a phenomenological idealism of pure reflection to a phenomenological hermeneutics of interpretation which acknowledges that meaning is never first and foremost *for me*.<sup>28</sup>

This rediscovery of the hermeneutic circle would have a profound effect on the great hermeneutic thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Gadamer and Ricoeur, and thus also on Kearney. Consequently, when Kearney speaks of taking a “phenomenological approach”, he means, following his mentor Ricoeur, a *hermeneutic* phenomenology which takes the consequences of Heidegger’s hermeneutic circle seriously. However, as we already noted, Ricoeur and (by extension) Kearney propose to take a longer route via “the various inevitable detours which interpretation undergoes through language, myth, ideology, the unconscious and so on – *before* it arrives at the ultimate limit of Being” (Kearney, 2004: 22).<sup>28</sup>

#### 1.4.3.2. *Philosophy of Existence*

As the title of this chapter indicates, Kearney’s heritage is equally influenced by an *existential* tradition as it is marked by a phenomenological one. Of course, Heidegger stands out as one of the great existential thinkers and one could say that his phenomenology, along with that of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, is an *existential* phenomenology. Our chapter subtitle also suggests that Kearney’s phenomenological-existential heritage involves a turn to “face the limit.” Heidegger’s existential philosophy facilitates such a turn in two important ways.

Firstly, whereas Husserl made important ground in positioning consciousness within a *Lebenswelt*, Heidegger went on to reveal the *finitude*, and therefore, the *limits* involved with *Dasein*’s “thrownness” in the world “with others.” While our existence is “a hermeneutic imagining which leads to an open future,” it is *finite* in as far as the horizon of the world – as *Umwelt* and *Mitwelt* – is the horizon of our possibilities (Kearney, 1995: 38). This means that our ultimate possibility is an *impossibility*: death, as the end of my time (*das Möglichkeit der Nicht-mehr-Dasein-könnens*). Kearney’s “philosophy at the limit” takes the finitude of human

---

<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur reveals the following limitation of Heidegger’s Analytic of *Dasein* as a failure to respond to the initial hermeneutic problem: “with Heidegger’s radical manner of questioning, the problems that initiated our investigation not only remain unresolved but are lost from sight. How, we asked, can an organon be given to exegesis, to the clear comprehension of texts? How can the conflict of rival interpretations be arbitrated? These problems are not properly considered in a fundamental hermeneutics, and this by design: this hermeneutics is intended not to resolve them but to dissolve them.”

existence seriously, but as he notes in a section on humour in *Anatheism* – not too seriously (2010: 42–43).<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, Kearney is concerned with *authentically* thinking through various actual limit-situations confronting the individual and society. These include the finitude of memory<sup>30</sup>, evil<sup>31</sup>, terrorism<sup>32</sup>, melancholy<sup>33</sup>, xenophobia<sup>34</sup>, forgiveness<sup>35</sup> and the monstrous sublime<sup>36</sup>. Once again, these explorations reveal how Kearney goes beyond Heidegger by understanding existence as *embodied* and *immersed*; and by viewing authentic life is a legitimate possibility *for everybody*, *within* common, everyday existence. As Kearney (2006a: 6) points out, Heidegger's *Dasein* “remains a universal, transcendental structure” and “has no body, no sex, no unconscious, no unique answerability to the other.” Kearney seeks to remedy this disparity, especially in his thinking about faith and religion, by facilitating a further phenomenological return (*reducere*) to “the flesh” and a sacramental reappraisal of “mundane” existence.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Cf. 3.4.2.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. especially Part Two of *On Stories* (2002:17-69), Chapter 8 of *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003a: 179–190); and his book chapters, *Narrative and the Ethics of Remembrance*, in J. Morley & J. Phillips, ed. “Imagination and Its Pathologies”. Cambridge: MIT Press (2003: 51-63); and *Exchanging Memories: Between Poetics and Ethics*, in W. Schwarz, ed. “Memories: Histories, Theories, Debates”. New York: Fordham University Press (2003a: 83–108).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. especially Chapter 4 of *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003a: 83–108); his book chapter, *Time, Evil, and Narrative: Ricoeur on Augustine* in J. D. Caputo & M. J. Scanlon, eds. “Augustine and Postmodernism.” Indiana: Indiana University Press (2005b: 144–158); and his article, *On the Hermeneutics of Evil* in “Revue de métaphysique et de morale”, 50(2) (2006b: 197–215),

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Chapter 5, “On Terror”, of *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003a: 109–137); and his lengthy article, *Thinking After Terror: An Interreligious Challenge* in “Journal of the Interdisciplinary Crossroads”, 2(1) (2005c: 1–96).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Chapter 7, “Melancholy: between gods and monsters,” of *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003a: 163–178)

<sup>34</sup> Cf. the Introduction, Conclusion and first three chapters of *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003a); his book chapter, *Welcoming the Stranger*, in P. O. Duibhir, R. Mc Daid, & A. O'Shea, eds. “All Changed? Culture and Identity in Contemporary Ireland.” Dublin: Duras Press (2011: 167–178); and joint introductory chapter, *At the Threshold: Foreigners, Strangers, Others*, in R. Kearney & K. Semonovitch, eds. “Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality.” New York: Fordham University Press (Kearney & Semonovitch, 2011).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. his book chapter, *Forgiveness at the Limit - Impossible or Possible?* in F. O'Rourke, ed. “What happened in and to Moral Philosophy in the twentieth century? Philosophical Essays in Honor of Alasdair MacIntyre.” Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, (2013: 304–320).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Chapters 4 and 9 of *Strangers, God and Monsters* (2003a).

<sup>37</sup> Kearney often treats the return to the flesh and the return to the everyday together. In this regard see Kearney's chapters 4 and 5 of *Anatheism* (2010: 85–100; 101–130) entitled, “In the Flesh” and “In the Text” respectively. “In the Flesh” draws on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the flesh, while the same line of thinking is extended in “In the Text” with reference to the modern novelists Joyce, Proust and Woolf and their capacity to mediate “epiphanies of the everyday.” See also, Kearney's chapter *Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology* in J. P. Manoussakis, ed. “After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy”. New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 3–20, where Kearney conceptualises such a turn in terms of a “fourth phenomenological reduction.”

This leads to a second existential turn towards the limit. Whereas Husserl was influential in his insights into human freedom and responsibility, Heidegger, with his notion of authentic existence, revealed the existential nature of such freedom and responsibility: by exposing freedom and responsibility to the involuntary limits facing *Dasein*, he revealed the inauthenticity involved in attempting to evade them. Once again, Kearney not only learns from Heidegger, but goes beyond him to include our daily social, moral and political relations within the constitution of *Dasein* itself – something for which Heidegger was unprepared<sup>38</sup>:

“This hermeneutic task sketched out by Heidegger, confronts the self with the limit of its own possibility in death; but, at this point of the analysis, it appears to slip back into transcendental solipsism rather than opening the self toward an ethics of responsibility to one’s fellow humans. This is a crucial lacuna.” (Kearney, 1995: 39)

As the discussion of Kearney’s phenomenology of the *persona* will illustrate, Kearney complements Heidegger’s being-with-the-other, which counted the other as little more than what distracts us from “authentic existence”, with a notion of being-for-the-other. Thus, “facing the limit” also carries the more personal, ethical meaning of giving a “face” (*prosopon*) to the limit – transfiguring the other from “pure limit” into a *persona* “who urgently solicits me, bidding me answer in each concrete situation, ‘here I am’” (Kearney, 2001: 18).

#### 1.4.3.3. *Poetics of the Possible*

The final major influence by Heidegger on Kearney comes in the form of Kearney’s *poetics of the possible*. To understand the context of this important notion we must turn to Kearney’s volume, *Poetics of Modernity: toward a hermeneutic imagination* (1995), where he seeks to address *value* as “a presiding anxiety of our time” (1995: xi).<sup>39</sup> As the subtitle of the work indicates, Kearney’s response to the crisis is his notion of a *hermeneutic imagination* by which he wants to “think through the hermeneutic relationship of poetics [*poiesis*] and ethics [*phronesis*]” (1995: xvi). Whereas post-enlightenment thought tended to separate *poiesis* and

<sup>38</sup> All of Kearney’s work shows that he is keenly aware of the social, political and moral relations, and the consequences of thought for these spheres. In *Anatheism* Kearney (2010: 133–165) reveals this sensitivity as he follows two sacramental, poetic chapters (cf. previous note) with two chapters, “In the World” and “In the Act,” in which he asks: “what does it mean to accept the sacred stranger in the secular universe? What is involved in translating epiphanies of transcendence into the immanence of everyday action? What are the practical implications of moving from sacred imagination to a sacred praxis of peace and justice?”

<sup>39</sup> Kearney sees evidence of a crisis in “the growing persuasion,” among contemporary thinkers, “that value is becoming ever more equivocal, elusive, even absent” (1995: xi). For him this “crisis” is related to the “recurrent motifs of our times” such as “the death of God”, “the end of art/imagination/man” and “the crisis of morality” (1995: xi).

*phronesis*, thus overplaying the tension between aesthetics and ethics, Kearney seeks to restore a constructive relationship between Aristotle's two deliberative virtues.

It is with this endeavour in mind that Kearney turns to Heidegger in order to explore a "poetics of the possible." Kearney argues that *Dasein*, "in its free and spontaneous activity of projecting and understanding its existential possibilities," discloses itself as *poiesis* – "as an event of productive imagination" (Kearney, 1995: 14; 17). According to Kearney, Heidegger employs the verb *ermöglichen*, meaning to "make or render possible," to designate the most fundamental existential activity of *Dasein*. Kearney combines this insight with what he learnt from the later Heidegger. Thus, in contrast to "the modern metaphysics of subjectivity," a poetics of the possible is "to be understood ... as an imaginative caretaking of being, a guarding over the house of being (which is language understood in the broadest sense)" (1995: 48). For Kearney this means that the work of imagination is a *hermeneutic* task in as far as it "acknowledges that language, as the house of being, is the "master of man" who first speaks to man; and that it is only when one has *listened* that poetry issues in speech" (1995: 48). Such a hermeneutic poetics privileges metaphors of "dwelling on earth", "building with care", "loving the possible" and "drawing from the well": "All creation is a drawing, as of water from a spring," says Heidegger (Kearney, 1995: 48).

While Kearney finds a valuable resource in Heidegger's post-metaphysical rethinking of possibility over actuality and the accompanying value given to *poiesis*, Kearney approaches with great caution. In a chapter on Heidegger's phenomenology of the sacred and his choice for the "god of the poets," Kearney (1995: 50–64) illustrates that, ultimately, his poetic dwelling is nothing more than "to let things be in their being." Such a passive attitude will not do for Kearney:

"Whatever the implications of such an apocalyptic poetics for a pliable attitude to political evils like fascism and war – and in Heidegger's case they are serious – its implications for the question of God are those of noncommittal quietism, an endless waiting for Godot" (1995: 58).

Kearney points out that Heidegger's poetical ontology is purely "phenomenological description, not ethical prescription," making it a-moral or non-moral, yet not necessarily immoral (1995: 63). He contrasts Heidegger's phenomenology of the sacred with an eschatological notion of God informed by divine revelation in history.

What distinguishes such an eschatology of justice most clearly from Heidegger's phenomenology of the sacred, is how each understands the appropriate human *response* to a "saving God." According to Heidegger: "[the] only possibility remaining to us in thought and in poetry is to remain available for the manifestation of this God or for the absence of this God in our decline" (cited in Kearney, 1995: 58). By contrast Kearney's eschatological God takes the form of a "radical transcendence which ... reveals itself to believers as a call to faith and to ethical action ... and depends for its actualization on the historical actions of prophecy, covenant, and commitment" (1995: 61). Thus, while Heidegger's waiting for "saving God" involves a passive, non-committal waiting (*warten*); an eschatological notion of the coming Kingdom finds expression in an urgent expectancy (*erwarten*) that impels us to action. While Heidegger's poetics of the sacred is content with stating God's absence; an eschatological poetics seeks to motivate and possibilize acts of justice and love (1995: 62-64).

To conclude this discussion on poetics: Kearney draws richly from Heidegger's thinking on possibility as a phenomenological category and, along with this, the revival of human creativity or *poiesis* as a way of *possibilizing* what may (within an actual situation) seem *impossible*. While Heidegger's existentialism bids us: "behold the limit!" – his claim that possibility has priority over actuality is a discovery, at the limit, of the reciprocal human capacity to *possibilize* and *be possibilized*. However, Kearney recognises that such a discovery may not remain at the level of "pure phenomenological description" devoid of hermeneutic engagement with tradition, critical vigilance and ethical responsibility. Like his mentor Ricoeur, Kearney views *phronesis* and *poiesis* in a complementary relationship.<sup>40</sup> This *hermeneutic* commitment to keep poetics and ethics in creative tension shows when Kearney turns to texts from the Judeo-Christian, prophetic tradition with its eschatological hope in a coming Kingdom in developing his poetics of the possible. The explicitly hermeneutic tenets of such a move will be the focus of our Chapter Two.

---

<sup>40</sup> Such a relationship becomes clear from a hermeneutic perspective that takes actual poetic forms such as narrative, symbol and metaphor seriously while recognising the world of action as the origin and end of *poiesis*. Commenting on narrative, for instance, Kearney says the following in *Poetics of Modernity* (1995: xi): "If poetics recognizes its bond to ethics and acknowledges its *origin* and *end* in the world of action, then, far from being a threat to responsibility, *poiesis* becomes its guarantor... the *configuring* act of poetics, carried out by productive imagination in the text, is one which presupposes the *prefiguring* act of our everyday temporal experience and culminates in the *refiguring* act whereby textual narratives return us to a world of action. When the story is over we re-enter our life-worlds transformed, however imperceptibly."



## 1.5. Kearney's Contribution towards a Phenomenology of the *Persona*

### 1.5.1. Introduction

Having shed some light on Richard Kearney's phenomenological-existential inheritance, it may be helpful to reflect on how he employs and extends this heritage by providing a phenomenological account of his own. In an opening chapter of his book *The God Who May Be*, called "Toward a Phenomenology of the *Persona*," Kearney gives an account of the Other that is, at once deeply informed by the heritage passed on by Husserl and Heidegger, while gaining significant new ground by critically engaging with "post-Heideggerian accounts of the self-other relation (Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, Kristeva, Ricoeur, and Derrida)" and hermeneutically retrieving resources from the Judeo-Christian tradition (in this case especially, the Greek Christian tradition).

Kearney's description of the *persona* plays a pivotal role in his book as an important interpretive lens for his subsequent hermeneutic readings of Biblical texts and even contributes to criteria by which Kearney would suggest one could discern between conflicting interpretations. Indeed, according to David Tracy, Kearney's concept of the *persona* is perhaps, "philosophically and theologically, [the] most important intellectual moment in the book" (Sheppard, 2004: 873). By retracing Kearney's argument here, in continuity with our discussion thus far, the hope is to gain an appreciation for Kearney's *own* phenomenological approach. It should also however, offer insight into the hermeneutic character of Kearney's thought and so serve as a bridge by which to cross over into a more explicit discussion of Kearney's interpretive approach. This re-tracing of his argument will, as far as possible, be done using Kearney's own words – his use of language is figurative and profoundly suggestive, without being obscure.

A final word before we turn to the *persona* on one of the primary theses of this study, namely, that Kearney attempts to think "at the limit." If the phenomenological tradition has taught us anything, it is that any enquiry of "the limit," "limitations" or "limit-situations," for all its (perhaps underestimated) geographic language and imagery, cannot be divorced from an enquiry into human existence, the self-other relation, and therefore also the human self. Here, more than anywhere else, Kearney turns to "face" the limit (both meanings intended) in an attempt to offer a way of dealing with the perplexities, perils and possibilities that emerge as we come face to face *with, at, or across* the limit. If Kearney's hermeneutics is a *transfiguring* that takes place at

the limit, and if his debates with post-modern thinkers is a vital *limiting* of hermeneutics, Kearney's phenomenology of the *persona* helps to provide the logic by which to negotiate these mediations. All the more reason to consider carefully what he says about the *persona*.

### 1.5.2. *Persona* as "Figure of the Other"

"Each person embodies a *persona*," he begins:

"*Persona* is that eschatological aura of "possibility" which eludes but informs a person's actual presence here and now. I use it here as another word for the otherness of the other; just as I use "person" to refer to my fellow in so far as he/she is the same or similar to me. At a purely phenomenological level, *persona* is all that in others exceeds my searching gaze, safeguarding their inimitable and unique singularity" (2001: 10).<sup>41</sup>

*Persona* represents for Kearney that elusive aspect of another person that at once informs him/her and yet surpasses beyond what consciousness could possibly grant me of that person. By "consciousness" Kearney means the whole package: the other's *persona* is "beyond my *intentional* horizons of re-tention and pro-tention;" beyond the "presenting consciousness" of *perception*; beyond the "presentifying consciousness" of *imagination*; and beyond the *signifying* abilities of consciousness to name and categorize (10). In short, the *persona* is "what escapes me toward another past that I cannot recover and another future I cannot predict" (10).

And yet, Kearney suggests, it is this "beyondness" that prompts language "to speak *figuratively* about it, deploying imagination and interpretation to overreach their normal limits in efforts to grasp it – especially in the guise of metaphor and narrative" (10 - my emphasis). And so Kearney is not the first person to have embarked on such a *figurative* exercise. According to him, it is what religions have tried to say, if with undesired consequences, by the term "spirit" (*pneuma/anima/âme/Geist*) and he likens his *persona* to Levinas' *la trace d'autrui* and Derrida's "alterity" (10). Accordingly, Kearney proposes to "develop the notion of *persona* in terms of a radical phenomenology of *transfiguration*" (10 - my emphasis). With the concept of "transfiguration" Kearney seems to suggest a "con-figuring" of the other that preserves the *persona's* "beyondness" (*trans-*) while paradoxically realising something of its elusive presence: "To configure the other as a *persona* is to grasp him/her as present in absence, as both incarnate in flesh and transcendent in time" (10).

---

<sup>41</sup> From here on, in this chapter, references to Kearney's *The God Who May Be* (2001) will be indicated by page number only.



Kearney immediately recognises that “this is not an easy matter,” for, if every authentic encounter with an other involves *configuring* him/her in some way, the possibility of *disfiguring* the other is an ever present hazard (10). This happens whenever one loses sight of the paradox involved in configuring by, either regarding “someone as pure presence (thing), or pure absence (nothing)” (10). According to Kearney, such disfiguring of the other takes on various forms in contemporary culture, often by somehow losing touch with the *as if* proviso of the *persona*, i.e. that “[the] other always appears *as if* he/she is actually present” (10).

On the one extreme, we tend to ignore this *as if* and “presume to have others literally before us, to appropriate them to our scheme of things, reading them off against our grids of understanding and identification” (10).<sup>42</sup> On the other side of the spectrum, ignoring the *as if presence* of the *persona* can lead to a form of idolatry in which the other’s “*flesh-and-blood thereness*” is traded in for absolute possession of the *persona*’s transcendence (11).<sup>43</sup> In both cases, the *persona*, and therefore, the other, is lost. What makes discerning and averting these dangers more difficult in a post-modern culture are the ways in which the *as if* is eclipsed by the unlikely duo of *literalism* and *fetishism*, thus conflating “the orders of the possible and the actual, the fictional and the empirical (11).<sup>44</sup>

As an alternative, Kearney proposes that we obviate these extremes by thinking the *persona* in terms of three different, yet complementary, figurative concepts: as *eschaton*, as *chiasm* and as *prosopon*. Each of these notions is rich in meaning and deserves separate attention.

### 1.5.3. *Persona* as “Eschaton”

According to Kearney an eschatological notion of the *persona* primarily serves to vouchsafe “the irreducible finality of the other as eschaton” (12). By “eschaton,” Kearney means “an end without an end – an end that escapes and surprises us, like a thief in the night” and strongly opposes this to “telos” as a “fulfillable, predictable, foreseeable goal” that offers immanent closure (12). The most striking consequence of regarding the *persona* eschatologically is that it reveals the other as that before which we are *powerless*: “Before the other we are no longer able to be able. If anything, it is the other who, once we first confront our primary disablement, re-

<sup>42</sup> Stereotyping is a prevalent example of this form of disfiguring.

<sup>43</sup> Besides religious idolatry, Kearney (2001: 11) sees the contemporary celebrity cult as an example of this form of disfiguring.

<sup>44</sup> According to Kearney (2001: 11), this “strange collusion” is “witnessed ... in the religious world, between the seeming extremes of fundamentalism and New Ageism.”

enables us” (12). Quoting Levinas, Kearney points to a vital link between temporality, futurity and alterity: “the future is that which is not grasped ... the relation with the future is the relation with the other.”<sup>45</sup> As eschaton, therefore, the *persona*’s future possibilities are revealed as “impossible for me (to realize, possess, grasp). The vertical ‘may-be’ of the other is irreducible to *my* set of possibilities or powers: my ‘can-be’” (12).

As such, as *eschaton*, the *persona* always evades being possessed and “resists the lure of presence” (12). Once again, Kearney quotes Levinas to express something of the *persona*’s presence as absence: “The relation with the other is the absence of the other, not absence pure and simple, not absence as pure noting (*néant*), but absence in a futural horizon, an absence which is time” (12). Yet, while the *persona* itself may be a “non-presence” and may itself not “take place,” it is an absence that *gives place* to the person – allowing the human person to *take place* in flesh and blood. Kearney sees the *persona* functioning as a “potential space” or no-place, yet one that is always mediated in and through a particular human body, “inseparable from *this* person of flesh and blood, here and now” (13). Thus, having learnt from Merleau-Ponty that the body is the primary locus of the *persona*, Kearney insists that the *persona* is not a “disembodied soul,” “some impersonal anonymous presence,” “formal condition of possibility,” or “archaic and formless receptacle” (13). The eschatological *persona*, as the guarantor of singularity and uniqueness, “gives itself in and through the incarnate body,” which “inscribes a singular style and manner of existing that is unique to each person” (14).

By viewing the *persona* from an eschatological perspective Kearney also sheds light on *violations* against the other. Confronted by its own insecurity and fragility before the other, the ego may compensate for the reality of the *persona* with infantile fantasies of power and omnipotence (12). Many, under the spell of their own “can-be,” move in on the other to grasp, possess and realise their own being – at the expense of the other’s “may-be.” Besides such “I-It relations of coercion,” Kearney recognises that compromise of the other’s irreducible alterity may also take on the more subtle form of “symmetrical I-Thou relations” in which “the Thou plays the role of another I: my mirror image, myself by proxy, ego in drag” (13). In the context of inter-personal relationships then, even under the name of “love,” appropriation of the other’s *persona* may be sought in an attempt to fuse and become one.

---

<sup>45</sup> The quotes from Emmanuel Levinas in this paragraph and the next are from *Le Temps et l'autre* (Paris: Arthaud, 1984), p. 64 and p. 185 respectively.

But Kearney extends this critique of the “drive to fuse” beyond the personal to expose what Lacan, Levinas and Kristeva, in their various ways, have exposed as projections that “subordinate singular others to some totalising One: the Same-One who is, at bottom, no more than the sum of our ego-fantasies” (14). Telling is his reference to Kristeva’s unmasking of the underlying *narcissism* of onto-theological concepts of the divine as “Self-Loving-Love,” “Self-Thinking-Thought,” “Self-Causing-Cause” and “Self-Desiring-Desire” (15).<sup>46</sup> Kearney contrasts this relation of “one-for-itself-in-itself” with what he calls the “eschatological universality of the Other,” marked by a relation of “one-for-the-other” (15). Unlike totalising “regimes,” Kearney’s eschatological “universal” – a “possible co-existence of unique *personas*” – is a “possibility still to be attained, heralding from an open future,” and therefore as *promise* rather than acquisition (15-16). Finally, Kearney uses the patristic metaphor of *perichoresis* to describe this promise of the eschatological universal as an “interplay of differing *personas*, meeting without fusing, communing without totalising, discoursing without dissolving” (15).

In his attempt to provide a phenomenological account of the *persona*, Kearney acknowledges that his eschatological *persona* has already surpassed phenomenology in a Husserlian sense of an eidetics of intentional consciousness. With its asymmetrical priority of the other, the “phenomenon of the *persona* calls for a new quasi-phenomenology, mobilized by ethics rather than eidetics” (16). As that which “supersedes every presentation or re-presentation which seeks to apprehend it as intuitive adequation,” Kearney recognises the need for *figurative* figurations of the *persona* that are able to do justice to the *ethical* and *temporal* consequences of viewing the *persona* as eschaton (16). Inspired by Levinas’s *visage*, as “the proximate neighbour (sic) as transcendence,” Kearney develops the notions of the *persona* as “chiasm” and “*prosopon*” respectively to further describe the ethical temporality and inter-subjectivity underlying the eschatological *persona*. We turn first to the image of the chiasm.

#### 1.5.4. *Persona* as “Chiasm”

Kearney uses the figure of a *chiasmus* or crossover with the person to help make sense of the paradoxical phenomenon of the *persona*: as presence in absence; *u-topia* through (*trans*) *topos*; no-thing through the *thingness* of the body; infinite through the finite; transcendence in and

---

<sup>46</sup> Kearney argues that even Heidegger’s critique of onto-theology remained trapped within this logocentric tradition with his solipsistic *Dasein* that exists only for itself (cf. 2001: 17).

through, but never reducible to, immanence; the a-chronic disrupting the synchronic. As Kearney says, the *persona*...

“... never actually appears at all, as such, in that it has already *come and gone*, leaving only its trace; or is *still to come*, outstripping every figuration on my part. The *persona* hails and haunts me *before* I even begin to represent it *as if* it were present before me” (16).

With the dynamic image of the chiasm, borrowed from Merleau-Ponty’s crisscrossing lines or two-sided sleeve, Kearney wants to signal the ethical type of temporality that is implied in the idioms of “already,” “prior,” “before,” “after” and “still to come” (16):

“*Persona* has always already crossed the person and yet is still always about to do so. That is why it can never be caught in the lure of some pure moment cut off from the differentiating traces of past and future. It marks a time that is always *more*, remaindered, excessive, sabbatical, surplus. And yet this extra-time reveals itself in time, in what Walter Benjamin called the *Jetztzeit* – the incursion of the eternal in the moment.”

Kearney uses terms such as “icon,” “trace,” “visage,” and “passage” to express something of what it means to *figure* the *persona*, as it crosses through (*trans*) the person before you, without reducing it to any particular configuration (17-18). What remains for us before the *persona* is “to behold the other as an *icon* for the *passage* of the infinite,” to recall the *trace* left behind in the trail of the *persona*, or to figure and play out one’s role, scripted by the *persona*, as one-for-the-other before the *visage* of the neighbour (17 – my emphasis). Such moments are always accompanied by the refusal, says Kearney, “to construe the infinite as some other being *hiding behind* the other” (for that would be Platonism), or “the other person as divine” (for that would be idolatry).

#### 1.5.5. *Persona* as “*Prosopon*”

Drawing on the Greek poetic and patristic traditions, Kearney retrieves the term “*prosopon*” to further transcribe the dynamic character of the *persona* (which was Tertullian’s Latin translation of the Greek *prosopon*). As with the Latin *persona*, the Greek *prosopon*, for Kearney, “signals the otherness of the other in and through the flesh-and-blood person here before me” (18). In continuity with the *persona* as chiasm, the *prosopon-persona* refers to the phenomenon of “inscribing the trace of an irreducible alterity in an through the face before me” (18). Yet this time the emphasis is more on the relational, ethical character of the *persona a la* Levinas:

*Prosopon* “is the face of the other who urgently solicits me, bidding me answer in each concrete situation, ‘here I am’” (18).

Drawing on the work of John Manoussakis, Kearney shows that such an inter-subjective interpretation of *prosopon* finds support in its original Greek usage (18). Etymologically, *prosopon*...

“... is made up of two parts: *pros* meaning ‘in front of’ or ‘toward’; and *opos*, as in optics, meaning a face or more particularly an eye, countenance, or vision. More precisely, *prosopon* refers to the face of a person as it faces us... One ‘is’ a *prosopon* but never ‘has’ a *prosopon* as such; it lets us see the very soul of a person in a new light. So to be a *prosopon* is to be-a-face-toward-a-face, to be proximate to the face of the other” (18).

Thus, by interpreting the *persona* as *prosopon*, Kearney makes its radically inter-subjective character, already implied in the eschatological perspective, more explicit. Indeed, “the *prosopon-persona* can never really exist on its own (*atomon*), but emerges in ethical relation to others” (18). Existence as a *prosopon* is therefore the opposite of existence as atomic *in-dividual* – as a fragmented, lone-standing self – and challenges the associated “ideology of each-for-itself” (19). Furthermore, Kearney sees the eschatological notion of *persona* as *prosopon* calling into question the onto-theological priority of Being over the Good (19):

“Herewith the good of the *persona* takes precedence over my drive to be (*conatus essendi*) and holds it to account. And, where possible, cares for it. Against Heidegger I say: it is not our being that cares for itself, as being-toward-death, but the good of the *persona* that cares for being, as promise of endless rebirth. Natality transfigures mortality.”

With this phenomenological reversal of birth over death, through *transfiguration*, Kearney brings his chapter to an end. To summarise this discussion of the *persona* from the perspective of *transfiguration*, one could say with Kearney that transfiguration is something “we allow the *prosopon-persona* to do to us. Something we suffer to be done to us,” rather than an intentional methodological procedure that can be applied in order to achieve a scheduled set of results (18). As *chiasm* the *persona* trans-figures as it passes through (*trans*) the embodied person (*figure*) before us, without ever being reducible to our synchronisations or configurations of that person. Those who want to transfigure must first acknowledge their own powerlessness before the other by letting go of the drive to possess, to control and to know immediately. For, “to the extent that I avow and accord this asymmetrical priority to the other, I am transfigured by that particular

*persona* and empowered to transfigure in turn – that is, to transfigure the other in their otherness” (16). Such is the promise of transfiguration to those who are open to the *persona* of their neighbour and, with reference to the eschatological judgement scene in Matthew 25, Kearney sees such openness as “the ultimate in eschatological awareness” (19).

\*\*\*

The aim of this chapter was to consider how Richard Kearney’s philosophy, and in particular his hermeneutic brand of philosophy, has grown from a deep engagement with the phenomenological-existential tradition. More specifically, we asked how this heritage inspired and enabled Kearney to think “at the limit” and argued that it has primarily done so by facilitating a turn to “face the limit.” The discussion has also shed light on the limits of the phenomenological-existential tradition itself and how Kearney has, through critique and creative appropriation, sought to transcend such limitations. While a good deal of Kearney’s response to phenomenology’s shortcomings comes in the form of hermeneutic considerations to be discussed in Chapter Two, his phenomenological account of the *persona* has already made significant ground. If the operative structure of Husserl’s transcendental reduction was *intentionality*, and that of Heidegger’s ontological reduction was *thrownness-into-the-world*, Kearney’s phenomenology of the *persona* may be said to advance a logic of “relatedness.”<sup>47</sup> With this phenomenological move the door is left open for our next chapter to consider how Kearney complements his phenomenological *vision* with critical hermeneutic *understanding*.

---

<sup>47</sup> See the chapters by Kearney (2006a: 3–20) entitled “Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology,” and Manoussakis (2006a: 21–33), “Toward a Fourth Reduction?” Both appear in J. P. Manoussakis, ed. *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*. New York: Fordham University Press. Kearney and Manoussakis interpret Kearney’s contribution to contemporary continental philosophy of religion as a fourth phenomenological reduction, together with Husserl and Heidegger’s “reductions,” Jean-Luc Marion’s thinking on “the Gift” as a third “*dosological* reduction.” According to Kearney, the fourth reduction “leads us beyond the horizons of ‘essence,’ ‘being,’ and ‘gift’ *back to existence*, that is back to the natural world of everyday, embodied life where we may confront once again the other as *prosopon*.”

# *Chapter Two: Transfiguring at the Limit*

## **Kearney's hermeneutic imagination**

### **2.1. Introduction**

If Richard Kearney does philosophy at the limit, Chapter One suggested that his phenomenological-existential heritage facilitated an important turn to *face the limit*. However, many questions remain unanswered. What happens to philosophy at the limit? Imagining yes, but what of critical, reflective thinking? Is understanding possible at the limit? If so, how does one come to understand? If interpretation is key, how does one negotiate between rival interpretations? How does poetics help answer the ethical question, “what is to be done?” And what of the broader political context within which human creativity is called to operate? With these questions Kearney (2004: 17) sees the phenomenological-existential tradition being brought to its own limits, only to escape its initial project in order to become a *hermeneutic* phenomenology.

As the title gives away, our central image for this chapter is Kearney's suggestive concept of *transfiguration*, a concept closely linked to his notion of the *persona*. While it is only in the context of his “hermeneutics of religion” that Kearney uses the concept of “transfiguration,” our liberal use of it here proposes that there is an almost seamless continuity between Kearney's hermeneutic philosophy generally and his “hermeneutics of religion” specifically.

Transfiguration is an image that, I believe, gives powerful expression to a hermeneutic approach to philosophy *and* theology “at the limit.” As *trans-figuration* it adopts the hermeneutic presupposition that there is no unmediated communication, no immediate intuition of essences, no understanding without some type of “figuring.” And because seeing is always *seeing-as*, interpretation goes right down to the bones of any matter, including our *pre-figures*, *re-figurings* and *unconscious* figurings. It suggests that any attempt at understanding should take *actual*



figures seriously – in their ineffable otherness *and* capacity to *transfer* meaning. Bringing us to the prefix, *–trans*, suggesting that limits are porous and, at times, mediating contours. But not too easily! The prefix also serves as a nagging presence, reminding us that the task, or rather duty, remains to acknowledge limits *as limits*. Trans-figuration is a reminder that figuring takes place at borders and crossroads, involving distances to cross and conflicts to negotiate. Trans-figuration is difficult yet rewarding if it serves better relations between diverse figures, including neglected and outcast trans-figures. Finally, transfiguration is dynamic and sensitive to change, for better and for worse. Yet, it is open to the future, enabling hope and action for a transformed world.

In exploring the various dimensions of this image, we will primarily focus on how Kearney appropriates the work of his teacher and mentor, Paul Ricoeur. The decision to do this is supported by the fact that Ricoeur's hermeneutics thoroughly pervades Kearney's thought and that Kearney's self-understanding as a philosopher unapologetically attests to this influence.<sup>48</sup> For the most part, the focus will remain on a number of Kearney's articles and book chapters on Paul Ricoeur, as it is through these dialogical engagements that Kearney develops his own thought, providing much of the reasoning behind his particular hermeneutic approach.

As the subtitle suggests, this chapter is about Kearney's *hermeneutic imagination*. There are a number of reasons for this designation. *Firstly*, it serves to connect the phenomenological-existential tradition's discovery of transcendental imagination and the hermeneutic theory of Paul Ricoeur that Kearney draws so richly from. We could say that the importance given to imagination in Chapter One is maintained and further developed here. *Secondly*, it refers to the particular perspective that Richard Kearney takes on Paul Ricoeur's work. Kearney sees imagination and human creativity as a central question pervading Ricoeur's work from beginning to end, and uses it as a focal point by which to understand Ricoeur's oeuvre.<sup>49</sup> *Finally*, the

---

<sup>48</sup> I am not by any means a "Ricoeur expert" and therefore the point of discussing Ricoeur's thought here is not to draw a comparison, relating Kearney's thought with Ricoeur's philosophy. This would be a task well beyond my competence and would not remain within the aims of this study. Rather, as with the discussions of Husserl and Heidegger in Chapter One, the focus will remain on a number of Kearney's articles on Paul Ricoeur, as it is through these articles that Kearney develops his own thought, providing much of the reasoning behind his particular hermeneutic approach.

<sup>49</sup> To illustrate this point, and to justify his own approach to Ricoeur's lifework, Kearney (2004: 57–8) quotes Ricoeur saying in an 1981 *Esprit* interview, that "despite appearances, my single problem since beginning my reflections has been creativity. I considered it from the point of view of individual psychology in my first works on the will, and then at the cultural level with the study on symbolisms. My present research on narrative places me



qualifier “hermeneutic” indicates that this is imagination understood in a particular way. The aim of this chapter is to give an account of this hermeneutic development of imagination, exploring how it has come to inform Kearney’s thinking at the limit.

To achieve this aim, this chapter will be divided into three parts. Part 1 (2.2), *Transfiguring Imagination*, will trace the development from phenomenology’s intuitive imagination to Ricoeur’s *linguistic* imagination, exploring the implications of such a turn for a hermeneutics of symbol, metaphor and narrative. Part 2 (2.3), *Transfiguring Social Imaginaries*, will broaden the view to include the cultural or socio-political dimensions of imagination. It discusses how Ricoeur’s notion of the “social imaginary” responds to modern critiques of ideology by calling for a *critical* hermeneutics of suspicion *and* affirmation. Part 3 (2.4), *Transfiguring God*, will relate Kearney’s hermeneutic imagination as discussed in 2.2 and 2.3 with his notion of a transfiguring God, touching briefly on some of the hermeneutic and theological implications that emerge.

## 2.2. Transfiguring Imagination

Kearney’s book *Poetics of Imagining: Modern and Postmodern* (1998) is a critical and thorough discussion of modern and post-modern theories of imagination along with critical reflections on examples of contemporary art forms such as literature, film, music and visual arts. The book ends with a plea for a *narrative* imagination that is capable of reconciling ethics and poetics in a post-modern crisis of value. His concluding vision and plea is deeply inspired by the hermeneutic imagination of Paul Ricoeur, which he discusses in an earlier chapter called “The Hermeneutical Imagination” (Kearney, 1998). In this chapter, of which an updated version later appears in his book *On Paul Ricoeur*<sup>50</sup>, Kearney (2004: 35) “explores and evaluates the particular significance of Ricoeur’s contribution to a philosophy of imagination.” What Kearney (2004: 37) recognises as the “particular significance” of Ricoeur’s thinking on imagination turns out to be “a powerful reorientation of a phenomenology of imagining towards a hermeneutics of imagining” that emerges from a renewed link between imagination and *language*. Kearney’s

---

precisely at the heart of this social and cultural creativity, since telling a story ... is the most permanent act of societies. In telling their stories, cultures create themselves...”

<sup>50</sup>The study appears in the book on Ricoeur under the revised title: *Between Imagination and Language* (2004: 35–58).

broad argument will be retraced here, for it not only reflects a reorientation pertaining to imagination, but introduces some of the main tenets of Kearney's own hermeneutics.

### 2.2.1. *Linguistic Imagination*

Kearney sees the remarkable significance of Ricoeur's contribution to a philosophy of imagination as the discovery of a fundamental link between *imagination* and *language*. It is this "linguistic turn," facilitated by Ricoeur, that fundamentally alters what was previously thought on imagination in the phenomenological tradition. While, before Ricoeur, the phenomenological tradition privileged *visual* models to make sense of imagination, Ricoeur himself reconsidered imagination "as an indispensable agent in the creation of meaning in and through language" (2004: 35). Kearney (2004: 35) quotes Ricoeur posing the challenging question:

"Are we not ready to recognise in the power of imagination, no longer the faculty of deriving 'images' from our sensory experience, but the capacity for letting new worlds shape our understanding of ourselves? This power would not be conveyed by images, but by the emergent meanings in our language. Imagination would thus be treated as a dimension of language."<sup>51</sup>

The first consequence of imagination being treated thus, as a dimension of language, is a renewed appreciation for the particular dialectic situation by which language is determined: *somebody saying something about something to someone* (Kearney, 2004: 30). Understood in the wake of Heidegger and Gadamer's claim "that human existence (*Dasein*) is in and of itself language (*Sprachlichkeit*)," Ricoeur situates the role of imagination "within the historical context of an intersubjective dialogue with others" (2004: 30). Ricoeur's preference for a semantic understanding of imagination over a visual one, is therefore accompanied by the analogous shift from phenomenological *description* or intuition (*Wesensschau*) of *appearances* to a hermeneutic *interpretation* or understanding (*Verstehen*) of *meaning*. From this perspective the productive power of the imagination is modelled by the verbal metaphor in poetry, thus emphasising the role of the imagination to create new meaning (semantic innovation) by conjoining two *similar* ideas from *dissimilar* semantic fields (2004: 40). Thus, Ricoeur supplemented the synthesising powers

---

<sup>51</sup> Original quote from P. Ricoeur, 'Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics', in Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981: 181.

of transcendental imagination<sup>52</sup> with the hermeneutic/productive function of projecting possible meanings (2004: 40).

In light of this, Ricoeur developed what Kearney (2004: 29) believes was “his most original contribution to contemporary thought,” namely, the hermeneutic model of *the text*. “Whereas Husserl approached meaning as an essence to be intuited (*Wesenschau*), Ricoeur approaches it as a text to be interpreted” (2004: 29). In other words, Ricoeur uses the text as a model to approximate what is at stake in a general philosophical hermeneutics after Heidegger and Gadamer. In its historically situated, intersubjective nature, the text calls forth a multiplicity of meanings that derive from the world of the text itself – but also from “the original conditions of inscription (the world of the author) *and* ... [from] the subsequent conditions of reception (the world of the addressee)” (2004: 29-30). At the same time, a text implies a certain autonomy “with respect to (i) the author’s original intention; (ii) the initial situation of discourse; and (iii) the original addressee” (2004: 30-31).

By implying these conditions of textual exegesis in his philosophy of imagination, Ricoeur’s model of the text “embraces a historical horizon where meanings can outlive the ‘here and now’ of interpersonal conversation and endure over time, in the written texts, documents, monuments, institutions and traditions of a culture” (2004: 30). Thus, the text problematizes “dialogue” understood in terms of an immediate face-to-face conversation. Even if one wishes to maintain the dialogical character of language, the text calls for a much broader historical horizon of understanding: “for each interpretation is both inherited by a sematic horizon inherited from tradition and yet exposed to multiple subsequent rereadings by other interpreters” (2004: 31). Indeed, for Ricoeur, “to interpret history is ... to arrive in the middle of a dialogue which has already begun and in which we try to orientate ourselves in order to make some new sense of it” (2004: 31).<sup>53</sup>

Ricoeur’s model of the text reveals that interpretation always takes place within a dialectic of ‘distantiation’ and ‘belonging’. Kearney (2004: 31) notes that if phenomenology responded critically against the empirical sciences’ claim to ultimate objectivity, Ricoeur’s model of the

---

<sup>52</sup> See the discussion of Kant’s transcendental imagination in Chapter One.

<sup>53</sup> For a very helpful discussion of a hermeneutics of dialogue see Kearney’s “Appendix” to *Dialogues with contemporary Continental thinkers* (1984: 127-133) where he pays special attention to the implications of the change in his dialogues from a spoken, face to face event to a written form.

text is a similar response against the primacy of the subject in Husserl and Hegel's idealism. The historical intersubjectivity implied by the text, exposes the *distance* between the interpreting subject and the origin of meaning. Kearney (2004: 31-32) notes that "the text ... becomes, for Ricoeur, the model for a belonging to communication in and through distance," for to read a text "is to expose oneself to a horizon of 'other' or 'alien' meanings that exceed my subjective consciousness." Thus, in order to reach the goal of subjective *appropriation*, a distancing or *disappropriation* is required from the interpreter's familiar preunderstanding. Subjectivity then, in Ricoeur's own words, "is not so much what initiates understanding as what terminates it" (2004: 32).<sup>54</sup> What is recovered after this detour of disappropriation is, therefore, "a new sense of subjectivity: enlarged, decentred and open to novel possibilities of self-interpretation" (2004: 32).

This hermeneutic model of the text has profound consequences for how one understands the role of imagination. What is central for a hermeneutic approach to imagination is the possible worlds that are disclosed by imaginative productions and how these in turn possibilize new ways of self-understanding, and therefore, new ways of being in the world (2004: 41).<sup>55</sup> Thus, far from Sartre's argument in *L'imaginaire* that saw imagination condemned to an 'essential poverty,' as a mere "*negation* of the perceptual world," Ricoeur sees imagination's function of semantic innovation as an *ontological* event (2004: 38; 41). This profoundly raises the value given to imaginative productions inherited through culture (such as myths, symbols, traditions etc.) – as well as their interpretation – as it is only through such hermeneutical detours that the human subject may come to know itself. Indeed, Kearney reminds us, "the shortest route from the self to itself is through the images of others" (2004: 41).

Kearney is quick to note, however, that the scope of hermeneutic imagination extends beyond circles of interpretation to the possibilization of *meaningful action* in the world. With reference to Ricoeur's famous claim that there can be "no action without imagination," Kearney (2004: 42) points out that "metaphors, symbols or narratives produced by imagination all provide us with 'imaginative variations' of the world, thereby offering us the freedom to conceive of the world in

---

<sup>54</sup> Original quote from P. Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," in Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981: 101f.

<sup>55</sup> Kearney (2004: 41) contrasts this hermeneutic approach, with its focus on the horizons opened up by the *matter of the text itself*, with objective structural analyses of texts proposed by structuralism, on the one hand, and with subjective existentialist analyses that focus on the authors of texts, on the other.

other ways and to undertake forms of action which might lead to its transformation.” At this point however, especially at the intersections between the symbolic imagination and the world of action and politics, a new challenge emerges: the challenge posed by conflicting interpretations. Ricoeur, was prepared to take on this arduous, difficult task and responded with a *critical* hermeneutics of symbol.

### 2.2.2. *Symbolic Imagination*

According to Kearney, the publication of Ricoeur’s *The Symbolism of Evil* (1960) marks a decisive transition in his thought from a phenomenology of will to a hermeneutics of symbol. Kearney (2004: 44) notes how the linguistic nature of symbols, discussed above, is evident in this landmark work where Ricoeur consistently articulates a shift towards the image-as-sign – from the *static* model of the image as ‘portrait’ to the *dynamic* model of the image as ‘expression’. Commenting on cosmic symbols, Ricoeur for instance says that “[these] symbols are not inscribed *beside* language, as modes of immediate expression, directly perceptible visages; *it is in the universe of discourse* that these realities take on a symbolic dimension” (Kearney, 2004: 43 - my emphasis).<sup>56</sup> Ricoeur (1980: 245) later defines *the symbolic* as “any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary and figurative, and which can be apprehended only through the first”. It is precisely this equivocal and multivocal nature of symbolic language that calls for *interpretation*, which Ricoeur (1980: 245) sees as “the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning.”

Kearney (2004: 45) notes that in *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur focussed primarily on *cosmic* symbols, exemplified by the myths by which communities sought to give expression to their first experiences of the cosmos. Ricoeur’s approach to these myths reveals some important aspects of a hermeneutic approach. Presupposing the linguistic nature of symbols, Ricoeur recognised “that before reflection and intuition *there are already symbols*” (Kearney, 2004: 46). This fundamentally extends the hermeneutic approach beyond the phenomenological concern for a “presuppositionless philosophy.” A hermeneutic approach to symbols departs from the conviction that “by beginning with a symbolism already there ... we give ourselves something to

---

<sup>56</sup> Original quote from Ricoeur, P. 1965. *De l’Interprétation: essai sur Freud*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil. pp. 23-24.

think about” (2004: 46). Thus, the hermeneutic imagination, despite being a properly *modern* endeavour itself, is “animated by a hope for a recreation of language” (Ricoeur, 1967: 19) as it seeks to “restore to [contemporary language] the poetic and symbolic powers of imagination”, so often neglected by technocratic notions of truth.

However, a logical consequence of symbolic language’s propensity for double or multiple meanings and the requirement of some form of decipherment, is that one is confronted by *conflicts of interpretation*. In contrast with Heidegger’s ontology of understanding which sought to circumvent this dilemma, Ricoeur’s hermeneutic approach to imagination takes up the challenge of negotiating the spaces between absolutist claims to truth. Ricoeur argued that the common element underlying all interpretations, whether they be Freud’s psychoanalytic work of uncovering unconscious structures of meaning hidden in recounted dreams, or theological exegesis of Biblical symbols, “is a certain architecture of meaning ... whose role in every instance, although in a different manner, is to *show while concealing*” (1980: 244 - my emphasis). In other words, different hermeneutic models attempt to ‘translate’ a surplus of meaning according their own vital frames of reference, inevitably giving rise to conflicts of interpretation.

Ricoeur does not see the role of philosophy to resolve such conflicts. Rather, philosophical hermeneutics, he suggests, should arbitrate between different hermeneutic models by showing “that the form of interpretation is relative to the theoretical structure of the hermeneutic system being considered” (Ricoeur, 1980: 246). According to Kearney (2004: 23-24) every hermeneutic model operates according to some problematic, established by a framework of pre-understanding that predispose it to a particular reading of symbols. As there is no hermeneutic model that can claim to reveal without – necessarily – concealing, Kearney (2004: 23) sees the “methodological limits of these respective readings [as] their very *raison d’être*.” Thus, along with the appreciation of a particular hermeneutic model’s creative capacity to let new horizons of meaning emerge, comes the reflective critique of its limitations – of what it fails to reveal, or even necessarily obscures.

This capacity of symbols to mask meaning emerges most clearly in Ricoeur’s enquiry into another category of symbol, what Kearney calls the *oneiric* symbol, referring to dream images or symbols with a psychic or unconscious reference (2004: 46–50). After *The Symbolism of Evil*

(1960), in *Freud and Philosophy* (1965), Ricoeur extended his analysis beyond cosmic symbols to “the epistemology of the symbol” as it manifests itself in the desires of the unconscious” (Kearney, 2004: 47). In this important work, Ricoeur notes that Freud’s psychoanalytic theory maintains the vital link he himself established between imagination and language. Freud revealed how dreams give rise to narration and, like cosmic symbols, carry a surplus of meaning that call forth narrative interpretation (2004: 47). More particularly, however, Freud’s work on dream images illuminated the *distorting* and *falsifying* capacity of images, especially as they function to censor latent desires by hiding them behind apparent meanings (2004: 48). By implication, it is not only hermeneutic models that reveal by concealing, but symbols and images themselves that mask and obscure meaning.

The fact that “images are not innocent” has profound consequences for hermeneutics. Like psychoanalysis which aimed at detecting the censoring function of dream images, hermeneutics had to learn that the layered levels of meaning characteristic of symbolic language “are far more complex and oblique than the traditional models of analogy and allegory would allow” (Kearney, 2004: 48). Freud’s psychoanalytic theory revealed complexities of consciousness that require a more rigorous hermeneutic imagination. For this purpose psychoanalysis promotes a critical hermeneutics of *suspicion* that is able to detect and expose dissimulation in symbols. With its primary focus on “archaeological” uncovering of past experiences that precede the mystifying image, psychoanalytic suspicion provides a model for this hermeneutic function (Kearney, 2004: 48).<sup>57</sup>

However, Ricoeur recognised that if *desire* is the basic motivation behind dream images, they are also to be considered in terms of their “teleological” reference, i.e. as expressions of “a passion for possibilities not yet realized” (2004: 48). Thus, Ricoeur famously calls for a hermeneutics of *affirmation* – to supplement the hermeneutic detour of suspicion – which would allow the symbol’s full range of meaning and creative possibilities to come to its right. According to Kearney (2004: 48-49),

---

<sup>57</sup> Kearney continues Ricoeur’s philosophical engagement with psychoanalysis in his works on imagination, narrative and the question of alterity. In this regard, Julia Kristeva is a favourite sparring partner as someone who has successfully garnered psychoanalytic insights for the purposes of philosophical reflection. See his dialogue with Kristeva in his *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (1995), entitled ‘Strangers to Ourselves: The Hope of the Singular.’ In his *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003), Kearney draws richly from her thoughts on alterity (172-177), the horrific sublime (89-91) and the notion of *khora* (194-197); while in *Anatheism* (2010: 96–100), he speaks with appreciation of her “aesthetics of sensation.”



“...the desire of dream images invents a future and thus aspires to a condition of creation, *poiesis*, poetry. It generates a surplus of meaning (*surcoût du sens*) – proof of a level of meaning which is irreducible to a retrospective correspondence between the image of one’s dream and a literal event of one’s past experience. Or, as Bachelard put it, *you cannot explain the flower by the fertilizer*.”

While a hermeneutics of suspicion sniffs at the fertilizer, conducting rigorous tests and analyses, a hermeneutics of affirmation explores how the beauty and proper purpose of a flower may come to its right. Thus, the hermeneutic imagination has a “dual function of recollection and projection,” stimulating a type of reflection, says Ricoeur,

“[that] must humble consciousness and interpret it through symbolic significations, rising up from *behind* or in *front* of consciousness, *beneath* or *beyond* it. In short, reflection must include an archaeology and an eschatology” (cited in Kearney, 2004: 48).<sup>58</sup>

The goal driving this interplay between the archaeological and eschatological functions of a critical hermeneutics, is best expressed in Ricoeur’s famous phrase that “the idols must die so that the symbols may speak.” Thus, despite casting a cold eye of suspicion, the search for authentic creativity remains the target. Thus, Ricoeur reminds us that dreams, beyond their censoring function, are what makes a *poet of every dreamer* (2004: 47).<sup>59</sup>

### 2.2.3. Poetic Imagination (or Narrative Imagination)

Alongside *cosmic* and *oneiric* symbols, Kearney recognises a third modality of symbol in Paul Ricoeur’s philosophy of imagination corresponding to a later stage of his hermeneutic project that culminated in the works, *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975) and the three-volumes of *Time and Narrative* (1984, 1985, 1988). According to Kearney (2004: 50), it is in these works that Ricoeur comes to focus more explicitly on the *poetical* expressions of imagination as such. Whereas, earlier, the *text* was primarily employed as a *model* to advance a general hermeneutic approach to philosophy, these works turn to the text itself as an expression of the productive imagination. In *The Rule of Metaphor* Ricoeur extends the unit under examination from the level of the word (symbol) to the level of the sentence (metaphor), while *Time and Narrative* goes

<sup>58</sup> Original quote from Ricoeur, P. 1974. *The Conflict of Interpretations*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press. pp. 328-9.

<sup>59</sup> Martin Luther King’s famous “I have a dream” speech, Desmond Tutu’s book “God Has a Dream: a Vision of Hope for Our Time” (2005), Allan Boesak’s “*Die vlug van God’s verbeelding*” (2005) and the recent series of publications by the Beyers Naudé Centre’s Globalisation project bearing the title “Dreaming a Different World” immediately come to mind as creative theological expressions of dream images, not to mention the vital role that dreams play in Scripture.

further in extending the analysis to the level of the *text as a whole* (narrative) (2004: 51; 55). Kearney (2004: 50–57) shows how both works build on Ricoeur’s earlier work, stressing the linguistic nature of imagination, yet further developing the inventive powers of imagination and the ontological implications of metaphorical reference.

The most striking insight that Kearney gains from *The Rule of Metaphor* is how Ricoeur recovers the phenomenological notion of *seeing-as*. In the notion of *seeing-as*, Ricoeur holds together the verbal, *semantic* aspect of productive imagination and the sensory, *imaging* role of imagination as a *re*-production of experience. Kearney (2004: 52) quotes Ricoeur saying: “Thanks to its character as half thought and half experience, [the *seeing-as* schema of imagination] joins the light of sense with the fullness of the image. In this way, the non-verbal and the verbal are firmly united at the core of the image-ing function of language.”<sup>60</sup> Having therefore argued for a semantic theory of imagination, Ricoeur brings his theory “to its limits – to the frontier of exchange between *saying* and *seeing-as*” (2004: 52). In so doing, Ricoeur not only regains the vital link between experience and thought, but sheds light on the ontological implications of the poetical imagination. According to Kearney (2004: 53), the “poetic image ... points to the very *depths of existence* where *a new being in language* is synonymous with a *growth in being* itself.” Thus, in the final analysis, “*seeing-as* ... not only implies a *saying-as* but also a *being-as*” (Kearney, 2004: 53).

This leads Ricoeur to what Kearney (2004: 53) calls “the ontological paradox of *creation-as-discovery*.” He, once again quotes a lucid Ricoeur directly:

“Through the recovery of the capacity of language to create and recreate, we *discover* reality itself in the process of being *created* ... Language in the making celebrates reality in the making” (cited in Kearney, 2004: 53).<sup>61</sup>

Which, in turn, means that...

“...the strategy of discourse implied in metaphorical languages is ... to shatter and to increase our sense of reality by shattering and increasing our language ... With metaphor we experience the metamorphosis of both language and reality” (cited in Kearney, 2004: 53).<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Original quote from Ricoeur, P. 1978. *The Rule of Metaphor*. London: Routledge. pp. 207-208.

<sup>61</sup> Original quote from Ricoeur, P. 1981. “Poetry and Possibility,” in *The Manhattan Review*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 20-21.

<sup>62</sup> Original quote from Ricoeur, P. 1993. “Creativity in Language,” in C. Regan and D. Stewart (eds.) *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*. Boston, MA: Beacon. pp. 122-33.

In *Time and Narrative* Ricoeur further develops “the ontological implications of ‘metaphorical’ reference” (2004: 53). If poetical language “exceeds the immediate reference of our everyday language,” this does not mean, as structuralism and a certain strand of post-modernism suggests, that there is no actual reference outside of language itself (2004: 53; 23-4). In fact, it “reveals a deeper and more radical power of reference to those ontological aspects of our being-in-the-world that cannot be spoken of *directly*” (2004: 53). By implication, the poetic image or literary work is not a *weakened image of reality*. To the contrary – it serves to enlarge *one’s horizon of existence*, depicting reality by *augmenting* it with meanings, thus, bringing “about an increase in the being of our world impoverished by quotidian routine” (2004: 53-4).

What follows from such an augmentation is an increase in human capabilities for meaningful *action* in the world, for “what is interpreted in a text,” says Ricoeur, “is the proposing of a world that I might inhabit and into which I might project my ownmost powers” (Kearney, 2004: 54).<sup>63</sup> This is especially the case with narrative, through which the imagination configures and refigures time, thus *remaking* action. The *configuring* function of the narrative imagination is characterised by “the ability to create a plot which transforms a sequence of events into a story. This consists of ‘grasping together’ the individual incidents, characters and actions so as to compose a unified temporal whole” (2004: 55). Such “emplotment” applies to both *historical* narrative as it imaginatively reconstructs events from the past, and *fictional* narratives which may, even more suggestively, configure and thereby explore new possibilities of action.

Yet Kearney (2004: 55) points to an even more radical suggestion from Ricoeur: that “both historical and fictional narrative [*presuppose*] ... the pre-narrative capacity of human imagination to act in the world in a symbolically significant manner.” In other words, narrative imagination presupposes the *transcendental* imagination of Kant and Heidegger, which has the primary

---

In *The God Who May Be* (2001:7-8), Kearney extends this notion of metaphorical discourse to his own attempt at God-talk, coining the term “metaphorology” to convey his “understanding of religious language as an endeavor to say something (however hesitant and provisional) about the unsayable.” Commenting on his approach in the book he says: “I borrow liberally from Ricoeur’s notion that inventive hermeneutic readings of religious texts can spark off a rich play of metaphoricity resulting in a radical semantic augmentation (or ‘surplus of meaning’)... By recognizing the fecund metaphorical interplay at work in the reading of all great religious texts ... we become more capable of hermeneutically retrieving certain lost meanings – in this case eschatological ones – within and between the texts themselves. ... Indeed it is from the productive friction of their ‘intersignification’ that some transfer (*metaphora*) of meaning is eventually, if always tentatively, achieved.”

<sup>63</sup> Original quote from Ricoeur, P. 1984. *Time and Narrative*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. p. 81.

function of temporalizing present action in terms of a remembered past and anticipated future. In Ricoeur's own words, this means that...

"What is resignified by narrative is what was already presignified at the level of human acting. Our preunderstanding of the world of action ... is characterized by the mastering of a network of intersignifications constitutive of the semantic resources of human acting" (cited in Kearney, 2004: 55).<sup>64</sup>

Here is a fundamental interplay and interdependence between the *transcendental* imaginative function of *presignified* temporalization and the *configurative* creativity of *narrative* imagination. It is perhaps because of this radical connection between *experience* and *narrative* that Kearney comes to recognise narrative as an indispensable resource in bridging the divide between ethics and poetics. This interplay comes to represent, for Kearney, a hermeneutic circle that is as *transformative* as it is constitutive:

"If ... poetics recognizes its bond to ethics and acknowledges its *origin* and *end* in the world of action, then, far from being a threat to responsibility, *poiesis* becomes its guarantor... the *configuring* act of poetics, carried out by productive imagination in the text, is one which presupposes the *prefiguring* act of our everyday temporal experience and culminates in the *refiguring* act whereby textual narratives return us to a world of action. When the story is over we re-enter our life-worlds transformed, however imperceptibly" (Kearney, 1995: xi).

This quote sums up Kearney's basic stance, taken up in a number of his works when he champions a narrative imagination in response to a variety of contemporary challenges. Deeply aware of the contested nature of narrative in post-modern culture, Kearney enters into contemporary debates to emerge with a nuanced position that ultimately recognises a narrative imagination as an indispensable resource, and even, ethical responsibility.<sup>65</sup> This nuanced

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> "Narrative" and "narrative imagination" function as key concepts in Kearney's trilogy "thinking at the limit." Commenting on the trilogy Kearney says that "the three volumes share an abiding conviction that when we are confronted by the apparently inexplicable and unthinkable, *narrative matters*" (2002: 157).

In *On Stories* he performs his narrative theory by exploring a number of actual narratives before providing a philosophical sketch of a narrative model in the final chapter. In the first part, Kearney (2002: 14) explores "the controversial relation between fiction and history in three individual cases – Stephen Daedalus [a character from James Joyce's novels], Ida Bauer (Dora) [one of Sigmund Freud's patients] and Oscar Schindler [a German partisan for the Jews during WWII and protagonist of Spielberg's *Schindler's List*]." A second part, extends "the discussion to three examples of more collective or national narration: Rome, Britain and America." By drawing examples from literature, cinema, art, psychotherapy and political history, Kearney (2002: 15) reveals the import of his narrative imagination when confronted "by the rich complexities and textures" of actual narratives – with the political and philosophical controversy and contestation surrounding them.

In *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, Kearney (2003: 19) "tackles diverse experiences of human estrangement," including encounters with the stranger or alien other, the functioning of the scapegoat mechanism in contemporary

position is most systematically articulated in a study, entitled *Between Ethics and Poetics*<sup>66</sup>, in which Kearney (2004: 99–114) outlines four contemporary narrative tasks that emerge from Paul Ricoeur’s notion of a narrative imagination.<sup>67</sup>

The *first* of these tasks is to help us develop a *historical* sensibility of “projecting futures and retrieving pasts,” able to resist what Kearney calls “the contemporary tendency to reduce history to a *depthless present of irrelevance*” (cf. Kearney, 2004: 99–104).<sup>68</sup> On the *retrieving* axis, this task includes the testimonial capacity to bear witness to the past according to a double responsibility: to the past as *present*, and to the past as *past*” (2004: 100). Thus, narrative enables “rememoration” – distinct from triumphalist commemoration – as a “standing in for” the neglected ‘others’ of history through narrative figurations that “stand for” the past (2004: 100–103). On the *projecting* axis of this task one finds “an eschatological capacity to project future possibilities where justice might at last prevail” (2004: 104).

The *second*, related task of narrative imagination has to do with the identity of historical communities as a form of *memory* (cf. Kearney, 2004: 104–108; 2002: 79–83). Such narrative

---

society, the experience of evil, and the complexities of memory. Here *narrative* understanding functions as the primary hermeneutic model by which experiences of alterity are dealt with. In as far as alterity poses a challenge to dilemmas of memory, “narrative imagination – in the guise of historical or literary testimony – may help prevent past traumas from becoming fixated in pathological forms of melancholy, amnesia or repetition” (2003: 182). And, in as far as alterity challenges identity (and vice versa), Kearney (2003a: 188–190) responds by proposing “a narrative identity woven from its own histories and those of others,” acknowledging that “the shortest route from self to self is always through the other.” In spite of relying on narrative imagination, Kearney (2003: 179) recognizes its limits by acknowledging that “there is narrative and narrative;” and that “at the limits of the tellable, we encounter the need to discern between different modes of telling.”

In *The God Who May Be*, Kearney (2001: 8) explores an “onto-eschatological” hermeneutics of religion, between the poles of negative theology on the one hand and onto-theology on the other, and declares that in doing so one enters “a frontier zone where *narratives* flourish and abound. It is a place where stories, songs, parables, and prophecies resound as human imaginations try to say the unsayable and think the unthinkable.” While there is no philosophical reflection on narrativity in *The God Who May Be*, the whole work can be seen as an exercise of the *narrative imagination* as Kearney explores the Biblical narratives of Moses and the Burning Bush, the testimonies of Christ’s Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, the accounts of Christ’s paschal appearances, and the tales of love and desire lyrically captured in the Song of Songs. By hermeneutically allowing these narratives to interact with a variety of rabbinical, patristic, theological and philosophical sources, Kearney (2001: 8) sees this work as an attempt “to sketch the outlines of a narrative eschatology.”

<sup>66</sup> An earlier version of this study appeared in Kearney’s *Poetics of Modernity* under the title “The Narrative Imagination” (1995: 92–106).

<sup>67</sup> An alternative account, on why and how storytelling still matters today, is given by Kearney in a final chapter of his *On Stories*, entitled “Narrative Matters” (2002: 125–156). Here Kearney outlines the narrative task in a rethinking of Aristotle’s five-fold narrative model under the headings of plot (*mythos*), re-creation (*mimesis*), release (*catharsis*), wisdom (*phronesis*) and ethics (*ethos*). In spite of the difference in form, Kearney’s position remains the same here as his account in *Between Ethics and Poetics*.

<sup>68</sup> For a helpful discussion on the complexities involved in historical testimony and rememoration, see chapter 5 of Kearney’s *On Stories*, entitled “The Paradox of Testimony” (Kearney, 2002: 61–69).

remembering also operates according to a double responsibility: (i) to provide *continuity* through the creative remembrance of foundational narratives, and (ii) to advance an ethic of *flexibility*, by virtue of narrative identity's capacity to imagine oneself otherwise – through one's own eyes or through those of the other (2004: 104-105). It is such an ethic of flexibility that enables, even as it is advanced by, the imaginative capacity for exchanging memories. If the dual fidelity to historical *uniqueness* and *communicability* is respected, such an exchange of memories could generate empathy and facilitate the important work of mourning (2004: 105-108; cf. 2002: 137-142). This may, in turn, possibilize the “impossibilities” of pardon and forgiveness<sup>69</sup>, not as forgetfulness, but as the completion of the mourning period – as what “gives memory a future” (Kearney, 2006b: 210).

The *third* task of narrative imagination is to cultivate a notion of *self-identity* (cf. Kearney, 2004: 108-112). In what Kearney sees as a “crisis of identity,” in which people are “increasingly defined as ‘desiring machines’ or ‘effects of signifiers’,” narrative imagination may offer a renewed sense of selfhood (2004: 108). However, this does not mean resorting back to a Platonic notion of the person as essence, an enlightened *cogito* or a late modern version of the ego. Nor does it involve a return to “oppressive Grand Narratives” (2004: 110). Rather, Kearney understands the narrative self as an “ongoing process of self-constancy and self-rectification,” requiring dialogue with others and critical detours through cultural symbols and significations (2004: 108). He also points to the role of “imagination to synthesize the different horizons of past, present and future,” stressing the “critical fluidity and openness” of identity as “something made and remade” (2004: 108; 111). In short, understanding self-identity in narrative terms involves overcoming subjective self-centeredness, in as far as it leads one to understand *oneself-as-another*.

In the *fourth* instance, Kearney recognises the narrative task of *persuading and evaluating action* (cf. Kearney, 2004: 112-114). According to Kearney (2004: 112-113), narratives are always ethically charged, whether they make an explicit summons (change your life!), solicit a tacit change in perspective, or even subvert the established system of virtue altogether. Nevertheless, Kearney (2004: 112) recalls Ricoeur's maxim that “the imaginary knows no censorship,” to

---

<sup>69</sup> For Kearney's thoughts on the matters of pardon and forgiveness, see his book chapter, “Forgiveness at the Limit - Impossible or Possible?” In F. O'Rourke, ed. *What happened in and to Moral Philosophy in the twentieth century? Philosophical Essays in Honor of Alasdair Macintyre*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, (Kearney, 2013: 304–320).



stress that such a critical rapport between ethics and poetics does not involve “the intrusion of moralizing dogmatism into the free space of creativity.” Rather, narrative imagination advances an “ethics of experience” that is “concerned with cultural paradigms of suffering and action, happiness and dignity” (2004: 112). In this way, by “presenting a variety of ethical possibilities” from which the reader, as an initiator of action, may select through a critical engagement with the text, narrative functions to stimulate a “desire for the good life guided by practical wisdom (*phronesis*)” (2004: 113). Thus, Kearney (2004: 114) points out that *phronesis* is ultimately dependant on fiction, as it requires that virtue be “fleshed out with experiential images and examples,” and not simply abstractly deliberated:

“To understand what courage means, we tell the story of Achilles; to understand what wisdom means, we tell the story of Socrates; to understand what *caritas* means, we tell the story of St. Francis of Assisi.”

In conclusion then: if the phenomenological tradition furnished Kearney with a special appreciation for the role of imagination and poetics, his position undergoes a profound transformation in the encounters with the hermeneutic tradition, psychoanalysis and structuralism – encounters facilitated by the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. What emerges, for Kearney (1995: xvi), is a *hermeneutic imagination* that “combines the powers of ethics and poetics in the formation of an intersubjective culture (*Bildung*) where, suspending the will to dominate, we exist one-for-the-other.” As Kearney himself notes in the introduction *Poetics of Modernity*:

“The *paradigm* for such hermeneutic imagination is the *poetic text* that invites us to enter into its otherness and recognize ourselves in it, putting ourselves into question, losing ourselves in order to find ourselves. Poetics thus serves ethics by enabling each of us to be beyond ourself, to be with the other and to come back to ourself as if to another” (Kearney, 1995: xvi).

At this point, where we recognise the constructive influence of imagination on our modes of action in society, critical questions emerge about the cultural and socio-political functions of the imagination.

### 2.3. Transfiguring Social Imaginaries

Alongside the hermeneutic model of the text, one of Ricoeur’s most influential contributions to the hermeneutical debate is possibly the concept of the *social imaginary*. Through this concept,



says Kearney (2004: 75), we concern ourselves with how the “politics of imagination” operates in the production of communal narratives. In his search for a renewed sense of human creativity, Ricoeur soon recognised the need to respond to the social pathologies of imagination – to what threatens authentic expressions and interpretations of a society’s social imaginary. As Kearney likes to say: “imagination is not on the side of the angels.” While Ricoeur is famous for incorporating a hermeneutics of suspicion into his hermeneutic theory, drawing on what he called the three Masters of Suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, the notion of a social imaginary distinguishes his critical hermeneutics from other modern critiques of ideology.

In a study entitled *Between Ideology and Utopia*, Kearney (2004: 75–90) shows how Ricoeur’s *imaginaire social* functions according to two complementary dimensions: the *ideological* and the *utopian*. We hope to show that what emerges, for Kearney as with Ricoeur, is a *critical* hermeneutics capable of the diagnostic tasks of recognising pathological expressions and interpretations, discerning between authentic and inauthentic discourses and recalling emancipatory narratives in ways that nurture health. To return to our central image, we could say that *transfiguring* social imaginaries, includes the laborious task of disentangling *disfigurations* from those images that may serve transformative interests. Commenting on his critical hermeneutics, Kearney (2012: 179) may therefore say that, in the end, “hermeneutics should do you good!” thus affirming Wittgenstein’s claim that *philosophy is therapy*.

### 2.3.1. The Social Imaginary and the Critique of Ideology

In order to understand how the notion of the social imaginary relates to ideology, Kearney directs our attention to the development of the concept “ideology” leading up to the Masters’ critiques of ideology as “false consciousness.” With reference to Ricoeur’s *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1985), Kearney (2004: 75) points out that the term “ideology,” first used by Destutt de Tracy at the end of the eighteenth century to refer to “the science of the genesis of ideas,” soon came to acquire a negative connotation used to vilify “those engaged with lofty abstractions rather than facing up to the truths of reality.” It was this sense of ideology as “abstract unreality” that Marx eventually picked up and analysed in greater detail in *The German Ideology*. Marx likened ideology to a *camera obscura*, in as far as it reverses the proper relationship between the real and illusory (2004: 75-6). Thus, ideology became that which “alienates human

consciousness by attributing the origin of value to some illusory absolute outside of the human” (2004: 75).

What subsequently took shape was a more unambiguous articulation of the negative sense of ideology *as false consciousness* in modern critiques of ideology (2004: 76). This was accompanied by a tendency to view scientific truth, more and more, as the very opposite of ideology (2004: 76). After the enlightenment, it became the task of science to overcome the alienation, caused by ideological imaginaries, of the human from itself, thus restoring *true* consciousness. “Science,” says Kearney (2004: 76), “promised to convert false consciousness into true consciousness, to transform the imaginary into the real and the rational.” Ricoeur’s hermeneutic approach, however, with its aim of uncovering hidden meanings behind discourse’s first order reference, resisted such a simple “reduction of the social imaginary to ideological distortion” (2004: 76).

With his notion of a social imaginary, Ricoeur sought to remedy this imbalance by proposing: (i) that the *ideological* function of social imaginaries is more complex than most critiques of ideology would allow, not to mention more difficult to dispense with than most seem to suggest; (ii) that social imaginaries, besides operating as ideology, also display the capacity for *utopian* discourses that function to critically *rupture* established powers of deception and manipulation; and (iii) that both functions, the ideological *and* the utopian, contain the possibilities of false *and* authentic forms of consciousness. According to Ricoeur, this nuanced notion of the social imaginary, required a critical hermeneutic that included both a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of invention.

### **2.3.2. Ideology and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion**

Ricoeur viewed the tradition of identifying ideology with false consciousness as practicing a hermeneutics of suspicion. Such a hermeneutic departs from the presupposition that discourse is “masked” and consequently seeks to uncover repressed or hidden meanings. As Kearney (2004: 76-77) points out, the three Masters of Suspicion directed special critique against *religious* consciousness, which they considered to be “the most extreme example of human subservience and the most primordial expression of ideology.” Marx, who “discerned the hidden connection between ideology and the historical phenomenon of class domination,” interpreted religion “as a coded system of submission, where the myth of a supernatural paradise becomes the opium of

the people, totally concealing its own socio-economic motivation” (2004: 77). With Nietzsche’s genealogical hermeneutics of the will, Christianity is rejected as “Platonism of the people” – as “cults of otherworldly transcendence” that negate life by replacing “a strong will-to-power with passivity, resentment, and self-abnegation” (2004: 77). Finally, Freud’s hermeneutics of desire, as we have already alluded, seeks to expose religion as “an *obsessional neurosis* whereby human desire is repressed through a complex of unconscious, self-concealing mechanisms” (2004: 77).

What Ricoeur recognised in these quite different critiques, was a shared, underlying *suspicion* that religious ideology remained ignorant of its own tendencies to produce false values. As false consciousness they saw religion “compensating for historical injustice with some ahistorical and otherworldly justice” (Kearney, 2004: 77). Kearney (2004: 77) stresses that Ricoeur began by taking these Masters of Suspicion seriously: by acknowledging the legitimacy and necessity of unmasking the ideological content of the religious imaginary, and therefore the need for a hermeneutics of suspicion. However, Ricoeur took such a hermeneutics of suspicion to the limit by “arguing that *critique must itself be subject to critique*” (2004: 78). By too quickly identifying ideology with *false consciousness*, and therefore with the opposite of science and rationality, most critiques of ideology fail to recognise how ideological imaginaries are operative in, under or behind their own vantage points.<sup>70</sup> Thus, Kearney (2004: 78) directs our attention to Ricoeur’s analysis of ideology *as a dimension* of the social imaginary. This is followed by a further distinction between *three functions of ideology*: (i) integration, (ii) dissimulation and (iii) domination.

In the *first* instance, according to Ricoeur, ideology emerges in response to a universal need amongst social groups “for a communal set of images whereby it can represent itself to itself and to others” (Kearney, 2004: 78). Its role is to *integrate* a society, especially in times of crises, often by recalling and retelling founding myths or narratives from some “sanctified past.” This enables a community to find stability and regain a sense of orientation, while also helping “to perpetuate the initial energy” present at its genesis (2004: 78-9). Accordingly, Kearney (2004: 79) wonders whether any social group could exist without such mediation helping to relate it to its own inaugural event. However, Ricoeur reminds us, ideology does not only foster consensus

---

<sup>70</sup> For another mature critique of Freud and Marx’s critiques of religion respectively see Phillips, D. 2001. *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (pp. 199-128 & 130-145). Phillips argues that a *contemplative* philosophical hermeneutics of religion is possible as an alternative to Ricoeur’s dialectic of suspicion and invention.

– it also operates by convention and rationalisation, giving it a *justificatory* role (2004: 79). Thus, even as ideology integrates a society, it also serves to *justify* present actions according to a sacred past. Instead of political revival, this may have the negative effect of a “stagnation of politics” in which “each power rehearses an anterior power.”<sup>71</sup>

A *second* aspect of the way ideology functions is its tendency to *dissimulate*. Kearney (2004: 80) points out the irony in the fact that ideology’s “schematic *rationalisations*” actually operate at a *pre-rational* level. According to Kearney:

“The ideology of foundational myths operates ‘behind our backs’ ... rather than appearing as a transparent theme. We think *from* ideology rather than *about* it... Ideology is by its nature an ‘uncritical instance’...”

While the concept of something operating at a pre-rational level *as such* does not shock Kearney, he recognises that it provides many with an *epistemological* reason for denouncing ideology, and by extension the social imaginary, as an obscuring inversion. However, Kearney’s critique is more *ethical* in nature, pointing out that it is this dissimulating function that makes ideology “easily susceptible to deceit, alienation, and, by extension, intolerance” (Kearney, 2004: 80). Because ideology stems “from the sedimentation of social experience” (Ricoeur), it often functions in reactionary and conservative ways in an attempt to accommodate what is unknown in terms of established types of the past (2004: 80). According to Kearney (2004: 80) this may be a reason that social groups tend to be “intolerant toward what is marginal, different or alien”:

“The phenomenon of the intolerable arises when the experience of radical novelty threatens the possibility of the social group’s recognizing itself in retrospective reference to its hallowed traditions.”

Thus, the dissimulating function of ideology often takes the form of *self-dissimulation*, expressed “as a resistance to change – as a closure to new possibilities of self-imagination” (2004: 80). By

---

<sup>71</sup> Here Kearney (2004: 79) quotes Ricoeur who notes that “every prince wants to be Caesar, every Caesar wants to be Alexander, every Alexander wants to Hellenise an Oriental despot.” My own country, South Africa, has been witness to similar examples of power being rehearsed, always justified with reference to mythologized historical narratives. For example, after gaining independence from British colonial rule, the Afrikaner community, facing a socio-economic crisis, managed to *integrate* through reiteration and ritualization of founding narratives of military victories and epic voyages, only to *justify*, by the same ideologies, a racist and oppressive regime of apartheid shortly after. Today, having come into power, the same political party that struggled against Apartheid over many decades is, many would argue, benefiting from a similar “stagnation of politics.” In this new situation, “the struggle years” are sometimes called upon to justify present exploitations of power – even as these memories serve to integrate and mobilize many who continue the ongoing struggles for justice. This serves to show how the ideological function of the social imaginary is more dynamic and complex than outright dismissals of ideology would allow.

concealing “the gap between what is and what ought to be,” ideology obscures present corruption and injustice, ironically helping to justify the status quo even if the present situation is not living up to the ideals of a community’s own self-images (2004: 80).

The *third* function of ideology identified by Ricoeur, helps clarify the context within which the integrative and dissimulating functions “may become joint allies of *domination*” (Kearney, 2004: 80). The *dominating* function of ideology raises what Kearney (2004: 80) sees as “the vexed question of the hierarchical organization of society – the question of *authority*.” According to Kearney (2004: 80), Ricoeur’s analysis starts from the observation, informed by Weber and Habermas, that “social systems tend to legitimize themselves through an ideology that justifies their right to secure and retain power.” Legitimation is, for Ricoeur, possibly the most problematic aspect of authority, especially in modern societies. What makes the process of legitimisation so problematic is the existence of...

“...a disparity between the nation state’s ideology and the answering belief of the public. Ideology thus entails a surplus-value of claim over response, of power over freedom. Put in another way, if a system’s claim to authority were fully consented to by those whom it governs, there would be no urgent need for the persuasive/coercive strategies of ideology. ... as such it is a direct consequence of modernity, for it seeks to fill the gap left by the diminution of tradition. Ideology attempts to compensate for the modern ‘disenchantment’ of society” (Kearney, 2004: 80-81).

With this analysis of domination, Ricoeur touches on what Marx saw in ideology as an inversion of reality, where the “ought” of normative codes (superstructural abstraction) obscures the “is” of lived social existence (infrastructural *praxis*) (Kearney, 2004: 81). According to Kearney (2004: 81), Ricoeur promotes Marx’s hermeneutic as “an ‘archaeological’ interpretation that relocates the origin (*arche*) of meaning in the material forces and relations of production.” For Kearney (2004: 81) then, as part of a hermeneutic move of suspicion, Marx’s critique serves the useful purpose of *inverting the inversion*, of “negating the negative functions of ideology.”

As is well known, Marx was particularly severe in his critique of religion as ideology *par excellence*. Also here, Ricoeur embraces Marx’s critique [and one could add, that of Nietzsche and Freud]<sup>72</sup> as “a view through which any kind of mediation of faith must pass... To smash the idols is also to let symbols speak” (Kearney, 2004: 82). According to Kearney (2004: 82), the

---

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Kearney’s, *Anatheism* (2010) pp. 71-76, where he discusses Ricoeur’s appropriation of Nietzsche and Freud’s critiques against religion to identify *taboo* and *escape* (alibi) as aspects of religion that call for radical critique.

Masters of Suspicion have done a service to theological hermeneutics, if it will learn to appropriate their demystifications of religion as a “mask of fear, a mask of domination, a mask of hate.” Elsewhere, Kearney (2010: 71) refers to Ricoeur’s postwar essay *Religion, Atheism, Faith* where he “speaks of the *religious meaning of atheism*, suggesting that an atheistic purging of the negative and life-denying components of religion needs to be taken on board if a genuine form of faith is to emerge in our secular culture.”

However, after giving the hermeneuts of suspicion their due, it is at this point, where the possibility of a genuine form of faith is raised, that Ricoeur takes his leave of Marx and the others. By summarily equating religion with ideology and viewing the latter exclusively in terms of inversion and domination, Marx held a reductionist view of both religion *and* ideology. In the *first* instance, his critique remained ignorant of the fact that religion can serve interests besides those of class domination, such as the interest in emancipation and the wellbeing of the stranger. *Secondly*, if one compares it to Ricoeur’s analysis of ideology, Marx’s understanding appears narrow and fails to see that “with the demise of religion as the dominant superstructure of society, other discourses came to serve as the ideological means of justifying and integrating new orders of legitimization” – including his own (2004: 82):

“In the modern era, science frequently fulfils the role of ideological legitimation even though it was, ironically, science that claimed to overcome ideology for Marx and several Enlightenment thinkers. A profound irony indeed” (2004: 82).

As an alternative to such reductionist views of religion and ideology, Kearney (2004: 84) sees Ricoeur champion a *critical hermeneutics* “able to operate *within* the social imaginary, while refusing any absolute standpoint of knowledge.” Unlike, many enlightenment critiques of ideology, such a critical hermeneutics departs from the presupposition that there is no “ideologically free zone” or “post-ideological vantage point” (2004: 82-83). It knows that “social reality always presupposes some sort of symbolic constitution, and frequently includes an ‘interpretation in images and representations of the social bond itself’” (Ricoeur in Kearney, 2004: 82).<sup>73</sup> Thus, Kearney (2004: 83-84) notes that “the best response to ideological imagination is not pure negation but a hermeneutic imagination capable of critical discrimination.”

---

<sup>73</sup> Original quote from Ricoeur, P. 1974. “Science and Ideology,” in *Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences* (1981), ed. and trans. John B Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 231.



Kearney's critical hermeneutic is also characterised by an open, dialogical approach which turns Critique into *critiques*. For Kearney, the best way to expose the blind spots of any critique is to accept the ongoing conflict of interpretations and adopt a hermeneutic openness to learn from the debates. Thus, instead of proposing an all-inclusive Critique, Kearney's work is characterised by dialogical encounters with various critical thinkers. Kearney (2012: 178) adopts a broad notion of critique:

"I mean this in the modern sense of the term from Kant's three Critiques down to the more contemporary movements of Critical Theory from Horkheimer and Benjamin to Habermas and Foucault. In this broad sweep, I would obviously include critiques of race, class, gender, power, and the unconscious: All critical philosophies, which carry on the legacy, amongst others of the 'three masters of suspicion' (Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche)."

Kearney does not swallow these thinkers whole, and while many of them may object to his partial use of their theories, the critical distance enables a critique of critique, while remaining open to new insights emerging from the confrontations themselves. Furthermore, the provisionality of such a hermeneutic approach means that the door is always left ajar for a new or unheard voice to enter the fray.<sup>74</sup>

However, for such a critical hermeneutics, operating *within* the social imaginary, a hermeneutic of suspicion is only one half of the story. The archaeological task, with its focus on anterior causes and unseen prejudices, needs to be supplemented by a hermeneutic of *invention* that remains open to horizons of aspiration and expectation opened up by symbols.

### 2.3.3. Utopia and the Hermeneutics of Invention

What many enlightenment critiques failed to recognise, and what Ricoeur's philosophy of imagination attempts to make possible, is to view the social imaginary, besides reaffirming past values and securing stability in the present, as a discourse of *rupture*. The social imaginary rupture's present securities through "a discourse of 'utopia' that remains critical of the powers

---

<sup>74</sup> One such critique that has been deeply influential on Kearney's thinking on myth generally, but more specifically, on how societies deal with the challenge of "others" via the social imaginary, is René Girard's critique of scapegoating. Kearney first real engagement with Girard's theories on scapegoating myths appeared in 1995 in a chapter of his *Poetics of Modernity* entitled "Myth and Sacrificial Scapegoats: On René Girard." In an imitation of Ricoeur's critique of the masters of suspicion, Kearney (1995: 147) criticises Girard for turning myth into the scapegoat of his own system of explanation by demonizing myth as such. Nevertheless, that Girard's theory helped to sensitise Kearney for operations of the scapegoat mechanism in contemporary societies is clearly illustrated in his recent trilogy, especially in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (cf. especially chapters 1 & 2) and *On Stories* (cf. Part Three).



that be out of a fidelity to an ‘elsewhere,’ to a society that is not-yet” (Ricoeur in interview with Kearney, 1984: 29). According to Ricoeur the capacity for rupture is possibilized, rather than hampered, by symbolic discourses as they operate according to “the permanent spirit of language ... not as some decorative excess or effusion of subjectivity, but as the creative capacity of language to open up new worlds” (Ricoeur in interview with Kearney, 1984: 44). Thus, the disparity observed between symbolic representations and reality, do not only serve to invert and alienate. They also perform the critical function of calling the present into question: by transcending the established limits of the world *as-it-is*; by exploring alternative possibilities; by expressing and rousing aspirations for justice, peace and beauty; by revealing the world *as-it-ought-to-be*.

Because of the double intentionality of symbols, opening up to past *and* future horizons, serving ideological *and* utopian purposes, a double edged, critical hermeneutics is needed “to discriminate between falsifying and emancipating modes of symbolization” (Kearney, 2004: 85). After the hermeneutics of *suspicion* has done its demystifying work of exposing falsehoods, a hermeneutics of *invention* “completes” the hermeneutic circle by endeavouring to reinterpret the social imaginary “in terms of a genuine symbolic anticipation of liberty, truth, or justice” (2004: 85). Thus, says Kearney, demystification must not be confused with desymbolisation [or demythologization]. The purpose is not to reduce symbols to a “some putatively ‘literal’ content” (2004: 86). Rather, the aim of the critical moment of suspicion is to expose the perversion of symbols, of which literalism (leading to sectarian triumphalism) is an example, so that a hermeneutics of invention may restore the “exploratory” capacities of symbols and myths to give rise to thought and disclose possible worlds.

However, in an interview with Kearney (1984: 29–30), Ricoeur is quick to remind us that utopian symbols may themselves become perverted:

“Besides the authentic utopia of critical rupture there can also exist a dangerously schizophrenic utopian discourse which projects a static future without ever producing the conditions of its realization... Here utopia becomes a future cut off from the present and the past, a mere alibi for the consolidation of the repressive powers that be. The utopian discourse functions as a mystificatory ideology as soon as it justifies the oppression of today in the name of the liberation of tomorrow.”

What is required from a critical hermeneutics, therefore, is to maintain a complementary relationship between “the symbolic confirmation of the past” and the “symbolic opening towards

the future” (Kearney, 2004: 88). The social imaginary operates in the gap between memory and projection, vacillating between the critical moment of suspicion and the creative task of invention in an open-ended process of self-representation. By choosing to also operate in this gap between memory and hope, Kearney (2004: 88) sees Ricoeur’s critical hermeneutics providing “a satisfactory basis for a dialectical rapport between imagination and reason.” A creative tension is at work in this dialectic: between *belonging* and *distance*. On the one hand, the hermeneutic circle includes a sense of *belonging*: “Before any critical distance”, says Ricoeur, “we belong to a history, to a class, to a nation, to a culture, to one or several traditions” (Ricoeur in Kearney, 2004: 89).<sup>75</sup> While this belonging includes the risk of ideological alienation, the gap between the present and the future/past, enables historical *distantiation*. As with Ricoeur’s interpretive model of the text, it is through the detour of signs and images, that “historical distancing implies self-distancing, a distancing of the subject from itself, which allows for a critical self-imagining” (2004: 89).

Thus, even as expressions of the social imaginary must “pass through the detour of critical enlightenment” to remain true to its promise, exponents of enlightenment critique may be reminded of their rootedness within tradition – lest they cut off the branch upon which their “interest in emancipation” is delicately poised. Ricoeur puts it as follows:

“Critique is also a tradition. I would even say that it plunges into the most impressive tradition, that of liberating acts, of the Exodus and the Resurrection. Perhaps there would be no more interest in emancipation, no more anticipation of freedom, if the Exodus and the Resurrection were effaced from the memory of mankind. ... If this is so then nothing is more deceptive than the alleged antinomy between a [hermeneutic] ontology of prior understanding and a [critical] eschatology of freedom. ... As if it were necessary to choose between reminiscence and hope! In theological terms, eschatology is nothing without the recitation of acts of deliverance from the past. ... It is the task of philosophical reflection to eliminate deceptive antinomies which would oppose the interest in the reinterpretation of cultural heritages received from the past, and the interest in the futuristic projections of a liberated humanity” (Cited in Kearney, 2004: 66).<sup>76</sup>

With this telling statement from Ricoeur, we are reminded that trans-figuration takes place in the gap between (-trans) the past and the future. It is an event of reminiscence and hope – or rather,

<sup>75</sup> Original quote from Ricoeur, P. 1974. “Science and Ideology,” in *Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences* (1981), ed. and trans. John B Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 243.

<sup>76</sup> Original quote from Ricoeur, P. 1974. “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology,” in *Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences* (1981), ed. and trans. John B Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 63-100.

reminiscence *as* hope, eschatology *as* the recitation of past acts of deliverance. Thus, Ricoeur's rich notion of the social imaginary prepares the ground for a re-discovery of the transfigurative potential of our faith traditions, as these have (and continue to) inform projects of emancipation. On this note, we turn to reflect on how Kearney's hermeneutic imagination, in both its personal and social modes, finds expression in his *transfiguring God*.

## 2.4. Transfiguring God

The purpose of this section is to show how Kearney extends his hermeneutic imagination to the question of God and, more specifically, how this leads him to think a *transfiguring God*. Kearney's most systematic and eloquent account of the transfiguring God is given in his book, *The God Who May Be* (2001). He begins his exploration of transfiguration with a phenomenological account of the *persona* (cf. 1.3). Indeed, for Kearney, transfiguration can hardly be thought without the notion of the *persona*, which provides the logic by which to understand, and some important criteria by which to judge, acts of transfiguration. The *persona* brings one to the limit of direct reference and compels one to speak figuratively about the other, "deploying imagination and interpretation to overreach their normal limits in efforts to grasp it – especially in the guise of metaphor and narrative" (Kearney, 2001: 10). One immediately recognises Kearney's hermeneutic imagination at work here: through the encounter with another *persona*, the *poetic* imagination's capacity to style and interpret meaning is activated.

However, as *eschaton* the *persona* may never become an acquisition, for as Kearney says, the *persona* outstrips every figuration on my part (2001: 16). No configuration of the *persona* is ever complete, no interpretation final. We may recall Ricoeur's model of the text, where understanding takes place in the tension between distance and belonging, requiring *disappropriation* before one may subjectively appropriate meaning. Thus, understanding requires that one exposes oneself, with the vulnerability that this implies, to an horizon of "other" and "strange" meanings that exceed one's initial, familiar horizons. The same applies for transfiguration:

"The *persona* transfigures me before I configure it. And to the extent that I avow and accord this asymmetrical priority to the other, I am transfigured by that particular *persona* and empowered to transfigure in turn – that is, to figure the other in their otherness" (Kearney, 2001: 16).

With the concept of transfiguration, Kearney's philosophy "at the limit," extends the quest for understanding well beyond merely epistemological categories. Situated within a radical inter-relatedness, understanding takes on a decisively ethical charge. Kearney signals this face-to-face relationship of one-for-the-other with his notion of the *prosopon-persona*:

"Transfiguration is something that, in the last analysis, we allow the *persona-prosopon* to do to us. Something we suffer to be done to us. Like the summons of the distressed other. Or the eyes of the icon that look through is from beyond us. Or the thin small voice of Elijah's cave. Or the cry in the wilderness" (Kearney, 2001: 18–19).

As the last three sentences of this quote suggests, Kearney believes that the promise of transfiguration also pertains to the human relationship with God as the divine Other. Thus, after his first chapter on the *persona*, Kearney turns to hermeneutic readings of a number of biblical passages through which he further explores "the notion of an eschatological God who transfigures and desires" (2001: 9).

#### **2.4.1. Moses and the Burning Bush**

The first text that he explores in this regard is the narrative of Moses and the Burning Bush in Exodus 3. Kearney's narrative interpretation of the encounter between God and Moses in the burning bush reveals the event as a radical transgression of the traditional metaphysical notion of God as an unmoving Mover or unchanging Essence. For, "not only is the bush transfiguring itself but so too is the God who speaks through it (*per-sona*). And it threatens to transfigure Moses too" (Kearney, 2001: 21). God, who is *beyond* being, meets Moses in a *traversal* of being – similar to the *persona* passing through an embodied person without being reducible to it. This leads Kearney to understand God's trans-figuring *revelation* to Moses, in terms of *gift* (as unconditional self-giving) and *passage* (for if God stays faithful, he never stays put).

Kearney (2001: 20–22) stresses the deeply personal, dialogical nature of the encounter between God and Moses. God's name is not given as a one-directional proclamation from nowhere, but as a response to Moses's question, "who will I say sent me?" God responds by giving an elusive, unpronounceable name (YHWH) which Kearney (2001: 27) chooses to translate as "I shall be what I shall be," or following Rosenzweig: "I will be there as I will be there." In contrast to many "onto-theological" interpretations given of the divine name over the centuries (2001: 23–25), Kearney recalls a counter-tradition, more sensitive to the narrative, relational context of the encounter between God and Moses (2001: 25–31). What emerges is an emphasis on the

dynamic, historical and ethical character of God, finely attuned to the eschatological implications of such a reading. Through its elusive, deconstructive character, God's "name" evades being acquired as a powerful means to any end. Rather Moses finds himself personally addressed with an ethical *mandate* and a historical *mission*; a *pledge* and a *promise* that "threatens to transfigure Moses":

"... the transfiguring God of the burning bush is pledging to remain with those who continue to suffer in future historical moments, and not just in the present moment. ... The transfiguring God is not a once-off deity but one who remembers the promises of the past and remains faithful to them into the eschatological future" (Kearney, 2001: 25).

Through this reading of the transfiguring God, Kearney reinforces the notion that trans-figuration takes place within the creative tension of memory and hope. The transfiguring God passes through this historical, cultural horizon to meet Moses, transfiguring his emissary in the process. Yet, the trans-figuring God is also *trans-cultural*. By interpreting God's revelation to Moses as a pledge "to remain with those who continue to suffer in future historical moments," Kearney takes up Ricoeur's conviction that the social imaginary of any historical community "extends beyond its own particular frontiers."<sup>77</sup> Even though myths emerge within a particular culture or community, warning bells should go off whenever myths are used to ground, justify or even liberate one community to the exclusion of others. "Liberation cannot be exclusive," says Ricoeur, who suggests that myths like the Exodus narrative "should have as their horizon the liberation of mankind as a whole" (Kearney, 2004: 71).

So how does one respond when encountering the transfiguring God? Certainly not by initiating a course of abstract speculation:

"Faced with the burning bush, one doesn't merely speculate; one runs, or if one holds one's ground, one praises, dances, acts" (Kearney, 2001: 30).

Before the transfiguring God conventional understanding is brought to its limit. Here philosophy and theology faces the radical challenge of speaking of what is ineffable. Transfiguration, as being enabled by the Other, as something one allows the other to do unto oneself, is unlike any methodical appropriation of knowledge. It requires a process of unknowing and allowing oneself to be "led into mystery," to borrow the title of John de Gruchy's fine book.<sup>78</sup> As mentioned

<sup>77</sup> As Ricoeur says, "nothing travels or circulates as widely and effectively as myths."

<sup>78</sup> de Gruchy, J.W. 2013. *Led into Mystery: Faith seeking answers in life and death*, London: SCM Press.

before, Kearney tries to understand this mystery in the dynamic, relational terms of ‘passage’ and ‘gift’.

For Kearney (2001: 36) *passage* means the “passing through flesh” by which the “God-made-flesh liberates and transfigures the *persona* in each one of us.” After the passage itself has taken place, what remains of the encounter is but a trace – “a trace that explodes the present towards the future, a *trait* which cannot be bordered or possessed” (2001: 28). Such an absence-in-presence “resists quietism as much as zealotry [and] renounces both the onto-theology of essence and the voluntarist impatience to appropriate promised lands” (2001: 38). We hear God’s warning to Moses: “take off your shoes! However you choose to respond, be advised to tread carefully, for you are standing on holy ground.”

Yet, as an act of unconditional *giving*, God’s transfiguring presence needs to be *received*. As *gift*, the transfiguring God’s promise is a mandate that includes a human response:

“Such commitment shows Yahweh as God-the-agent, whose co-respondents, from Moses to the exilic prophets and Jesus, see themselves implicated in the revelation as receivers of a *gift* – a Word given by someone who calls them to cooperate with Him in his actions” (2001: 28).

As gift, God’s revelation cannot be imposed. God’s people are free to accept or refuse it. This is one of the reasons that Kearney speaks of the transfiguring God as the God who *may be*. As transfiguring promise, God “depends on us to be. Without us no Word can be made flesh.” Accordingly, “transfiguring is not just something God does to us:

“... it is also something that we do to God. And we transfigure God to the extent that we create art, we create justice, we create love. We bring into being, through our actions – poetical and ethical – a transfiguration of the world. It is a human task as much as a divine gift. God gives to us a transfiguring promise; we give back to God a transfigured world...” (Kearney, 2006c: 371).

We find here a recapitulation of Kearney’s transformative hermeneutic circle which begins in experience before being led through the detours of a some *persona*, figure, symbol or narrative, to return to one’s life-world transformed and enabled to perform transfiguring acts. One could therefore say that, in the final analysis, transfiguration is known by its fruits. By the same logic God’s transfiguring call may go unheard or unheeded: “since no die is cast, no course of action preordained, we are free to make the world more just and loving, or not to” (2001: 5). Kearney

(2001: 5) is aware of taking an Augustinian position on evil, viewing it as the absence of God who is also the ultimate Good (*privatio boni*):

“We are thus reminded that if there is evil in our society – as there is – it is not the pre-established will or destiny of God, but our responsibility. For evil ... is the consequence of our refusal to remain open to the transfiguring call of the other *persona* – the summons of the orphan, widow, stranger, the cry of the defenceless one: ‘where are you?’”

Here the transfiguring call of God overlaps with the transfiguring call and cry of the neighbour. For Kearney this not only testifies to God’s goodness as the one who cares and acts on behalf of the weak, but also for God’s vulnerability. Kearney is highly sceptical of theodicies and theocracies that hold on to “a metaphysics of causal omnipotence and self-sufficiency” (2010: 53). As an alternative, he promotes the idea of a God who’s relatedness with creation is characterised by a self-giving love that leaves God dependent on his creatures to answer his transfiguring call. One is reminded here of the fact that it is not only the defenceless neighbour who cries, “where are you?” but also the vulnerable God who’s transfiguring call is not answered: as in Gen. 3:9, for example, where God calls to Adam and Eve – having hid themselves from him – “where are you?” And then, strikingly in Gen. 4:9, after Cain killed Abel: “*Where is your brother?*”

#### 2.4.2. Messianic Transfigurations

From the Exodus narrative, Kearney turns to Messianic readings of transfiguration. His first example of messianic transfiguration is the transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor (Luke 9: 28-36). What is later recounted by the three disciples who were present, according to Kearney, is that the person of Jesus metamorphosed before their eyes into the *persona* of Christ:

“It is marked not by Jesus abandoning his original person to become someone else, but by a change of “figure” which allows his divine *persona* to shine forth – in singular fashion – through his flesh-and-blood embodiedness” (2001: 39).

What is most instructive for Kearney about this narrative is how the transfiguration of Christ reveals an infinite excess or surplus (of meaning, beauty and glory) inscribed in and through the finite figure of Jesus’ person. Thus, just like the symbols which carry a surplus of meaning, making them open to endless interpretation and re-interpretation, figures such as the narrative account of what happened on Mount Tabor “invite a history of plural readings” (2001: 47).



At this point it may be instructive to review Kearney's critical engagement with another contemporary attempt to think God in the wake of Nietzsche and Heidegger's conceptual atheism. Such an attempt is made by Jean-Luc Marion, who draws especially from the negative or apophatic theological tradition to explore the idea of God *without Being*, God as *pure gift*.<sup>79</sup> What emerges for Marion is a mystical theology pointing to a radically transcendent God "beyond both the affirmation and negation of names" (2001: 32). Encounters with God, mediated by "saturated phenomena" like Christ's transfiguration or the Eucharist (as sign *par excellence*), are understood as a form of "mystical union" (2001: 32). According to Kearney (2001: 32), such encounters leave no room for further discussion or debate: "The 'saturated phenomenon' of mystical eucharistic with the divine encounter [ideally administered by a bishop in the Roman Catholic Church] is informed by such a *hyper-excess* that it cannot be seen, known, or understood." Kearney (2001: 33) responds to the notion of *hyper-excess* by raising a number of questions, thus revealing his own critical hermeneutic position:

"If the saturated phenomenon is really as bedazzling as Marion suggests, how can we tell the difference between the divine and its opposites? How are we to distinguish between enabling and disabling revelations? Who is it that speaks when God speaks from the burning bush?"

Kearney (2001: 33) answers his own questions by praising the Pauline sobriety expressed in 1 Thessalonians 5<sup>80</sup>, where despite the indefinite nature of the Messiah's coming, Paul "calls for sober and enlightened vigilance" over "blind mystical rapture." For Kearney, the deconstructive and elusive nature of an encounter with the transfiguring God is never an opportunity to bypass the responsibility of interpretation and discernment. Even if such responsibility be deferred by an initial silence or postponed to be re-figured in retrospect, it cannot be evaded outright. Christ's Transfiguration suggests that while God transcends all concepts and figurations, he nevertheless reveals by *trans-figuring*, by passing through, as a manner of speaking, flesh and sign and word. And if such *figurations* of the divine carry an *excess* or *surplus* of meaning,

---

<sup>79</sup> For Kearney's critical engagements with Marion's work see *The God Who May Be* (Kearney, 2001: 31–33), but also the very enlightening series of debates between Kearney and Marion published in *After God* (Manoussakis, 2006b: 318–339), and the published round-table discussion on the phenomenology of the gift between Kearney, Derrida and Marion at the 1999 Villanova Conference, Caputo, John D. 1999. "Roundtable on the Gift," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*. Caputo, JD & Scanlon, MJ (eds.) Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

<sup>80</sup> 1 Thess. 5:2; 4-6 (NRSV): "For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ... But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober..."

unlike Marion's *hyper*-excess, this never implies *saturation*, resolving in a holy "stupor" or "terror" that brings all thinking, saying and doing to an abrupt end. Rather, the *surplus* of meaning in religious symbols, Kearney's hermeneutic imagination teaches us, has creative potential, bringing forth interpretation, re-interpretation and conflicting interpretations; giving rise to thought, debate and dialogue as it *transfigures* the world itself, possibilizing new ways of being.

Yet, as figures make transfiguration possible, their very ineffability and surplus of meaning include the possibility of *dis*-figuring interpretations. For Kearney (2001: 47), transfiguring interpretations maintain Christ as an "icon of alterity," whereas disfigurations are marked by their tendency to misconstrue him as an "idol of presence." Thus, on Mount Thabor, God has to intercede from the clouds to avert Peter's effort to "fix Christ as a fetish of presence," bidding them to "listen to *him!*" to "attend to Christ's otherness" (2001: 47). Upon which "Christ proceeds to a second kenotic act of giving, refusing the short route to immediate triumph and embracing the *via crucis*..." (Kearney, 2005a: 230). Because of this ever present danger to impose our own designs on God, hermeneutics should also avoid shortcuts and rather opt for the more arduous, humble road. Kearney calls for the discerning capacities mentioned in our earlier discussion of his critical hermeneutics:

"... the transfiguring God calls at all times for hermeneutic vigilance and discernment, setting us at a critical distance – yet never so distant to forfeit grace. Far in its nearness, but not so far as not to be (or be read) at all. It bids us cast a cold eye but not the eye of death" (2001: 41).

Such hermeneutic vigilance and discernment is made all the more necessary in a time in which the conflict of interpretations has become almost overwhelming. In a context of radical plurality, Kearney (2001: 48) advises that, "the point is not to repudiate such a multiplicity of interpretations but to enter the conflict and take sides." The choice of sides, for Kearney (2001: 48), is ultimately determined by which interpretations one deems "more faithful to the ethico-eschatological import of the Christ-event." Kearney's criteria in this regard should have become clearer as this chapter progressed, although he might want to add that it would depend greatly on the context and the rival interpretations that are at hand. *Firstly*, one may say that an authentic interpretation would remain faithful to the broad logic of the *persona* and testify to its *transfiguring* power as "the power of *perhaps*" (2001: 48; 4-5). *Secondly*, as Kearney (2001: 48-

49) himself says, faithful and discerning testimony is “known by its fruits” and more specifically:

“Fruits of love and justice, care and gift. We have to try to tell the difference, in sum between narrative testimonies that transform or deform lives. The rest is indeed silence.”

*Thirdly*, Kearney’s hermeneutic imagination, in its personal and cultural modes, makes the wager that faithful interpretation and decision can only take place where the memory and hope are united. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the transfiguration on Mount Thabor presents Christ, discussing his immanent passion with Moses and Elijah, as the ultimate *trans-figure*, “re-figuring the burning bush (Moses) and pre-figuring the coming of the messianic kingdom (Elijah)” (2001: 42). Indeed, as Gerrit Brand (2014: 92) once said in a letter to a friend, the Christian faith is marked by the fact that its ultimate hope, “the *telos* or purpose of history”, is secured in “an event that took place two millennia ago in a neglected suburb of the Roman Empire.”

#### 2.4.3. “Possibilizing God”

Kearney’s final textual reading that we will touch on here is of a response by Jesus to a query about how it is possible for anyone to be saved: “For humans it is impossible, but not for God; because for God everything is possible,” Jesus is quoted to have said in Mark 10:27.<sup>81</sup> Kearney allows Jesus’ response to the disciples to interact with a number of other scriptural and philosophical texts, providing us with another crucial perspective on the “transfiguring God.” What ultimately emerges for Kearney (2001: 81) from the “eschatological ‘possible’ invoked in Mark 10” is the following:

---

<sup>81</sup> The context of this reading is a chapter entitled *Possibilizing God*, where Kearney teases out the possible meanings of Jesus statement in dialogue with “a number of related scriptural and philosophical texts.” Philosophically, the background to his discussion is clearly Husserl (cf. Kearney, 2001: 84–87) and Heidegger’s (cf. 2001: 91–93) conviction that possibility precedes actuality and thus many of the philosophical texts called up by Kearney are “post-metaphysical” developments of possibility, such as Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive notion of the “impossible-possible:” of the “perhaps” as both possible and impossible (cf. 2001: 93-99). Kearney also compares the “(post-)Heideggerian” notions with Ernst Bloch’s dialectical notion of the possible (cf. 2001: 87-91). By exploring the strengths and limitations of these accounts, Kearney (2001: 99) appropriates them as “crucial critical signposts for a new eschatology of God.” In all of this, Kearney’s “ultimate contention” is that “such an eschatological revision of God ... may enable us to retrieve certain neglected texts of our intellectual heritage and offer an account more consonant with the Messianic promise of theism” (2001: 80). Cf. also Kearney, R. 2005. “Hermeneutics of the Possible God,” in I. Leask & E. Cassidy, eds. *Givenness and God*. New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 220–242 & Kearney, R. 2006. “Enabling God.” In J. P. Manoussakis, ed. *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*. New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 39–54.

“... that when our finite human powers – of doing, thinking, saying – reach their ultimate limit, an infinite *dunamis* takes over, *transfiguring our very incapacity into a new kind of capacity*. The reference to the kingdom in this passage of Mark points forward to the Resurrection of the Just, “possibilized” ... by the laws of Moses, to the wisdom of the Prophets, and to the dying and rising of Jesus (1 Corinthians 6:14). It alludes to the possibilizing power of the Spirit ... which raised Christ from the dead and prepared the disciples for their prophetic mission (1 Cor. 2:4; Rom. 15:19; Tim. 1:7; Acts 4:33, 1:8, 8:10; Luke 1:35, 24:49, 9:1, 10:19, 24:28)” (2001: 81; 151n).

As the rich array of scriptural references in this quote suggests, a “hermeneutic poetics of the Kingdom looks to some of the recurring *figures* – metaphors, parables, images, symbols – deployed in the Gospels to communicate the eschatological promise” (Kearney, 2005a: 229). Employing such a “hermeneutic poetics of the Kingdom,” Kearney notices two recurring motifs dispersed through the gospels.

The *first* of these is expressed in the countless figures suggesting that the transfiguring God is a God of the “little things,” that a macro-eschatology of “sovereignty, omnipotence and ecclesiastical triumph” should be replaced by a “*micro-eschatology*,” as Kearney (2005a: 230) calls it.<sup>82</sup> A micro-eschatology where the *faith* in the Kingdom is associated with the vulnerable openness of ‘little children,’ and the Kingdom’s *judgment* “related to how we respond in history, here and now, to the ‘least of these’” (2005a: 230). What Kearney hears in these scriptural witnesses:

“... is clearly not the imperial power of a sovereign; it is a dynamic call to love that possibilizes and enables humans to transform their world – by giving themselves to the “least of these,” by empathizing with the disinherited and the dispossessed, by refusing the path of might and violence, by transfiguring the mustard seed into the Kingdom, each moment at a time, one act after another, each step of the way. ... It signals the option for the poor, for nonviolent resistance and revolution taken by peacemakers and dissenting ‘holy fools’ from ancient to modern times” (2005: 232).

As Kearney (2005: 233) declares, the “God witnessed here goes beyond the will-to-power.” Yet it also gives a powerful response to Nietzsche’s critique of a meek and mild Christianity that disempowers people, stripping them of any will whatsoever. Contra Nietzsche and Heidegger, the possibilizing God *enables* people, transfiguring the individual into a “capable self,” for “it is

---

<sup>82</sup> In making his point, Kearney (2005a: 229–230) refers, amongst others, to the images of “the yeast in the flour (Luke 13), the tiny pearl of great price (Matthew 13), and, perhaps most suggestive and telling of all, the mustard seed (Mark 4) – a minuscule grain that blooms and flourishes into a spreading tree...,” but also to Christ’s self emptying (*kenosis*) which finds narrative expression in his temptation in the desert and his entry into Jerusalem on a borrowed ass’s colt.

in the renunciation of my will-to-power, and even in my refusal to rest satisfied with my ownmost totality as a being-toward-death, that I open myself to the infinite empowering-possibilizing of God. Abandoning ego, I allow the infinite to beget itself in my *persona*” (Kearney, 2001: 108).

The *second* motif recognised by Kearney complements these spatial metaphors with *temporal* figures, indicating the paradoxical nature of eschatological time, as *already come* and always *yet to come* (2005a: 231). This relationship is crucial for understanding Kearney’s notion of a transfiguring, possibilizing God. The “already” indicates that God’s promise is a *historical possibility*, while the “yet to come” refers to the fact that God’s Kingdom is *not yet actualised in history* (2005a: 231). Kearney develops this inherent tension within God’s transfiguring presence in terms of Nicholas of Cusa’s notion of God as *posse* (possibility) or *possest* (possibility-to-be).<sup>83</sup> This engagement with Cusanus is formative for Kearney’s eschatological idea of God as *may-be*. “From an eschatological perspective,” says Kearney (2001: 105), “divinity is reconceived as that *posse* or *possest* which calls and invites us to actualise its proffered possibles by our poetical and ethical actions, contributing to the transfiguration of the world to the extent that we respond to this invitation, but refusing this transfiguring task every time we do evil or injustice or commit ourselves to non-being.”

\*\*\*

In conclusion then, what Kearney (2005a: 235) sees in all these figurations is a God “of transfiguration rather than coercion, of *posse* rather than power, of little rather than large things.” In these three shifts, we witness a daring attempt by Kearney to say something of the ineffable. More accurately, we see an attempt to trans-figure conceptions of God that have come to betray or domesticate their original transfiguring power. The three sections of this chapter have tried to explore, through different focal points, how Kearney employs the *hermeneutic imagination* to think at the limit. As an imaginative exercise, “at the frontier zone where narratives flourish and abound,” the hermeneutic imagination has shown to be no less vigilant, critical and rational. Yet

---

<sup>83</sup> In a number of original and celebrated passages (cf. for e.g. Tracy’s comments in Sheppard, 2004: 870-871; 879–880), Kearney develops Cusanus’s notion of *posse* and *possest* into a post-metaphysical eschatological conception of God. See especially *The Wake of Imagination* (Kearney, 1988: 75–78) & *The God Who May Be* (Kearney, 2001: 37, 92; 103-5).

as a reflective exercise at the limit, it is conscious of the fact that it lags behind, that there is much – regretful and merciful – that precedes and transcends the critical gaze.

What remains is to move one step closer to the limit and explore in greater detail how Kearney's hermeneutic imagination deals with phenomena of radical alterity. How does one read in the dark? Is there hope for transfiguration in the borderlands "where maps run out ... and navigators click their compasses shut" (Kearney, 2003a: 3)? Is transfiguring possible in experiences of extreme estrangement? May one hope for transfiguration before an absolute stranger? Chapter Three will explore how Kearney responds to these challenging questions in dialogue with other contemporary philosophical voices.

# *Chapter Three: the Limit as Threshold?*

## **The Stranger and Kearney's diacritical hermeneutics**

### **3.1. Introduction**

Perhaps the most poignant manifestation of the limit is the enigma that goes by the broad designations of “otherness,” or “alterity,” or “the strange.” Any philosophy “at the limit” worth its salt needs to give an account of how it understands, or at least relates to, this enigmatic challenge to thought and life. How one responds to this challenge has far reaching consequences for philosophy and theology, but also for life with others, for ethics, politics and religion. This chapter will explore how Kearney's philosophy at the limit gives a voice to the complex of questions that emerge when we are confronted by strangeness, while venturing new ways of relating to the stranger. One could say that alterity becomes a third focal point by which we seek to understand Kearney's hermeneutic philosophy.

The *first* section (3.2) will show how Kearney frames the question of alterity, situating it historically within the Western philosophical tradition. This step is vital, for Kearney's own account of this enigmatic problem emerges in critical dialogue with thinkers who share his phenomenological heritage, especially Emmanuel Levinas, with his ethical philosophy, and Jacques Derrida, who approaches the Other from Deconstruction. Having “introduced the stranger,” the *second* section (3.3) attempts to give a systematic account of Kearney's own hermeneutic approach to the other, which he calls *diacritical hermeneutics*. Finally, the *third* section (3.4) will give a brief account of how this approach finds expression in Kearney's notion of “ana-theism” where the divine is figured as a stranger. We will focus there on Kearney's “anatheist wager,” which he defines in terms of five moments, movements or components, namely, *imagination, humour, commitment, discernment and hospitality*.



## 3.2. Introducing the Stranger

By virtue of his hermeneutic philosophy, Kearney could not possibly view alterity as some free floating problem, existing independently, distinct from discourses that emerge within particular historical contexts. Indeed, Kearney's response to the challenges that alterity poses to his hermeneutic imagination is intimately tied up with how he frames and understands the question itself. Being aware of this, Kearney traces the development of the concept in Western thought, before developing his own approach in critical dialogue with other contemporary streams of thought.

### 3.2.1. "Strangers, gods and monsters"

Kearney completes his trilogy "Philosophy at the Limit" with *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003), bearing the subtitle, "Interpreting Otherness." While one could say that "the Other" is a theme that permeates all of his work, it is with this book that he provides his first fully fledged attempt to address the question of alterity. As the title of the work suggests, strangers, gods and monsters are the "central characters" of Kearney's story (2003a: 3). Kearney introduces the work by telling us that these characters, who occupy "the frontier zone where reason falters and fantasies flourish, ... represent experiences of extremity which bring us to the edge. They subvert our established categories and challenge us to think again." As "three colloquial names for the experience of alterity," Kearney (2003a: 13) traces the historical emergence and re-emergence of these "figures of Otherness" in ancient and modern myths, art, literature and various forms of popular media.

Kearney argues that the quest for strangers, gods and monsters is as old as time itself, plaguing philosophy since its earliest beginnings, since the times of Parmenides and Plato. He quotes Plato's *Phaedrus* (230e) where the following words are placed in the mouth of the philosopher *par excellence*, Socrates (2003a: 13):

"I look not unto them (myths), but into my own self: Am I a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon, or am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature?"

This either/or position, with Socrates' clear choice for the latter, sets off a philosophical tradition seeking to maintain itself by expelling the very source of wonderment (*thaumazein*) and terror (*deinon*) from which it originally sprung (Kearney, 2003: 13). The transition from a "mythology

of monsters” to a “metaphysics of reason” required that strangers, gods and monsters, “because they threaten the known with the unknown,” be “set apart in fear and trembling. Exiled to hell or heaven; or simply ostracised from the human community into a land of aliens” (Kearney, 2003a: 14; 3).

Yet, as evidenced by the persistent return of strangers, gods and monsters in the Western tradition’s imagination – individual and social, unconscious and poetic – Kearney (2003a: 14) argues that “if Reason is predicated on the expulsion of its monstrous Other, it is never wholly rid of it.” Because “philosophy always begins and ends in speechlessness” (Arendt), philosophers taking up the call to “know themselves,” would “do well,” says Kearney (2003a: 14), “to concern themselves with this inaugural and abiding enigma of the monster within.”

Another reference to Plato indicates a second tendency of the Western philosophical tradition’s approach to the Other. This time, Kearney (2003: 14-15) quotes from *The Sophist* (259a-b) where the *Eleatic stranger* (xenos) gets involved in an argument with Parmenides, under who’s administration strangers and foreigners were unwelcome in the order of being. The stranger has to justify his existence by showing that otherness is the flipside of the same:

“The kinds blend with each other and that what-is and the other run through each and every kind, that the other shares in that which is and, because of that sharing (*methexis*), is; but (since) the other is different from that in which it shares, being other than what-is, it is most clear and necessary that what-is-not is” (cited in Kearney, 2003: 15).

Thus, wherever, the Other was not expelled from the realm of reason altogether, projected onto the figures of strangers, monsters, gods, or returning to haunt the unconscious, it was reduced to a necessary sub-category of the same. Alterity became defined in relation to sameness, as *relative* otherness. While acknowledging exceptions to the rule, Kearney (2003: 15-16) views this as the dominant position of the Western metaphysical tradition, stretching from Plato to the Modern era.

### **3.2.2. Phenomenology and the Other**

We have already discussed Kearney’s phenomenological heritage, yet it is important to briefly revisit its contribution to the question of alterity here, for Kearney’s hermeneutics of otherness emerges primarily via debates taking place within this tradition.

Once again, it is Husserl with whom we shall begin, as he addresses the issue in his *Cartesian Meditations*, delivered in Paris in 1929. On the whole Husserl continued the trend that sought to understand the other in terms of the same, yet, unlike Plato, Husserl situated the encounter with otherness within the subjective “ego’s perspectives and projections” (Kearney & Semonovitch, 2011: 8).<sup>84</sup> Thus, the Other never appears directly *as it is*, but always via the ego’s consciousness; perceiving the transcendent Other only ever as an “*immanent* transcendency” (2011: 8). Yet, Husserl makes important ground by showing that the “apperceptive” experience of the Other by the intentional consciousness of the body (*Leib*) in the world (intersubjective *Lebenswelt*) is not a mere inference, but “an actual experience of the Other” (2011: 8). According to Kearney & Semonovitch (2011: 8), “Husserl succeeds in changing our understanding of “mind” and “body” as *things* and transforms them into *relations*.” This is an important transformation, which Kearney himself develops in his notion of the *persona* where he approaches the otherness of the Other in personal, relational and embodied terms (cf. 1.5).

However, Kearney (2003a: 79) points out that for Husserl, the experience of the Other is always *apperceived* as “other than mine.” As such, Husserl says that “neither the other Ego himself, nor his subjective processes ... nor anything else belonging to his essence, becomes given in our (my) experience originally” (quoted in Kearney & Semonovitch, 2011: 9). For Husserl then, the Other remains at most an “other ego,” or “alter-ego,” a projection of my own experience *as if* it were in the place of the other – which it never is (2011: 8-9). Kearney sees this as a limitation of Husserl’s approach to alterity, for “the other as alter ego is never actually Other as such” (2011: 9). Kearney & Semonovitch (2011: 9) conclude their introduction to Husserl’s notion of the Other as follows:

“Essentially, Husserl thought of the Other than me as another me. He shows how we move out from the self toward the Other but never analyzes how the Other comes toward me from out of its own alterity. In Husserl’s phenomenology interiority cannot be reconciled with exteriority. His transcendental idealism is unable to account for radical transcendence. The transcendental ego ultimately remains the foundation of the Other even as its otherness escapes me, slipping behind the intentional horizons by which I seek to capture it.”

---

<sup>84</sup> Kearney and Semonovitch are joint editors of a collection of essays published as *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality* (2011). Their shared introductory chapter, “At the Threshold: Foreigners, Strangers, Others,” (2011: 3–29) provides a very informative overview of phenomenological accounts of the Stranger and provides some constructive suggestions for a way forward.

According to Kearney (2003a: 16), Heidegger, despite his attempt to transcend Husserl's transcendental idealism, didn't do much to go beyond this state of affairs – at least not as far as the Other is concerned. With Heidegger, the Other remained trapped within *Dasein*'s horizons of “thrownness” and “possibility,” and reduced to the coming and going of existential moods (2003: 16). Thus, as a being thrown into the world with others (*Mitsein*), the Other confronts *Dasein* as that which *obstructs* authentic self-expression. Even *Dasein*'s profound experience of radical *Unheimlichkeit* as “a sense of deep disorientation, of not-being-at-home in ourselves,” is ultimately due to *Dasein*'s ownmost possibility as a *Sein-zum-Tode* (2003: 76-77).

### 3.2.3. Levinas and the Ethical Stranger

Enter Emmanuel Levinas, French philosopher of Jewish descent, who, besides studying under Husserl in Freiburg, was influential in introducing Husserl's phenomenological approach to the French speaking world. According to Kearney & Semonovitch (2011: 10) Levinas begins his own exploration of the Other, by agreeing with Husserl “that the Other surpasses all our attempts to mediate its otherness.” Yet, while he shared Husserl's phenomenological point of departure, Levinas sought to emphasise the Other *as Other*, and not only as an alter ego. Thus, says Levinas, “the Other is what I myself am not” (quoted in Kearney & Semonovitch, 2011: 10). What distinguishes Levinas's position from that of his mentor's, says Kearney (2011: 10), is that Levinas viewed this irreducible transcendence as a “good thing.” Whereas Husserl, through his narrow epistemological lens, understood this incapacity of the subject as a failure, Levinas reimagines the Other from a broader perspective that includes the ethical, viewing the self's very incapacity before the Other as “an invitation to allow the Stranger to remain strange” (2011: 10).

Thus, Levinas puts forth a radical critique of Western thought's tendency towards relative alterity, which reduces the strange to the familiar, the Other to the Same – challenging what Levinas, in his *Totality and Infinity*, called “a history of representation and totality” (2011: 10). In response to the emphasis Husserl placed on *immanence*, Kearney (2011: 10) sees Levinas providing a corrective movement of *transcendence*. Contrary to Husserl's transcendental subject that “moves *out* to appropriate the Other in the world,” Kearney argues that “the Levinasian Other moves *in* toward the subject, overtakes it, overwhelms it and even holds it ‘hostage’” (2011: 10). Thus, the Other is given both logical and temporal priority over the self, going well beyond Husserl and Heidegger's thinking, to insist that the Other demands “my care before my

care for my own life” (2011: 10-11). One could say, as Kearney (2003a: 16) does, that Levinas introduces Plato’s *Eleatic stranger* to the *ethical stranger* of the Torah:

“Levinas intervenes in the phenomenological venture, saving it from itself so it may serve the Other: namely, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Beyond the ontology of the same – ego, representation, adequation, totality – Levinas locates an ethics of radical alterity. ... At the limit of my powers I am compelled to confront a Stranger whose ‘face’ refuses to be reduced to what is ‘similar’ to me” (Kearney & Semonovitch, 2011: 11).

With this ultimate challenge to phenomenology: of relating to “an alter beyond all alter egos;” of turning “toward the face of the Other who looks at me before I look at it,” Kearney & Semonovitch (2011: 11) suggest that “the possibility of radical welcome” is opened.

With this notion of the *face* of the Other, Levinas’s influence on Kearney’s thinking is clear. Our discussion of Kearney’s *prosopon-persona* in Chapter One was already laced with references to Levinas’s Other (cf. Kearney, 2001: 10–19). Elsewhere, in his *Poetics of Modernity*, Kearney explores the benefits of Levinas’s distinction between the *face* and the *image* for striking an alliance between a *poetics* of imagination and *ethics* of responsibility in a postmodern culture of parody and pastiche (cf. Kearney, 1995: 108–117). In this detailed exposition, Kearney (1995: 109–111) discusses Levinas’s opposition between the *face*, which expresses itself even as it transcends the subject’s searching gaze, and the plastic form of the *image*, which represents and duplicates, either under the illusion of “totality” or the “boredom” of depthless immanence. According to Kearney (1995: 110–115) Levinas retrieves monotheism’s warning against “idolatrous images of death” to address a postmodern crisis of the image, causing him to favour forms of art, literature and film that “clear a path toward the other.”<sup>85</sup>

Drawing from Levinas’s *ethical* aesthetic, Kearney (1995: 111) emerges with “a poetic imagination open to conversation with the other ... that allows the face to exceed the plastic form of the image representing it.” Such “poetic imagination,” says Kearney...

“... responds to the surprises and demands of the other. It never presumes to fashion an image adequate to the other’s irrecoverable transcendence. An ethical imagination, consequently, would permit ‘the eye to see through the mask, an eye which does not

---

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Chapter 8 of *Poetics of Modernity* (1995: 108–117) where Kearney discusses the ethics of various representations of the holocaust at the hand of Levinas distinction between the *face* the *image*.

shine but speaks.’ *It would safeguard the saying of the face against the subterfuges of the said*” (Kearney, 1995: 111 - my emphasis).

This last line, is representative of a *limiting* of hermeneutics in Kearney’s thought. With respect to the strangeness of the stranger Kearney’s hermeneutic approach adopts a sensitivity for the transcendence of the other (*saying*), in and through the forms and figures that remain after an encounter with him/her (*said*). Such a “limiting” of faith, or inclusion of doubt, in the hermeneutic endeavour has been in the near background of most of this study, emerging especially in *Chapter One* with Kearney’s notion of the *persona* and continuing *through Chapter Two* with his concept of *transfiguration*. Levinas’s ethical phenomenology and ethical aesthetic is a profound influence in this regard that should not be underestimated.

Despite Kearney’s obvious indebtedness to Levinas, he shares in the reservations held by those who believe Levinas’s radical phenomenological reversal goes too far in stressing the self’s limitless responsibility before the absolute Other. Levinas’s hyperbolic language suggests a self-emptying that Kearney (2003a: 71) says, “goes beyond humility to a form of abject humiliation: what Levinas calls a ‘passivity beneath all passivity.’” Haunted by an “alterity that can be neither comprehended nor refused,” Levinas sketches an *image* of the self “that is ‘obsessed,’ ‘accused,’ ‘expulsed,’ and ‘hostaged’” (2003a: 71).

Nevertheless, Levinas’s ethical other poses a number of challenges to Kearney’s hermeneutic imagination. Can Kearney’s high regard for imagination and figuration do justice to the irreducibility of the other’s face? If Levinas does underestimate the importance of maintaining a notion of the self, how does Kearney propose restoring a notion of the self without falling back into Totality and Subjectivism? And how does he propose reconciling the hermeneutic quest for understanding and the ethical responsibility to maintain the strangeness of the Other?

### **3.2.4. Derrida’s (im)possible Hospitality**

Another French phenomenologist with whom Kearney enters into critical dialogue is Jacques Derrida, who approaches the question of the Stranger from what Kearney calls a *deconstructive* phenomenology. Derrida also returns to Husserl’s *Fifth Mediation* as his point of departure. Agreeing with Levinas that Husserl’s confrontation with the Other brings phenomenology to its ownmost limit, Derrida’s deconstructive approach nevertheless maintains a slight shift in emphasis. According to Kearney (2011: 11), “where Levinas takes phenomenology to its



external limit in the Other, Derrida begins by identifying the internal limits of the phenomenological method itself.” In other words, one could say that while Levinas breaks from phenomenology towards ethics, Derrida remained to explore the radical consequences that this limitation and rupture between self and other holds for phenomenology (cf. 2011: 288–9n).<sup>86</sup> Along with the need to establish ethical responsibility towards the irreducible Other, Derrida raises the need to problematize the epistemological and metaphysical language that pre-conditions ethics (1995: 151). While Derrida agrees with Levinas’s ethical language of radical responsibility to the Other, he insists that the language of ethics cannot be so easily divorced from the language of Being (1995: 151). Thus, by combining the deconstruction of metaphysics, characterised by his “critique of logocentrism,” with the ethical horizon of the Other, Derrida sets off “to reevaluate the operative concepts of ethics” (1995: 164).

One important aspect of such a post-metaphysical rereading of ethical precepts, is “a reevaluation of the players who summon and respond – the ethical subject and the ethical other” (Kearney, 1995: 164-5). According to Kearney (1995: 165), “[this] is why Derrida challenges all metaphysical attempts to reduce subject and other to categories of ‘mastery, possession, totalization and certitude.’” Whereas Levinas *interrupts* phenomenology by giving ethical and logical priority to the Other, Derrida “*disrupts* phenomenology’s pursuit of the Other by dismantling the transcendental ego, Cartesian, Kantian, or Husserlian” (2011: 11 - my emphasis). Yet, Kearney (1995: 165) makes a point of noting that Derrida’s deconstruction of the subject,

---

<sup>86</sup> In an important book chapter entitled “Derrida’s Ethical Return” (Kearney, 1995: 148-167) Kearney argues that there is a development in Derrida’s thought that may be understood as a *Khere* by which Derrida “returns” to emphasise the latent ethical import and purpose of deconstruction in his writings after 1972. Kearney (1995: 148) argues that Derrida’s “recurring obsession with otherness ... originally took the form of an epistemological contrast between a metaphysics of presence and all that escapes or subverts it – what Derrida calls alterity.” Kearney (1995: 148) includes the following of Derrida’s writings in this epistemologically oriented period: *Introduction to the Origin of Geometry* (1962) and *Speech and Phenomena* (1967) (both commentaries on Husserl), *Writing and Difference* (1967), *Of Grammatology* (1967), *Dissemination* (1972), and *Margins of Philosophy* (1972). In Derrida’s writings after 1972, however, Kearney (1995: 148) notes a difference in focus “marked by a more pronounced emphasis on the question of ethical responsibility.” Kearney chooses to understand this, not as a radical conversion to some moral position, but as a re-reading of deconstruction in light of an *ethics of responsibility*. Understood in relation to two of Derrida’s “influential contemporaries,” Kearney says that “his later writing supplements a Heideggerean resolve to deconstruct metaphysics with a Levinasian attention to the ethical demands of the other,” or “to reread Heidegger in the light of Levinas” (1995: 149; 150). Kearney (1995: 150-164) continues by discussing these later writings under a number of themes, namely *religion* (*Schibboleth*, 1986; *Of an Apocalyptic Tone*, 1984; *Circonfession*, 1991); *education* (selected texts from *Du droit a la philosophic*, 1990); *law* (“Force of Law: ‘The Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” 1990; *Otobiographies*, 1984); *politics* (*Le dernier mot du racism*; *Admiration de Nelson Mandela*, 1981; “No Apocalypse, Not Now” in *Psyche*, 1981; “Art against Apartheid” in *Critical Inquiry*).



far from being a destructive effort, is an attempt “to ‘resituate’ [the self] in terms more vigilant and responsive to the other.”

Alongside this deconstruction of the self and other, Kearney (1995: 151) draws attention to another of Derrida’s deconstructive projects: his dismantling of the “logocentric structure of moral dualism.” In contrast to a moral framework characterised by “pure” categories (such as *pure peace* or *pure violence*) and the certainty of a logic of “either/or,” deconstruction adopts an ethos of “undecidability,” which follows a logic of “both/and/neither/nor” (cf. 1995: 154-8). Thus, deconstruction denies the notion of “an immaculately conceived ‘origin’” of Good (pure peace) and/or Evil (pure violence), insisting rather on a “double origin” of mutual contamination and implication (1995: 151). Furthermore, the *singularity* of each event and the *irreducibility* of the Other precedes and transcends these ethical concepts, and therefore also, any rule of law or reason (1995: 154-8). Thus, while “a just decision is always required immediately, right away” (Derrida), “no decision is ever totally pure” or “unconditionally decidable” (1995: 156). Kearney” (1995: 156) quotes Derrida directly, writing on the undecidability of “justice”:

“The undecidable is not merely the oscillation or tension between two decisions, it is the experience of that which, though heterogeneous, foreign to the order of the calculable and the rule, is still obliged ... to give itself up to the impossible decision, while taking account of law and rules. A decision that didn’t go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision, it would only be the programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process. It might be *legal*; it would not be *just*.”<sup>87</sup>

Thus, the self finds itself utterly compromised and vulnerable before the stranger whose arrival in a singular event, extends an ethical call to responsibility, to justice, while at the very same instance rupturing what familiar convention and law would have one respond by. It is therefore understandable that Derrida speaks the “impossibility” of a just decision. However, while each decision, law, convention or norm may be deconstructed, “justice” itself, like the other *as other*, remains beyond deconstruction’s reach, “irreducible to principles of duty, rights, or objective law” (1995: 155).<sup>88</sup> Like the stranger who is always coming, yet never arrives, one may think of

<sup>87</sup> Original quote from Derrida, J. 1990. “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority/Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice,” in *Cordoba Law Review* 2, 5-6 (1990): p. 963.

<sup>88</sup> According to Kearney (1995: 155), there are close ties between Derrida’s notion of Justice and what Levinas calls “ethics.” Justice always remains before and beyond deconstruction and therefore can never come under deconstructive scrutiny, at least not the “never fulfilled or fulfillable” Justice, as Derrida understands it. Kearney (1995: 155) says that, for Derrida, “Justice is deconstruction and deconstruction is Justice.” As Derrida himself puts it: “In the end where will deconstruction find its force, its movement or its motivation, if not in this always unsatisfied appeal, beyond the given determination of what we call, in determined contexts, justice, the possibility of

Derrida's justice as a *strange justice*, which “*demands to be done immediately*,” yet within “finite historical conditions, ... is a task which always *remains to be done*” (1995: 158).

This same deconstructive logic of undecidability comes to bear on Derrida's thoughts on *hospitality*. In his celebrated work, *On Hospitality*,<sup>89</sup> he argues that absolute hospitality, as presented by Levinas's hyperbolic language, is impossible. Its “impossibility” is due to the conditional nature that it takes in practice, in the realms of “family,” “society” and “state” in which the Stranger always approaches, but only the “foreigner-for-me” ever arrives (Kearney, 2003: 68–9; Kearney & Semonovitch, 2011: 11). *In practice* hospitality is conditioned by laws and conventions (*nomos*), and the demand for the stranger's name (*le nom*) (2011: 12). Thus the Other, claimed and situated as a “foreigner-for-me,” is not allowed to remain strange. In other words, because “the laws of hospitality” dictate that the host reserves the right to “evaluate, select and choose those he/she wishes to include or exclude – that is, the right to discriminate” – Derrida recognises “a certain injustice ... at the very threshold of the right to hospitality” (Derrida in Kearney, 2003: 68; 69).<sup>90</sup> The law of hospitality, at its very core, is therefore marked by an “undecidable dialectic” or paradox of the stranger “as either invader-alien or welcome-other” (Kearney, 2003a: 69).

Ultimately, however, the deconstructive undecidability is energised by a “desire” for Levinas's *absolute hospitality*, an ideal always worth striving for in spite of being unachievable. Derrida gives the following account of what such a “hospitality of justice” entails:

“Absolute hospitality requires that I open my home and that I give not only to the stranger (furnished with a family name and the social status of a stranger etc.) but to the absolute other, unknown and anonymous; and that I give place (*donne lieu*), let come, arrive, let him take his place in the place that I offer him, without demanding that he give his name or enter into some reciprocal pact” (Derrida in Kearney, 2003a: 69).<sup>91</sup>

Despite playing absolute hospitality off against the “accredited hospitality of right,” Kearney (2003a: 69) makes it clear that Derrida does not completely lose sight of the latter. As with the relationship between *justice* and *law*, the demand for absolute hospitality to the stranger, which

---

justice?” quoted in Kearney (1995: 155-6). Original quote from Derrida, J. 1990. “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority/Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice,’” in *Cordoza Law Review* 2, 5-6 (1990): p. 957.

<sup>89</sup> Derrida, J. 1997. *De L'hospitalité*, Calmann-Levy: Paris.

<sup>90</sup> Original quote from *ibid.* p. 53.

<sup>91</sup> Original quote from *ibid.* p. 29.

may call one to transgress the conventions of hospitality – in the name of hospitality – in one context, may, in another, require “preserving it in a state of perpetual process and mutation” (Kearney, 2003a: 69–70).

As with Levinas, Derrida’s influence on Kearney’s hermeneutics of alterity is not to be underestimated. Kearney’s reading of Derrida in *Poetics of Modernity* (1995) and his continued dialogue with Derrida in subsequent texts and conversations confirms this. Kearney goes to great lengths to show that Derrida’s emphasis on alterity, not only stirs the waters of metaphysics and epistemology, but translates into “an ethics of ‘increased responsibility.’” By combining Heidegger’s “poetics of language” and Levinas’s “ethics of otherness,” deconstruction wants to teach us, says Kearney (1995: 167), that “language is ethics:”

“As soon as we speak, or listen, we are indebted to the other, bespoken to the other, summoned by the other, answerable to the other.”

Elsewhere, Kearney (2003a: 243n) suggests that Derrida may be teaching us a lesson in Samaritan hospitality:

“The most important lesson, I believe, that we can draw from Derrida’s analysis is that the exclusivist binary oppositions of ‘us’ (sameness) and ‘them’ (otherness) need to be challenged so that the ‘Foreigner Question’ becomes not only ‘Who is this foreigner?’ but ‘Who am I for this foreigner?’ And by extension ‘Whose home is this anyway?’”

This deconstructive vigilance marks much of Kearney’s work and as we will see later, Derrida’s notion of undecidability, as a moment of doubt or reverential agnosticism, becomes an important moment in Kearney’s own proposal for hospitality to the stranger. Yet, in response to Derrida’s impossible hospitality, Kearney (2003a: 67) has some reservations and poses some serious questions of his own:

“But since, according to this reading, the Other surpasses all our categories of interpretation and representation, we are left with a problem – the problem of *discernment*. How can we tell the difference between benign and malign others? How do we know ... when the other is truly an enemy who seeks to destroy us or an innocent scapegoat projected by our phobias? Or a mixture of both? How do we account for the fact that not every other is innocent and not every self is an egoistic emperor?”

In response to these questions, Derrida would agree that “the newcomer may be good or evil,” but might then add, that “if you exclude the possibility that the newcomer is coming to destroy your house, if you want to control this and exclude this terrible possibility in advance, *there is no*

*hospitality*” (Derrida in Kearney, 2003a: 70).<sup>92</sup> Thus, the “best we can do,” according to a deconstructive approach to alterity, “is try to read between the lines and make a leap of faith, an impossible leap of faith, like Abraham, like Kierkegaard...” (Kearney, 2003a: 70). Before we may turn to Kearney’s response to this challenge, we need to consider one last contribution to the debate.

### 3.2.5. Psychoanalysis: the stranger in myself

We have already noted Kearney’s debt, shared by Paul Ricoeur, to the psychoanalytic tradition in developing a critical hermeneutics of the symbol and the social imaginary. Understandably, that influence flows into his approach to the stranger. Once again, it is particularly the work of Julia Kristeva who helps to explicate for Kearney the philosophical and political significance of a psychoanalytic approach the Other.<sup>93</sup>

The context in which to understand Kristeva’s psychoanalytic approach to alterity, according to Kearney (2003a: 72–3), is the age-old tendency within Western discourses to predicate claims to identity “upon some unconscious projection of an Other who is not ‘us’.” Kearney (2003a: 72–73) recalls countless examples at the collective level of ethnic groups or nations defining themselves against antagonistic strangers: from “the old enmities between Greek and Barbarian, Gentile and Jew, Crusader and infidel;” to Colonial British identity vs. “subject races of overseas colonies;” to reactionary claims by German nationalists of a Germanic *Volk* “surrounded by subraces.” According to Kearney (2003a: 73), Kristeva’s psychoanalytic approach...

“... relates this recurring xenophobic drive to a basic unconscious process whereby we externalize that which is ‘strange’ within us unto an external ‘stranger’. The result is a denial of the fact that we are strangers to ourselves, a denial which takes the form of negating aliens. To the extent that we exclude the outsider we deceive ourselves into thinking that we have exempted ourselves from estrangement.”

Kearney shows how Kristeva’s analysis of this recurring phenomenon rests upon Freud’s notion of the “Uncanny” (*das Unheimliche*). Ironically, Freud noted that the *Unheimliche* “is that phenomenon of strangeness which curiously re-evokes what is ‘known of old and familiar’”

<sup>92</sup> Original quote from Derrida, J. 1998. “Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility” in *Questioning Ethics*, Ed. R. Kearney and M. Dooley, Routledge, London, pp. 66-83.

<sup>93</sup> With this purpose in mind, Kearney draws in particular from her *Etrangers à nou's-mêmes*, Fayard: Paris (1988), translated in 1991 as *Strangers to Ourselves*, Harvester: London.

(Kearney, 2003: 73). In other words, the uncanny is situated, not in the other as such, but in the unconscious of what is “self,” “known,” and the “same.”

“... *das Unheimliche* is the obverse of *das Heimlich*, arising when the latter becomes so privy or surreptitious that it disappears from consciousness altogether, slipping beneath the bar of the unconscious. The intimate becomes *so* intimate that it becomes strange. The ‘uncanny’ comes to mean, then, something ‘secret or untrustworthy,’ finding its equivalents in the Latin *occultus* or *mysticus*” (Kearney, 2003: 74).

As the most hidden part of ourselves the “alien” or “uncanny” appears to the self as something fearful and unspeakable, causing us to externalise it by projecting it onto others. In such cases, says Kearney (2003a: 74), the “more foreign someone is the more eligible to carry the shadow cast by our unconscious. Strangers become perfect foils since we can act out on them the hostility we feel towards our own strangers within.” What the psychoanalytic hermeneutic reveals is that the scapegoated stranger, however threatening and terrifying, is in fact “nothing other than our own estranged self coming back to ghost us” (2003a: 74). Kearney (2003: 75), concludes his discussion of Freud’s *Unheimliche* thus:

“The pre-fix *un-* in *Unheimlich* is, in short, to be understood less as a logical opposition than as a dialectical reversal. The adversary I love to hate is often nothing less than myself in disguise. Taking our cue from Freud we might conclude, accordingly, that dreaded aliens are most dreaded not because they are other than us but because they are *more like us than our own selves*.”

Kristeva develops this Freudian insight politically, viewing the *realisation* that we are “strangers to ourselves” as the “very basis” upon which “we can try to exist with others” (cited in Kearney, 2003a: 75).<sup>94</sup> Aware of the strangeness within, a “tolerant moral cosmopolitanism” becomes “the secular equivalent,” says Kearney (2003: 75-6) “of the old religious vision ... so vigorously promoted by the Prophets and Saint Paul, of a community of peoples and tongues.” Thus, “Kristeva promotes the Kantian idea of a cosmopolitan Universal Republic where aliens (*étrangers*) would be respected as others, acknowledged in the right to difference” (2003: 75).

Kearney (2003: 76) views the psychoanalytic exposé of the uncanny as the stranger-within-the-self as a “useful means of *depathologizing* the alien.” Because a “gap is now located within the presumed homogeneity of human consciousness,” the other is “at long last being admitted as an integral inhabitant of the self” (2003: 76). Or as Kristeva puts it: “the stranger is neither a race

---

<sup>94</sup> Original quote from Kristeva, J. 1988. *Etrangers à nou’s-mêmes*, Fayard: Paris p. 250 (Kearney’s translation).

nor a nation ... we are our own strangers – we are divided selves” (cited in Kearney, 2003: 76).<sup>95</sup> Combining Freud’s uncanny with Heidegger’s existential analysis of *Dasein* as a *Sein-zum-Tode*, Kristeva went on to identify “our existential anguish before death” as our “ultimate stranger of strangers” – an experience of “radical *Unheimlichkeit*” (2003: 76-7).

Finally, to the enigma of alterity, Kristeva proposes psychoanalysis as a therapeutic response...

“... which enables me, based on the other, to become reconciled with my own strangeness/alterity, to play with it and live with it. Psychoanalysis thus experiences itself as a journey into the other and into oneself, towards an ethic of respect for the irreconcilable. For how can we tolerate strangers if we do not know that we are strangers to ourselves” (cited in Kearney, 2003: 76).

Kearney (2003a: 77) endorses this therapeutic purpose of psychoanalysis: as i) an activity of “imaginary play” which may reduce the likelihood of “acting out” through scapegoating and violence; and ii) as promoting a “new politics of cosmopolitanism whose solidarity is founded on the ‘conscience of the unconscious’.” However, in light of the radical alterity of Levinas and Derrida, Kearney (2003a: 77) is inclined to ask whether Kristeva’s psychoanalytic approach is not perhaps “too quick in its tendency to reduce alterity to a dialectic of the unconscious psyche?”

“To put it in another way, if deconstruction too rapidly subordinates the Same to the Other, psychoanalysis may too rapidly subordinate the Other to the Same. And so doing, it risks subsuming the exteriority of transcendence into the language games of psychic immanence” (Kearney, 2003a: 77).

Nevertheless, psychoanalysis offers an important counter-point to the radical transcendence espoused by Levinas and Derrida. Kristeva sheds light on an aspect of the experience of alterity that is lost from view when all otherness becomes radical otherness. Both positions, according to Kearney (2003a: 77), tell “only one half of the story.” Thus, one way to understand Kearney’s diacritical hermeneutic approach to otherness is as an attempt to steer a middle path between the poles of radical alterity and psychic immanence (2003a: 77). It is to Kearney’s diacritical hermeneutic approach to the Other that we now turn.

---

<sup>95</sup>Original quote from Kristeva, J. 1988. *Etrangers à nou’s-mêmes*, Fayard: Paris p. 268 (Kearney’s translation).

### 3.3. The Stranger and Kearney's Diacritical Hermeneutics

As the previous paragraph suggested, Kearney's *diacritical hermeneutics* searches for some sort of middle ground between deconstructive and psychoanalytic approaches to the other. While he acknowledges the unique contributions of each to "our ethical awareness of others," he maintains that neither provide "a sufficient account" (2003a: 77). According to him, "it is not enough to be simply *open* to the other beyond us or within us" (2003a: 77). As essential as this is, "one must also be careful to discern, in some provisional fashion at least, between different kinds of others," says Kearney (2003a: 77). Thus, he believes that hermeneutics may supplement deconstruction and psychoanalysis by introducing the possibility of critically informed judgements, without returning to the dangers respectively exposed by each of the other approaches (2003a: 77).

In this section Kearney's hermeneutic approach to the other will be explored in two parts. *Firstly*, we will consider Kearney's claim that the best way to *de-alienate* the other is by recognising *oneself as another*. Such an approach, Kearney suggests, involves a shift from the hyperbolic paradigm of Derrida and Levinas to one of "translation" or "linguistic hospitality." The *second* part will give a more systematic account of Kearney's *diacritical hermeneutic* approach, presenting it as a helpful model of what being an interpreter *at the limit* entails.

#### 3.3.1. Oneself as Another

As so many times before, Kearney's position is profoundly shaped by that of his mentor Paul Ricoeur. As an alternative to the approaches to alterity discussed thus far, Kearney proposes an approach to otherness informed by Ricoeur's *hermeneutic* phenomenology. The primary claim of this approach rests upon the hermeneutic presupposition, already discussed in Chapter Two, that human discourse entails *someone saying something to someone about something* (Kearney, 2003a: 79). Thus, "it is a matter of one self communicating to another self, recognising that if there is no perfect symmetry between the two, this does not necessarily mark a total dissymmetry" (Kearney, 2003a: 79). Because a hermeneutic approach takes up the challenge of relating selves to one another – *as others* – it cannot allow itself to fall into the extremes of either radical alterity or psychic immanence. Rather, Kearney's hermeneutic approach calls for a double-sided recognition of "a) oneself as another and b) the other as (in part) another self" (2003a: 80).



“For if ethics rightly requires me to respect the singularity of the other person, it equally requires me to recognize the other as another self bearing universal rights and responsibilities, that is, as someone capable of recognizing me in turn as a self capable of recognition and esteem” (Kearney, 2003: 80).

Why is a restoration of selfhood so important? Kearney (2003a: 189) provides a number of reasons why “there can be no sense of *other*-than self ... without some sense of self.” *Firstly*, he argues that a “minimal quotient of self-esteem is ... indispensable for ethics” (Kearney, 2003a: 79). According to Kearney, Levinas underestimates the importance of selfhood for a moral agency capable of remaining faithful to promises and pledges over time, while his fierce iconoclasm also threatens the ethical practice of testimony and remembrance, especially to the victims of history (2003: 79; 80).<sup>96</sup> *Secondly*, in a situation where responsibility is reduced to pure obligation, Kearney (2003: 80) asks whether this does not mean that “the self can only become ethical *against* its own nature and will.” Employing hyperbole that would impress even Levinas, Kearney asks how one could freely choose for the other when “one finds oneself radically assaulted and denuded, stripped of one’s interpretations in exposure to an absolute Other who demands expiation” (2003: 80-81).<sup>97</sup>

*Thirdly*, unless one wishes to entirely relinquish the possibility of a relationship between the self and the other, there needs to be some allowance for an absolute other to be transfigured into “a relative other – an other for another self” (Kearney, 2003a: 79). Kearney (2003: 79-80) acknowledges that “there is no way for the other to find its way into the hermeneutic circle without entering the web of figuration, however ‘passive’ or pre-conscious.” Yet, if greater hospitality – hospitality that is more just – is the goal, then Kearney (2003a: 70) shares Derrida’s conviction that “we must allow some way for the absolute other to enter our ‘home.’”

---

<sup>96</sup> On the last point, Kearney (2003a: 80) quotes Ricoeur posing the following question to Levinas: “With justice may we not hope for the return of memory, beyond the condemnation of the memorable? Otherwise, how could Emmanuel Levinas write the sober exergue: ‘to the memory of those who are closest’?”

<sup>97</sup> In the already mentioned chapter on Levinas and an ethics of imagination (*Poetics of Modernity*, 1995: 108-117), Kearney argues that Levinas’s obligatory responsibility is spun too tight to allow for the imagination’s role in motivating and orientating moral action. By contrast, Kearney maintains that the hermeneutic imagination cannot be dispensed with so easily. Kearney (1995: 205–206) makes his point as follows: “One is motivated to act for the Other over and against the self because one has heard/read/seen the parables and lives of Abraham and his descendants, Jesus and his disciples, Saint Francis and the martyrs and the saints. In other words, we act ethically – inside or outside religion – not only because the infinite Other demands it but also because our hermeneutic imagination provides us with examples and stories of what it is like to be another, to give one’s life and love for another, to exist for the Other. It is not enough for us to be summoned by a voice in the night; we also need to interpret what the voice is saying and who is saying it. ... If the biblical *here I am* is one part of the ethical response, the hermeneutic *who do you say that I am?*, is the other. And the answer to the latter question is to tell one’s story.”

Otherwise, could an overemphasis on radical alterity not have the undesired effect of relegating “the other to total exteriority – barbarous, savage, precultural and prejudicial”? With this in mind, Kearney (2003a: 188) maintains the possibility of a “post-deconstructionist subject ... able to carry out acts of semantic innovation (poetics) and just judgment (ethics)” through which the stranger may be hosted.

It is important to note that the self spoken of here is no longer the self-founding, self-knowing “I,” but a *narrative self* that “takes on board the postmodern assaults on the sovereign cogito” (Kearney, 2003a: 189).<sup>98</sup> As a narrative identity it is not a *fait accompli*, but an open-ended *task* of imagination, of being “woven from its own histories and those of others” (Kearney, 1988: 396; 2003: 188). This suggests that the narrative self is not “sufficient unto itself,” but a self “that can only be reached (*pace* Descartes and the Idealists) through the odyssey of alterity” (Kearney, 1988: 395; 2003: 189).<sup>99</sup> Thus, Kearney’s diacritical hermeneutic approach of oneself-as-another is an attempt “to acknowledge a difference between self and other without separating them so schismatically that *no* relation at all is possible” – or, stated differently, “to discover the other in our self and our self in the other – without abjuring either” (Kearney, 2003a: 9; 10).

Along with this altered view of the self, Kearney also presents an alternative approach to alterity that does not subject the other to an either/or of radical alterity or psychic immanence. Instead, Kearney calls for “a hermeneutic *pluralism* of otherness” (2003a: 81- my emphasis):

“... a sort of ‘polysemy of alterity’ – ranging from experiences of conscience and the body to those of other persons, living or dead (our ancestors), or to a divine Other, living or absent. There is no otherness so exterior or so unconscious, on this reading, that it

---

<sup>98</sup> See Chapter Two. In his “Introduction” to *On Ricoeur* (2004) Kearney summarises Ricoeur’s notion of the self in a single paragraph: “Ricoeur explodes the pretensions of the *cogito* to be self-founding and self-knowing. He insists that the shortest route from self to self is through the other. Or to put it in Ricoeur’s felicitous formula: ‘to say self is not to say I’. Why? Because the hermeneutic self is much more than an autonomous subject. Challenging the reign of the transcendental ego, Ricoeur proposes the notion of *self-as-another* – a *soi* that passes beyond the illusory confines of the *moi* and discovers its meaning in and through the linguistic mediations of signs and symbols, stories and ideologies, metaphors and myths. In the most positive hermeneutic scenario, the self returns to itself after numerous hermeneutic detours through the language of others, to find itself enlarged and enriched by the journey. The Cartesian model of the *cogito* as ‘master and possessor’ of meaning is henceforth radically subverted” (Kearney, 2004: 2).

<sup>99</sup> While narrative as such is not innocent, Kearney (2003: 79) maintains that “narrative identity should not ... be summarily dismissed as an illusion of mastery (for it is such in the breach and not in the observance). On the contrary, narrative identity which sustains some notion of selfhood over the passage of time, can serve as guarantor for one’s fidelity to the other. How is one to be faithful to the other, after all, if there is no *self* to be faithful?”

cannot be at least minimally interpreted by a self, and interpreted in a variety of different ways – albeit none of them absolute, adequate or exhaustive” (Kearney, 2003a: 81).

Thus, even though Kearney allows the other to enter into the “web of figuration” the “hermeneutic imperative of a plurality of interpretations,” and of understanding as an open-ended process, ensures that the Other always transcends the grasp of any particular figure. We may recall that Kearney’s *persona*, while only ever encountered in person, in “*flesh-and-blood thereness*,” remains “all that in others exceeds my searching gaze, safeguarding their inimitable and unique singularity” (2001: 11; 10).<sup>100</sup> This paradoxical relationship between self and other, a relationship of *oneself-as-another*, is further explored by the related notion of *transfiguration*, which becomes the hermeneutic model for recognising oneself as another and the other as another self.<sup>101</sup>

In order to strike this delicate balance between *immanence* and *transcendence*, Kearney (2003a: 10–11) argues that a “double critique” is required. Because “not all ‘selves’ are evil and not all ‘others’ are angelic,” Kearney (2003a: 10–11) suggests that “it is wise to supplement the critique of the *self* with an equally indispensable critique of the *other* ..., which exposes illusory categories of ego *and* alien.” Amongst the positions that overemphasise the transcendent, Kearney (2003a: 11) places “certain kinds of apophatic mysticism and deconstruction,” while he includes “certain forms of psychoanalytic and New Age immanentism” amongst those that run the risk of losing sight of the other in the conscious or unconscious self. As an alternative to both, Kearney (2003a: 11) makes “an effort to discern the *juste milieu* where a valid sense of selfhood and strangeness might coexist.” As he declares in his introduction to *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*: by making “the foreign more familiar and the familiar more foreign,” his diacritical hermeneutic hopes that “the self might achieve a more discerning readiness to welcome strangers, respect gods and acknowledge monsters” (2003a: 11).

Kearney and Semonovitch (2011: 13–15) suggest that such a diacritical hermeneutic approach replaces the hyperbolic paradigms of Levinas and Derrida with the paradigmatic event of *translation*. Drawing on Ricoeur’s recently published volume of essays *On Translation*, they suggest that “translation” becomes a model of the hermeneutic mediation of self and other (2011: 13). As such, the *inter*-linguistic act of translation between different natural languages becomes

---

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Chapter One, 1.3.

<sup>101</sup> Cf. Chapter Two.

a symbol for the *intra*-linguistic “capacity to communicate between distinct human beings” (2011: 14). The latter Ricoeur calls the “ontological paradigm” of translation (Kearney, 2006d: xii). What this symbol teaches us is that even the most intimate and familiar contexts, as those shared by friends or lovers, include an element of strangeness or estrangement. Therefore, translation is always required (2011: 14).

The notion of translation is dependent on the Other, for it presupposes a multiplicity of languages, in contrast to the “Platonic ideal of one Language,” is considered by Ricoeur as a “happy opportunity” (2011: 14). Therefore, a good translation requires an openness to the other and a willingness “to forfeit our native language’s claim to self-sufficiency ... in order to ‘host’ ... the ‘foreign’” (Kearney, 2006d: xvi). Ricoeur calls this condition of openness *linguistic hospitality*. While translation celebrates the possibility of communication between self and other, “linguistic hospitality calls us to forego the lure of omnipotence: the illusion of a total translation which would provide a perfect replica of the original” (2006d: xvii). Or, to put it in Ricoeur’s own words, linguistic hospitality...

“is the act of inhabiting the word of the Other paralleled by the act of receiving the word of the Other into one’s own home, one’s own dwelling” (cited in Kearney, 2006: xvi).

According to this model, translation, and therefore also hospitality to the Other, is *difficult* yet not impossible (Kearney, 2011: 13). As with any translation, something is always lost in an encounter with the Other. As someone who “serves and suffers the differences between languages” the translator is rewarded for his/her effort, but also mourns what is lost in every translation (2011: 14-15). In this difficult task, the translator serves as a “middleman between ‘two masters,’ between an author and a reader, a self and another” (Kearney, 2006: xv). Likewise, the translator is called to maintain a double fidelity: “the first to the possibility of receiving the Foreigner into one’s home, the second to the impossibility of ever doing so completely” (Kearney & Semonovitch, 2011: 14). The good translator always respects “the ‘untranslatable kernel’ that resists the lure of the ‘perfect translation,’ the temptation of a final account, the mirage of a total language” (2011: 14).

We could therefore say that the “good translator” exemplifies the hermeneutic self “which only finds itself after it has traversed the field of foreignness and returned to itself again, this time altered and enlarged, ‘othered’ (Kearney, 2006d: xix). As Kearney (2006d: xix) says:

“The arc of translation epitomizes this journey from self through the other, reminding is of the irreducible finitude and contingency of all language.”

However, as the hermeneutic self is always an ongoing project, translation remains a never ending task, for it is always possible to translate something *otherwise*, with each translation being “invariably strange,” no matter how similar they may appear. As Ricoeur (cited in Kearney, 2006: xviii) puts it:

“The gap between a hypothetical perfect language and the concreteness of a living language is felt again and again in the linguistic exchange: it is always possible to say the same things in a different way. Now, to say something in a different way, to say it in other terms, is exactly what a translator does from one language to the other. The inputs at the two ends, the two halves of the problem, so to speak, clarify each other and present again the enigma and the richness of the relationship with the Other.”

If we were then to return to our theme of the limit to summarise Kearney’s hermeneutic approach to alterity, we may say that for Kearney the limit posed by the Other is not an ultimate limit as it seems to be for Derrida and Levinas; nor is it purely a projection of the divided self’s psyche as psychoanalysis suggests. Instead, the Other is one that appears on the other side of a *threshold* or *border*: “the one who is recognizable enough to appear but who nonetheless retains a distance” (2011: 14). Hermeneuts, as interpreters and translators, are called to be boundary dwellers, capable of making the strange more familiar and the familiar more strange, while resisting the dual temptations of erecting walls and withdrawing from the boundary, or collapsing the threshold altogether.

### 3.3.2. What is Diacritical Hermeneutics?

In what follows we will take a closer look at what being an interpreter in Kearney’s diacritical sense involves. This will be done under three headings, each illuminating another aspect of Kearney’s diacritical method. The *first*, focussing on the prefix *–dia* will look at Kearney’s enduring adherence to a *dialogical* model of philosophy (3.3.2.1). The *second*, focussing on the *critical* aspect of his hermeneutics will explore the role of *krinein* as *phronetic discernment* within the continuing “conversation that we are” (3.3.2.2). *Finally*, we will consider how Kearney introduces the notion of *carnal hermeneutics* to include Merleau-Ponty’s embodied, or rather, “incarnated” perception into the diacritical hermeneutic circle (3.3.2.3).

The basic claim is that these three aspects of Kearney’s diacritical hermeneutics, outline an adequate hermeneutic model for interpreters, if not at the limit, certainly at the threshold where

strangers appear. The aim of his diacritical hermeneutics is ultimately to make us more hospitable to strangers and more capable of (self-)critical discernment.

### 3.3.2.1. *Dia-logical*

As our biographical account of Richard Kearney illustrated, his dialogical approach finds its roots in his earliest encounters with cultural, religious and political conflict in Ireland, intensified by widespread dogmatism and hostility towards others. His early choice for dialogue was reinforced by his education in the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition inaugurated by the great dialogical thinkers, Heidegger and Gadamer.<sup>102</sup> It should come as no surprise then, that Kearney (2003a: 18) turns to dialogue in his exploration of the “possibilities of intercommunion between distinct but not incomparable selves.”<sup>103</sup> Thus, the *dia* of his dia-critical hermeneutics is of great importance. A number of aspects may be highlighted here:

*Firstly*, diacritical hermeneutics emerges as an attempt to inhabit the *in-between space*, “between the no-place of the absolute Other, quarantined by Levinas and Derrida, and the immanent place of Husserl’s idealist Ego” (Kearney & Semonovitch, 2011: 17). It discovers meaning as that which “sounds and resounds across differences between self and other (human, animal or divine),” rather than in an isolated subject or premature synthesis of antithetical positions (Kearney, 2012: 181). As Kearney (2003a: 18) puts it:

“It champions the practice of dialogue between self and other, while refusing to submit to the reductionist dialectics of egology governed by the *logos* of the Same. Between the *logos* of the One and the anti-*logos* of the Other, falls the *dia-logos* of oneself-as-another.”

Thus, the *dia* of dialogue refers to “a reading between, through, across (*dia*), an inter-signifying in relation, a welcoming of alterity.”

*Secondly*, *dia-legein*, “welcoming difference,” recalls the Socratic dialogue as a space “where different points of view work their way towards a new point of view” (Kearney in Ryan, 2006: 18). It is important to note, however, that this recovery of the Socratic dialogue, facilitated by

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Kearney’s helpful introduction to “dialogue” in the tradition of Heidegger and Gadamer in his *Appendix* to “Dialogues with contemporary Continental thinkers” (1984: 127-133), as well as Fouché, H.L. and Smit, D.J. 1996, “Initiating a Dialogue on ‘Dialogue’,” in *Scriptura* (57), 79-102.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. Chapter 12, “Derrida’s Ethics of Dialogue,” of *Poetics of Modernity* (Kearney, 1995: 168–177) where Kearney argues that Derrida’s deconstruction of “hermeneutic notions as the subject, context, communication, and reference” poses serious challenges to his later attempts to develop an ethics of dialogue.



Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur, is unlike the Romantic hermeneutic model of Dilthey and Schleiermacher as it does not envision a “perfect inter-subjective correspondence between one speaker and another” (Kearney, 1984: 128). It points rather to a more fundamental dialogical context of language, implying a complex hermeneutic circle with horizons that extend well beyond what is presumed in the context of a face-to-face conversation. The level of complexity is further intensified if one introduces the *written text* into the equation. As Kearney (1984: 129) says, “when a discourse passes from speaking to writing, the entire set of co-ordinates in the dialogue – *subject*, *word* and *world* – undergo a significant change.” As we have already touched on these issues in Chapter Two, let it suffice to simply mention that the recovery of the dialogical model for philosophy stems from the conviction that human existence itself is dialogical in nature, expressed so poignantly by Heidegger when he said:

“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” (cited in Kearney, 1984: 128).

*Thirdly*, as an implication of the point above, diacritical hermeneutics recognises “that language is never purely and simply our own ..., but always involves the traces and anticipations of *other* language-users, existing in *other* places and in *other* times, past and future” (Kearney, 1984: 130). In other words, the door is always left ajar for an other to enter or re-enter the conversation, past, present or future. New, infinitely extending horizons of meaning are opened up with each dialogue partner that enters the fray. Furthermore, as our discussions in Chapter Two have already illustrated, meaning is usually layered and multi-referential, and may even be intentionally hidden or obscured. This calls for hermeneutics, as the art of “interpreting (*hermeneuein*) plural meaning in response to the polysemy of language and life,” or more specifically, as “the practice of discerning indirect, tacit or allusive meanings, of sensing another sense beyond or beneath apparent sense” (Kearney, 2012: 177). This “call for interpretation” never ends, for as Ricoeur says, hermeneutics remains “an open process which no single vision can conclude” (cited in Kearney, 2004: 31). Yet, as Kearney (2007: xx) remarks, if the final word of Ricoeur’s last major work *History, Memory and Forgetting* is “Incompletion,” this “is a signal not of failure but of hope.”



### 3.3.2.2. *Dia-Critical*

Kearney (2003a: 82) is quick to remind us that the “hermeneutic imperative of a plurality of interpretations,” invoked above, “is no call for relativism.” “On the contrary,” he says, “it is an *invitation* to judge more judiciously so that we may, wherever possible, judge more justly” (2003: 82 - my emphasis). While our discussion, thus far, illustrated Kearney’s sensitivity to the ethical concerns raised by the various “exposures of the ‘appropriating’ tendencies of human beings,” a recurring concern for Kearney, is the problem of *discernment*. He poses the question thus:

“... how are we to address otherness at all if it becomes totally *unrecognizable* to us? Faced with such putative indetermination, how could we tell the difference between one kind of other and another – between (a) those aliens and strangers that need our care and hospitality, no matter how monstrous they might first appear, and (b) those others that really seek to destroy and exterminate... How are we to differentiate between the voice that bade Abraham kill Isaac and the voice that forbade him to do so? These are urgent matters. For they determine how cultures take the side of murder or compassion” (2003: 10).

An *urgent* invitation indeed for phronetic discernment in the face of alterity. Kearney’s response to this invitation is particularly marked by the designation *critical* of dia-critical hermeneutics, to which he ascribes four related, yet distinct, meanings. Each of these meanings shed light on another aspect of what ultimately boils down to a hermeneutic proposal for discerning between “different kinds of others and different kinds of selves” (Kearney & Semonovitch, 2011: 20).

In the *first* place, *dia-critical* refers to the “critical function of *interrogation*” (Kearney, 2012: 178). On the one hand, this involves *Critique* as “an inquiry into the conditions of possibility of meaning” (as in Kant’s three *Critiques*) (2012: 178). On the other hand, it refers to “a critical exposure of ‘masked’ power in the name of liberation and justice” (2012: 178). This critical function has already been discussed in detail in Chapter Two when we considered Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion (cf. 2.3.2).

Yet, as we argued in Chapter Two, discernment isn’t only derived from the interrogative function, but shoots equally from the *explorative* or *inventive* role of imagination (cf. 2.3.3). This brings us to Kearney’s *second* meaning of *dia-critical*, namely, the “*criteriological* function of discerning between competing claims to meaning” (2012: 178). According to Kearney, remaining undecidably open towards the other is not enough. There is also the need – and

possibility – of positively articulated criteria to assist us in making decisions that are more just. Of the various forms of criteria that are available,<sup>104</sup> Kearney (2012: 178) favours the model of *narrative phronesis*, which provides practical ethical understanding and orientation by hermeneutically retrieving “memories and testimonies as well as future oriented projects – utopian, messianic, eschatological.” Thus, Kearney does not promote criteria in the sense of pre-programmed tick-boxes to be applied indiscriminately across contexts. Rather, *phronesis*, or practical understanding, employs the powers of the hermeneutic *imagination* and *dialogue* to assist in the art of discernment within ever changing contexts where responsibility to the other is called for.<sup>105</sup>

The *third* meaning that Kearney has in mind is the more technical *linguistic* definition of *diacritics* as a “grammatological attention to inflections of linguistic marks” like “signifiers, graphemes and accents” (2012: 179). Once again diacritical carries the meaning of discernment and discrimination, this time however, by a “micro-reading” of the “small graphic demarcations” that “serve to avoid confusion between otherwise identical letters, helping us differentiate between distinct meanings” (2012: 179). The point is that when one is discerning between various interpretations, slight changes in meaning and shifts of emphasis matter. Grammar matters, in the narrow linguistic sense, but also in the more general philosophical sense. This is not to imply a prescriptive or dogmatic application of rules, but an ability to read, for even breaches of the rules are to be understood in terms of their general observance. In any case, a language is not learnt from grammarians. On this point Kearney claims to share common ground with Caputo’s radical hermeneutics and Derrida’s deconstruction (2012: 179).<sup>106</sup>

In the *fourth* place, Kearney (2012: 179) reminds us of a much older meaning of *dia-critics*, deriving from the Greek terms *dia-krinein* and *dia-krisis*, which refer “to the medical or

---

<sup>104</sup> Kearney (2012: 179) lists a number of examples, such as “rational evaluation, virtue ethics, pragmatist judgment, phenomenological intuition of values, feminist and ideology critiques, wisdom traditions and so on.”

On the topic of criteria in philosophy and theology, see Gerrit Brand’s published doctoral thesis, *Speaking of a Fabulous Ghost*, where he makes an argument on hermeneutic and analytic grounds that the use of criteria, seen as ‘success conditions,’ “has distinct advantages over at least two other angles of approach, namely *via the methods and sources of theology*” (Brand, 2002: 20–23).

<sup>105</sup> As Kearney puts it in his metaphorical terms, criteria, especially the narrative kind that he has in mind, does not mean “resorting to metaphysical fusion, but trying out a variety of crossings between same and other. I am not proposing speculative flyovers or viaducts but tentative footbridges and rope-ladders reaching across the chasms separating old ontologies from new heterologies.”

<sup>106</sup> On the use of grammar or the grammarian as a metaphor for doing theology cf. Smit, DJ. 2008. “In diens van die tale Kanaän? Oor sistematiese teologie vandag,” in *Geloof en Openbare Lewe: Versamelde Opstelle 2*. SUN PReSS: Stellenbosch.

therapeutic practice of diagnosing symptoms of bodily fevers, colorations, and secretions.” According to Kearney (2012: 179), this “hermeneutic art of telling the difference between health and disease,” of reading “between the lines of skin and flesh – in order to sound the movements of the soul ... – was often a matter of life and death.” By including this meaning of diacritics in his hermeneutic approach, Kearney (2012: 179) suggests that the “model of micrological reading of somatic and psycho-somatic symptoms has deep implications for the practice of philosophical reading in its own right.” In the first place, it means that Kearney agrees with Wittgenstein’s commitment to philosophy as therapy, as an exercise in restoring health and wholeness (*shalom?*) to humans and their world (2012: 179). Yet, it also refers to a more recent move on Kearney’s part, what he calls a “fourth reduction” back to the concrete, everyday, embodied existence of people, where the divine may become manifest in “*the least of these*: in the colour of their eyes, in the lines of their hands and fingers, in the cracked tone of voice, in all the tiny epiphanies of flesh and blood” (Kearney, 2006a: 7). If this is indeed the case, philosophical (and theological) hermeneutics may want to cultivate a sharper dia-critical sense for reading, not only texts, but bodies.

### 3.3.2.3. *Carnal Hermeneutics*

The above range of meanings denoted by dia-critics (*critical*, *criteriological*, *linguistic*, and *diagnostic*), make up the basis of what Kearney (2012: 180) envisions as a “carnal hermeneutics.” What he means by this designation is a hermeneutic “sense” that extends from the more traditional hermeneutic “deciphering of cryptic messages” (specifically the first two meanings) right down to the most primal, carnal forms of discernment (tending towards the third and fourth meanings) (2012: 180). Thus, diacritical hermeneutics is:

“A sensing which makes sense in the three connotations of the French *sens*: sensation, direction, meaning. I am concerned here, in short, with a multilayered sensing which goes all the way up and down – like Jacob’s ladder – from thought to touch and back again. Meaning ascending and descending in open-ended spirals” (Kearney, 2012: 181).

In other words, Kearney’s notion of “carnal hermeneutics” does not intend to disregard the traditional hermeneutic understandings of meaning, but looks to supplement the intellectual, historical and existential with “a sort of incarnate *phronesis* which sounds, probes, scents, and filters” (2012: 180).

In light of our focus in this chapter on alterity, Kearney (2012: 180) insists that such “carnal hermeneutics has a crucial bearing ... on how we ‘sense’ subtle distinctions between hostile and hospitable strangers.” To illustrate this point he refers to one of the oldest tales of the Western world, Homer’s *Odyssey*, where Argos the dog recognises Odysseus upon his return to Ithaca, while his own son Telemachus mistook him for a god (2012: 180). What Kearney (2012: 180) recognises in this tale is “a lesson in how to discern between mortal and immortal strangers through our carnal senses; indeed a lesson which, Homer suggests, dogs may well have to teach men!” Thus, he suggests that the patron saint of hermeneutics, the *god* Hermes, should be accompanied by a second benefactor: the *dog* Argos:

“For if Hermes discloses hermetic messages from above, Argos brings animal savvy from below. The former guides our deciphering of cryptic messages and masks (Hermes disguised as a beggar). The latter, Argos, imparts a canine flair for recognising the friend or enemy in the visitor ... Diacritical hermeneutics goes all the way down. It is carnal in its ascent and descent between gods and dogs” (Kearney, 2012: 180; 194).

To fully appreciate the importance of introducing carnal sense into the equation, we need to reflect briefly on another phenomenological account of the stranger that we failed to take note of before, namely, that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. While Kearney did not include any detailed reflections on Merleau-Ponty’s account of otherness in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, his subsequent works are certainly marked by a conscious effort to introduce Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the flesh into his hermeneutic phenomenological framework.<sup>107</sup> In their introduction to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the stranger, Kearney and Semonovitch (2011: 15) argue that he went well beyond his contemporaries in acknowledging the *body* as the *site* of any encounter with the Stranger:

“Merleau-Ponty restores the phenomenon of the Stranger to the condition of incarnation. His phenomenology fully acknowledges our multiple modes of situatedness – political, social, historical, geographical – but underlying all these sites of hospitality (or hostility) to Strangers, Merleau-Ponty identifies the “wild being” (*l’être sauvage*) of the living body.”

Of crucial importance to the debates outlined thus far, is Merleau-Ponty’s discovery that it is specifically as corporeal, animate and animal bodies that we are capable of recognizing “our own

<sup>107</sup> Cf. especially *Anatheism* (2010: 87–96; 99–100), where Kearney draws on Merleau-Ponty’s notion of incarnation to promote a sacramental vision of the everyday, and Kearney, R. 2012. “Diacritical Hermeneutics.” In M. Portocarrero, L. Umbelino, & A. Wiercinski, eds. *Hermeneutic Rationality / La rationalité herméneutique*. Berlin: Lit Verlag, pp. 185–189, where he discusses Merleau-Ponty’s notion of *diacritical perception*.

species – our living “similar” – across difference ...: an identification not of identical beings, but of *similar* beings despite an infinite multiplicity of variation in corporeal form and of conduct across time” (2011: 16). In other words, Merleau-Ponty facilitates a shift from the extremes of radical alterity and psychic immanence to a similarity in plurality before the stranger offered by the shared “condition of both perceiving and being perceived.” Thus, quoting Merleau-Ponty, Kearney and Semonovitch (2011: 16) say:

“The very fact that we are oriented to display for others affirms the otherness of others. When I am talking with someone else, ‘should the voice alter, should the unwonted appear in the score of the dialogue’ – in short, if the person with whom I am speaking does anything that shows her to be alive and not a robot – then, ‘suddenly there breaks forth the evidence that yonder also, minute by minute, life is being lived.’”

In light of the above, one could therefore say that Kearney’s diacritical, carnal hermeneutics is a response to the crucial question: *How do we sense, shape, and decipher the other in our midst?* (2011: 17- my emphasis). By combining the phenomenologies of Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty it acknowledges the “paradox of incarnation.” of human beings as “carnal and metaphorical beings,” as “hosts and strangers in all their linguistic and corporeal richness” (2011: 17).

Thus, with *carnal* hermeneutics Kearney looks to supplement the rich account we have already given of the metaphorical aspect of human existence, with what he calls “diacritical sensation,” or “diacritical perception” (Merleau-Ponty), as “the way we read bodies and bodies read us” (2012: 181; 185–189). As an example, Kearney (2012: 181) uses the common practice of reading “facial expressions – glancing or shading of eyes, widening of pupils, raising of eyebrows, alteration of complexion, stiffening or loosening of lips, smiling or grimacing of mouth... – as bearer of inner moods, deep feelings and moral emotions.” Yet, besides the ability to see, most humans also have the “ability to hear, touch, smell and taste” (2012: 181). And each sense has its own unique way of knowing, which becomes a matter of taste – knowing becomes tasting, and tasting becomes knowing:

“Taste (along with smell) is the most primordial sense of carnal hermeneutics. The most alimentary is the most elementary. For tasting is already, *ab initio*, a transfiguring of nature into culture... Even the most basic culture of food is a way of carving up our universe into good and bad to eat, raw and cooked, herbivorous and carnivorous, hostile or hospitable. Matters of taste are often matters of inclusion and exclusion, even of life and death” (2012: 182).

This central role of food and taste also plays a role in the world's great wisdom traditions and, on a number of occasions, Kearney provides readings of these, including a number of scriptural passages. Quite often these are narratives in which hospitality towards the stranger is a central theme, as in Gen 18 where Abraham and Sarah receive three strangers at Mamre, or the risen Christ meeting two disciples on the road to Emmaus as a stranger, only to be recognised in the breaking of bread (John 20:16). Another narrative about hospitality to the stranger, rich with allusions to food and taste, and profoundly illustrative of what carnal hermeneutics may amount to, is the account of Cornelius's baptism by the apostle Peter in Acts 10.

In short, what these narratives, as “second-order methodological interpretation[s] of first-order interpretations of carnal communication between hosts and guests,” reveal to us, according to Kearney (2012: 183; 185), is that “from the beginning, Word is Flesh in multiple ways,” and that negotiating the “polysemy of such primal enfleshment is ... a key task of diacritical hermeneutics.” As this task remains incomplete, Kearney's own project of “carnal hermeneutics” is also a work still in progress. Besides, some reflections in an article or two, Kearney has not as yet developed this notion in a systematic fashion. Hopefully, this will not be the case for much longer: indeed, the “forthcoming books” section of Kearney's *Curriculum Vitae* reflects that we may expect a work by the name of *Carnal Hermeneutics*, to be published soon by Fordham University Press.

### 3.4. The Divine Stranger

In the final section of this chapter, the aim is to give a brief account of how Kearney extends his analysis of “the stranger,” and the accompanying diacritical hermeneutic approach, to the possibility of faith in what may be called a “secular” or, if you will, a “post-secular” context. We will do so by reflecting on a section of Kearney's recent work, *Anatheism* (2010), in which God is re-imagined as a stranger before whom we may respond either with hospitality or hostility. According to Kearney, the overlap between God and the Stranger is nothing new, with inaugural narratives of the divine appearing in the form of a stranger to be found, at least, in the three Abrahamic faiths. After providing readings of one such narrative from each of the Abrahamic faiths respectively, Kearney's second chapter, *In the Wager*, pays attention to five components, moments or movements that comprise the anatheist wager of welcoming the Divine Stranger. In what follows we will give a brief overview of these moments of the anatheist wager

in the hope that it will not only shed new light on the diacritical approach discussed thus far, but also serve as a bridge to our theological reflections in the concluding chapter.

By using the notion of a “wager,” Kearney (2010: 40) seems to be saying a number of things all at once: 1) that an encounter with the divine stranger calls for a decision, 2) that such a decision, while not being a blind leap of faith, is complex, made before all the facts are in, and therefore contains an element of doubt, uncertainty, and/or insecurity, 3) that the decision is often called to be made “in an instant, all at once,” and 4) “that there is much ... that precedes and follows them.” It is important to note that the five components that make up the anatheist wager, says Kearney, do not necessarily follow chronologically upon one another, but form part of “a single hermeneutic arc,” mutually informing each other.

### 3.4.1. Imagination

Considering the central role of imagination in Kearney’s thought, it should not come as a surprise that it also features here. Imagination plays two important roles in the encounter with a possible divine Stranger. In the *first* place, imagination is a condition for the very possibility of a wager in as far as it provides one with “the freedom to choose” (2010: 40). As Kearney (2010: 40) says, “choice presupposes our ability to imagine different possibilities in the same person, to see the Other before us *as* a stranger to be welcomed or rejected.” Before any decision is made, our very perception of the other “is *already* a hermeneutic *seeing as*” (2010: 40).

*Secondly*, imagination makes empathy “between self and other” possible. The only way for the self to become host to the stranger is by “imagining the other as other” (2010: 41). Because the other always remains foreign and transcendent, imagination cannot ever eradicate the gap between self and other. Yet, it is within this gap that imagination operates, “imagining the Other “as” Other (metaphorically) or “as if” the Other were like me (fictively)” (2010: 42). While this never serves as a perfect translation (always remaining metaphor and fiction), it is only through such “gracious imagining” that the self may be transformed into a host, capable of receiving the stranger as guest (2010: 42). Thus, imagination involves a “double movement of action and passion: I actively imagine what it is like to be like the stranger as I passively assume the stranger’s summons and sufferings” (2010: 42).



### 3.4.2. Humour

This second movement, says Kearney (2010: 42), “is sometimes overlooked in official religious doctrines where cheerless sanctimony can mask the essentially human response to the wager.” He sees humour as “the ability to encounter and compose opposites,” or as Bergson has it, “as a creative response to enigma, contradiction, and paradox” (2010: 42). By these definitions, it is not difficult to see how humour becomes indispensable when encountering the strange or the stranger – human or divine. Thus, Sarah laughs from inside her tent when she hears the impossible being declared possible by the three strangers speaking with her husband. Besides this humorous moment, Kearney (2010: 42-3) recalls countless other Scriptural references such as “the multiple comic reversals, puns, and conundrums that recur throughout the Gospels: the last as first, the mountain moving, the kingdom as mustard seed, the rich man and the eye of a needle, etc.”

Kearney (2010: 42-3) sees close ties between humour and *humility*:

“As the Latin root *humus* reminds us, humor, humility, and humanity share a common source. ... Humor reminds us that we are deeply and invariably creatures of the earth (*humus*). Finite, mortal, natal. We laugh, like Sarah, when we see God because we are temporal beings facing divine surplus.”

Indeed humour-humility is essential for hospitality towards the (divine) stranger. If we recall the narrative mentioned earlier from Acts 10 where Peter, still the devout Jew, is framed by God through bizarre dreams and coincidences to meet with the gentile believer Cornelius in his home (which Peter doesn’t fail to mention: is against the law). The two strangers meet at the threshold of Cornelius’s home, where he falls before Peter’s feet in honour. Peter responds to the strange event in humour-humility by raising up the man before him and saying simply, yet profoundly, cutting through all that divides and separates them: “stand up, I am also just a human being.”

### 3.4.3. Commitment

At the heart of Kearney’s anatheist wager lies the call to decision, to making a commitment. According to him, our response to the stranger is already a decision: “even if that choice is to have no choice – to remain in indecision – it is still a choice” (2010: 44). Kearney (2010: 44) likens this moment to the *hinenee* in the Hebrew Bible, the moment of “Here I am!” when called upon by the Divine Stranger:

“We are speaking here, in sum, of a moment of truth – as *troth* – where we do not *know* the truth but *do* the truth. *Facere veritatem*, as Augustine put it. Orthopraxis precedes orthodoxy. Trust precedes theory. Action precedes abstraction. Commitment, in this sense of betrothal, is the movement of the wager that makes truth primarily, through not exclusively, a matter of existential transformation (*metanoia*)” (2010: 44).

Thus, the moment of truth before God the stranger becomes an occasion for “performative truth” as trust – a confession of faith – “inscribed in a tactile and testimonial promise” (2010: 44).<sup>108</sup>

#### 3.4.4. Discernment

If the anatheist wager involves a commitment to the divine stranger, it also acknowledges that “not every stranger is divine”:

“There is the other who kills and the other who brings life. The other who loves and the other who lies. Jesus heard a voice that bade him offer his life in service to Others and another voice (in the desert) that tempted him to become a Master God of spectacle (turning stone into bread) and triumph (possessing the cities of the world)” (Kearney, 2010: 45).

Thus, welcoming the *divine* stranger is no different to encounters with any other stranger in the sense that it also includes the decisive moment of discernment. Kearney (2010: 45) recalls Ignatius, who’s notion of “discerning between the spirits” implies that he knew that “we do not ... consent to just *any* Other simply because they are other.” Thus, contrary to those who hold that “every other is every other,” Kearney (2010: 45–6) upholds Jesus’s admonition to Peter to be “watchful and prayerful:” where watchfulness means being “vigilant and alert,” and “prayer is attention to otherness.”

Here again we come across Kearney’s diacritical hermeneutic approach as a “multilayered hermeneutic drama – extending from embodied prereflection to critical reflection” (2010: 47). Discernment already begins “in the moment” starting “at the most basic carnal level” where “the body already ‘ponders’ in dia-logue with the stranger.” Even before reflection, says Kearney (2010: 46), “perception already stylizes” (Merleau-Ponty). However, this does not mean that discernment ends “in the moment.” Discernment is always accompanied by the movements of imagination, commitment, and humility, which Kearney (2010: 47) says, “includes the wisdom

<sup>108</sup> In this regard, cf. chapter 2 of Anthony Thiselton’s *Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (2007: 19–42) entitled “Dispositional Accounts of Belief,” where he makes a similar argument, drawing on Wittgenstein, for the performative, dispositional character of declarations of faith, that are “*action-oriented, situation-related, and embedded in the particularities and contingencies of everyday living*” (2007: 21).

to learn from initial mistakes and misreadings.” Thus, the initial moment is followed by reflection, pre-figurations are followed by the possibility of re-figuring, of re-cognising the other as a stranger to be welcomed, or not. While such discernment is difficult and complex, it remains a possibility and, therefore, a responsibility that needs to be taken up. Hence, Kearney (2010: 45) says that, “even if the stranger shows up in the dark we receive him or her with eyes wide open.”

### 3.4.5. Hospitality

Kearney (2010: 47) insists that the emphasis of discernment does not mean that “knowledge trumps love.” Thus, hospitality is not only the final moment after all facts are in, but is “there from the beginning and coterminous with the other four [movements]” (2010: 47). “At best,” says Kearney (2010: 47), “love of the stranger is a form of faith seeking knowledge,” knowing that absolute knowledge of the other is impossible and that we always run the risk of getting it wrong. “Love – as compassion and justice – ... which precedes and exceeds knowledge” is ultimately “the watermark” by which discernment itself is to be measured (2010: 47).

Hospitality which precedes and exceeds discernment implies, furthermore, that the “ability to serve as gracious host is not ... only a matter of discerning between strangers; it is also a matter of discerning between selves” (2010: 48). Hospitality involves being “transfigured” by the stranger, being transformed from *moi* to *soi*, becoming a “self defamiliarized, exposed to difference, alert to alternatives of alterity” (2010: 48). This carries particular weight if one considers God as a stranger to be received as a guest, whose strange presence transfigures me through its very strangeness, reads me before I may read him/her, hosting me in turn and calling me towards a strange love and hospitality beyond the familiarity of my neighbour to the defenceless stranger knocking on my door.

\*\*\*

What better note on which to conclude this chapter, than with hospitality to the (divine) stranger? This chapter explored *the limit* as that place where we are bound to meet strangers, gods and monsters. Our discussion revealed that Husserl was the first to recognise the limit. Then, with Levinas the limit is given in the irreducible face of the Other, calling one to ethical responsibility before and beyond any attempt to figure or relate across the divide between Other and self. With Derrida the limit is no less absolute, yet he questions the capacity of a self to enact hospitality to

the incoming of the Other. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Kristeva's psychoanalytic approach views the limit as nothing other than the fractured self projected onto others.

Finally, Kearney's hermeneutic option views the limit as a territory that may be inhabited and traversed, yet only by casting and recasting tentative rope-ladders and provisional footbridges. Kearney seems to suggest that we are better off understanding the limit as a threshold or boundary, as an in-between space, where interpreters or translators can operate. Thus, thinking at the threshold involves greater hospitality towards strangers, more humble (and humorous) introspection of the monsters within, and waiting expectantly on the opportunity to host (and be hosted by) the God "of the least of these." To be sure, "our contemporary world of doubling and undecidability has blurred our intellectual boundaries and evacuated the frontier posts which monitor passage back and forth" (Kearney, 2003a: 230). Yet, says Kearney, "even in our world of fuzzy edges, many continue to wrestle with gods until they yield their names, to talk to strangers and reckon with monsters." May we be counted amongst them.

# *Conclusion: Theology at the Limit?*

## **4.1. Introduction**

Having taken a number of dialogical detours through Richard Kearney's attempts to think philosophically at the limit, we return to the question that initiated our exploration in the first place: *is theology at the limit possible?*

The author of this study hopes that the detours written up in it would have already suggested to the reader that something like theology *at the limit* could be possible. More than that, it may have stimulated the reader's imagination to begin conceiving in his or her own imagination what such a theology could look and sound like. While I could not hope to do full justice to Kearney's contribution to a theology at the limit here, this chapter will nevertheless make an attempt at recapitulating some of the insights that have emerged from our detours, posing some questions that I believe deserve further investigation, and making some tentative comments on how I imagine Kearney's thought may contribute to a theology at the limit.

I will ask what it is that Kearney's philosophy says about the limit itself, i.e. about the sense of a limit that not only poses a deadly threat, but also stimulates new ways of saying and being. Our response will also provide something of a summary of the study as a whole. On the foot of this, we will rephrase our question of whether theology at the limit is possible and ask: "who is a theologian at the limit?" In response, we will suggest three images that each shed light on different aspects of becoming a theologian at the limit: namely, the theologian as i) diacritical interpreter, ii) translator at the threshold, and iii) poet.

## **4.2. At the limit?**

In our introduction to this study, we suggested that there are two broad ways of understanding the designation "at the limit" as applied to an intellectual endeavour such as philosophy or

theology. The *first* meaning referred to the possible *end* of the *intellectual enterprise* as such, while the *second* was a reference to the *limit* of *human understanding* generally, posing a challenge to each and every person, community and intellectual discipline. Having traversed Kearney's "philosophy at the limit," we may ask what it is that we have learnt about the limit itself. What light does Kearney shed on each of these meanings of the limit, especially as they pertain to theology?

In terms of the *first* meaning, to do with the possibility or impossibility of an intellectual enterprise's continued existence, our study has revealed that Kearney steers clear of strong apocalyptic tendencies. His philosophical performance itself and the ease with which he positions himself within the Western philosophical tradition does not speak of someone prophesying an imminent end to philosophical reflection, nor does it reflect someone trying to survive in a post-apocalyptic situation where the present and future are ruptured from a past soon to be forgotten. If this is so, it does not imply that Kearney continues with "business as usual." Our first chapter illustrated that Kearney's phenomenological-existential tradition facilitates a decisive turn to *face the limit*, a turn that Kearney not only endorses but develops in significant ways. As such, the limit represents a crisis, stimulating a radical transformation of philosophy, a transformation that our second chapter revealed to be a *hermeneutic* phenomenological reorientation of the basic conditions and options for doing philosophy.

While one should not read too much from it, such a hermeneutic transformation could at least be a sign of hope for those who are anxious about the possible demise of theology as an intellectual enterprise. If theology faces an end due to an overreliance on strict metaphysical systems of thought and the Enlightenment ideals of universal truth and certainty, a hermeneutic transformation such as Kearney's at least suggests that there are post-metaphysical, post-enlightenment, post-onto-theological options available.<sup>109</sup> On a last note, perhaps Kearney's esteem for theology as a valuable dialogue partner and his respect for theology's integrity, as a discipline rightfully enjoying a relative independence from philosophy, may also remind

---

<sup>109</sup> If theology fears its own end because of a lack of interest in God and religion, Kearney's involvement in Continental philosophy's so-called "turn to God" may also suggest otherwise. As he puts it: "God is not a dead letter but a vibrant concern for our time. In spite of vagaries of fashion, and interminable apocalyptic pronouncements on the death of God, the task of questioning the divine has arguably become more urgent than ever" (2001: 3).

theologians that it does not require philosophical regulating and, thus, should itself maintain a critical distance from any particular philosophical system or approach.

This brings us to our *second* meaning of limit, as the more fundamental limit of human understanding. What may we learn about the limit in this sense, taking Kearney's attempt to think at the limit seriously?

Our notion of *facing the limit* in **Chapter One** is especially revealing in this regard. As a verb, "facing" the limit is expressive of the emphasis on *human freedom and responsibility* that Kearney's phenomenological heritage imparts on his thinking (cf. 1.3.4). For Kearney, the limit is something human beings can choose to face or choose to ignore, while the choice itself comes with an equal sense of responsibility for bearing the consequences of that choice. No matter what we decide, however, nothing can change the fact that "we are *beings at the limit*" (Kearney, 2003a: 230). This implies that the limit is not an abstract matter, but an existential question with implications for the *meaning* of human existence (cf. 1.4.3.2). Facing the limit becomes a *hermeneutic* question of *seeing* the limit *as*. In other words, it is a question posed within the *historical, temporal* and *finite* horizons of the hermeneutic circle (cf. 1.4.3.1). Along with the somewhat morbid realisation of one's limits, however, the phenomenological method also discovers, at the limit, the profound human capacity to *possibilize* ways of being that seem impossible, and even more radically, capable of receiving the gift of *being possibilized* by meanings that far *transcend* the limits of our own horizons of expectation (cf. 1.3.3; 1.4.3.3; and 2.4.3). Finally, in his account of the *persona*, Kearney goes beyond the phenomenological reductions of Husserl and Heidegger to advance a logic of *relatedness*, showing that, more often than not, *the limit has a face (prosopon)* (cf. 1.5).

Having thus turned to "face" the limit, **Chapter Two** addresses the question of how one ought to respond to the experience of being confronted by the limit. It provides an overview of Kearney's daring hermeneutic phenomenological proposal of rediscovering and reviving the creative potential of the human imagination – *at the limit* – as fragile, fallible, finite beings, "resolving to recover, in spite of the odds, the *yes in the sorrow of the finite*" (Kearney, 2003a: 231). Thus, the limit becomes a place of *transfiguration*, "a frontier zone where narratives flourish and abound," a place "where stories, songs, parables, and prophecies resound as human imaginations try to say the unsayable and think the unthinkable" (Kearney, 2001: 8). For while there certainly are limits



to what can be said, Kearney argues that “the resolve to say something is indispensable to both ethics and poetics” (2003a: 231). We could add that the resolve to say the unsayable is equally indispensable to the life of faith, and therefore also to theology. Thus, the limit presents a challenge and an invitation to be transfigured by God and, thus, transfigure God in turn (cf. 2.4). Yet, trans-figuration is constantly reminded that the limit grants no transparent access to what lies beyond, “that even the shortest route takes time,” that “our existence, like the stories we tell, will come to an end,” that “puzzles and aporias” remain, and that the hermeneutic imagination must always take up the task anew of *discerning* between figurations that *disfigure* and those that *transfigure* (2003a: 231).

**Chapter Three** explores, in greater detail, the suggestion that the limit often bears a face. The limit, as an Other or Stranger, manifests in various guises, often being perceived as a threatening presence, eliciting responses of horror, suspicion, xenophobia, crippling indecision, and tactics of scapegoating, evasion and fetishizing otherness. Yet, in response to those who want to view alterity as an absolute limit, as an “unbridgeable abyss” rupturing *self* from *Other*, or *us* from *them* (3.2.3; 3.2.4); and against others who reduce otherness to nothing but a fracture within the psyche (3.2.5); Kearney proposes that the limit is a *threshold* where “strangers, gods and monsters” make their appearance. As *threshold*, the limit is a place where self and other may enter into dialogue, where the familiar can become more strange and the strange more familiar, where ethical discernment between types of selves and types of others can take place, and, ultimately where the divine Stranger may be received as guest.

Simply on the face of this summary, one could list a number of aspects that, in Kearney’s sense at least, may characterise an attempt to think *theologically* at the limit:

- 1) It would look to maintain a strong sense of human freedom *and* responsibility (cf. 1.3.4).
- 2) It would want to situate the theological enterprise, and the life of faith, within the *embodied, historical, temporal* and *finite* horizons of human existence, taking full cognisance of the fragility and fallibility that condition our being human (cf. 1.3.1; 1.4.3.2; 1.5; and 3.3.2.3).
- 3) It would want to restore an overemphasis within the theological tradition of privileging categories of actuality over possibility in its god-talk and do so primarily by hermeneutically retrieving the many counter examples that do justice to a possibilizing God and a capable humanity (cf. 1.4.3.3; and 2.4.3).

- 4) It would explore an understanding of human existence that is *ex-centric* in the sense of being open to, determined by and oriented towards the *horizontal* (temporal, historical) horizons of past, present and future, as well as the *vertical* (ethical and spiritual) horizons, as beings in relationship with Others (human, animal and divine) (cf. 1.5; and Chapter Two).
- 5) It would acknowledge the indispensable role that *imagination* plays in the life of faith and theological reflection and critically explore those places where theological imagination overlaps with other forms of individual and social imaginaries (cf. Chapter Two).
- 6) Aware of the limits of imagination, it would take the critical theological task of *discerning* “the spirits,” of judging between figures that disfigure and those that transfigure, seriously – yet maintain the possibility of multiple interpretations to avoid the trap of absolutism (cf. Chapter Two; 3.3.2.2; and 3.4.4).
- 7) It would emphasise the *explorative* function over the *explanatory* function of the myths, symbols, narratives and metaphors of the Christian tradition, as that which gives birth to thought, stimulates dialogue, initiates action, reads its readers and opens new worlds of possibility (cf. Chapter Two).
- 8) As a theology at the *threshold*, it would want to illustrate hospitality to its *others*, whether these be other disciplines or other faith traditions, and write theology, as Levinas says, that “clears a path toward the other” (cf. 3.2.3; 3.3.1).
- 9) Theology at the threshold, daring to speak of the divine Stranger and to interpret strange texts from worlds not ours, would seek true hospitality that allows the stranger to remain strange, even as he/she/it enters our home. We might want to consider what Kearney says of transfiguration, as being a gift from the other, something suffered and not achieved, a matter of *being made* capable once we recognise that we are powerless (cf. 3.4; 3.3.1; 2.4).

This list of characteristics is not meant as a systematic proposal, nor is it complete. Yet, perhaps they may serve as “first words” in what could become a constructive dialogue about theology at the limit. Each of them have their “blind spots” and each could be responded to with a “yes, but...” Nevertheless, I believe that there are good reasons for taking them seriously, many of which have been tendered in the first three chapters of this study.

Another way of facilitating a dialogue about the basic options, conditions and tasks of a theology at the limit, would be to ask it in a more personal manner: “who is a theologian at the limit?”

### 4.3. Theologian at the limit?

If Kearney’s thinking at the limit said only one thing, it may well be that philosophy and, by extension, theology is not practiced by self-sufficient, isolated, disembodied Cogitos, but by embodied, narrative selves, being “woven from [their] own histories and those of others,” existing one-for-another (Kearney, 2003a: 188). Thus, it would make sense that “theology at the limit” is not only a matter of abstractions, of results to be gained, skills to be acquired or techniques to be applied, but *also* a question of “who?” and, therefore, a question of *identity*, *character* and *participation*.

Having myself been shaped by the detours through Richard Kearney’s attempt to think at the limit, I will tender a description of being a theologian at the limit in three complementary images: a) as *a diacritical interpreter*, b) as *a translator at the threshold*, and c) as *a poet*. Once again, this is not to be seen as a systematic proposal, but as three focal points that each shed light on a reality that far exceeds their scope.

#### 4.3.1. A Dia-critical Interpreter

As our study has shown, Kearney’s proposal for “thinking at the limit” comes in the form of a “diacritical hermeneutics.” Could it be helpful to think of a theologian as a diacritical interpreter *at the limit*? What would this entail?

*Firstly*, with reference to the *dia* of dia-critics, it would suggest that a theologian is someone committed to *dialogue* and a *dialogical approach* to truth. Dialogue, for Kearney, means “welcoming otherness,” or as Smit and Fouché (1996: 90) put it: “respecting the strangeness, the particularity, and legitimate claims of the *other*.” More than something one does, dialogue is an *ethos* of openness to the other, a willingness to learn from and be moved by the other, and a commitment to the *sache* of the conversation.<sup>110</sup> Thus, dialogue requires humility and the

---

<sup>110</sup> With regards to dialogue as an ethos and a process of character formation, cf. Chapter 5 of Anthony Thiselton’s *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, entitled “Formation, Education, and Training in Hermeneutics and in Doctrine.” Thiselton makes the argument, via a range of hermeneutic thinkers from Gadamer to Ricoeur, Betti and Wittgenstein, that philosophical hermeneutics is a matter of character formation (*Bildung*) and that this applies also to Christian doctrine in interpreting communities of faith. Thiselton says: “The heart of hermeneutical endeavor is

capacity to acknowledge one's belonging and indebtedness to a tradition that exceeds one's own horizons of understanding.<sup>111</sup>

Dialogue is motivated by a desire to remain in touch with the other, to recognise the other, move towards the other and welcome the other. This remains preferable, in spite of the risks and ambiguities involved, to an option of radical particularity where self and other remain irreparably ruptured from one another. As a diacritical interpreter, a theologian at the limit will strive to remain in dialogue with a plurality of others, contexts, traditions and disciplines. It is through this openness to the other as other, and the possibility of returning to one's own narrative enlarged and enriched after a detour through the narratives of multiple others, that keeps the self vigilant of its egoistic tendencies of appropriation and projection (cf. 3.3.1). In a theology of dialogue, the *way* is perhaps more important than the results gained.<sup>112</sup>

*Secondly*, with reference to the designation, *critical*, of diacritical hermeneutics, a theologian is someone in search of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, someone on a quest of (self)critical interpretation, narration and discernment. As Kearney (2012: 181) suggests, hermeneutic discernment goes all the way up and all the way down, "from thought to touch and back again." It involves being able to take the critical distance required for *interrogation*, to expose ideological cover-ups and power-plays, to recognise and expose dis-figuring *idols* (cf. 2.3; 3.3.2.2). But it also means allowing the trans-figuring *symbols* to speak for themselves, to explore the emancipatory and *transfiguring* potential of the Christian tradition and to set its myths, parables, narratives and metaphors in service of phronetic understanding in ever-changing contexts (cf. Chapter Two and 3.3.2.2). As dia-critical hermeneut, the theologian is also a *grammarian*, who studies the rules of the Christian language game as it is being played, sensitive to the slightest change in nuance, yet not prescriptive or authoritarian (cf. 3.3.2.2). Finally, Kearney reminds us that theological interpretation is not only practiced in noiseless libraries and isolated studies, but more often than not, by *listening* from pulpits, pews and street corners, by

---

learning how to be open to 'the other,' to come to respect 'the other' on its own terms. Thereby it is 'learning to affirm what is different from oneself.' This ultimately leads to and involves the cultivation of *wisdom (phronesis)*."

<sup>111</sup> Yet, as our discussion of the various approaches to alterity suggested, dialogue is an ambiguous notion. To the description of dialogue given above, Levinas might respond by questioning whether any dialogue could truly do justice to "the strangeness, the particularity, and legitimate claims of the other"? He might well suggest that *any* and *every* claim by the Other is always legitimate (cf. 3.2.3). Derrida might be suspicious about the ethos itself: questioning whether the participants are able to adopt it with any sense of integrity (cf. 3.2.4).

<sup>112</sup> Kierkegaard writes: "Everyone who has a result merely as such does not possess it; for he has not *the way*" (cited in Thiselton, 2007: 82 - original quote from "The Concept of Irony")

*paying attention* to the faces of others, by *tasting* bread and wine, by the *sensation* of water on one's skin, by *feeling* the touch of another's hand (cf. 3.3.2.3). Thus, from the clinical distance of critical interrogation, to the most intimate, carnal participation in the life of faith, the theologian is an interpreter, sensing and making sense of "plural meaning in response to the polysemy of language and life" (Kearney, 2012: 177).

#### 4.3.2. A Translator at the Threshold

Besides the meaning implied above, an "interpreter" can also be a synonym for a *translator*. In this sense of the word, an interpreter is someone who *translates* a dialogue for partners speaking different languages. Thus, an interpreter acts as an intermediary or mediator between strangers. We employed this image earlier in our discussion of Kearney's approach to the Stranger, suggesting that his hermeneutic approach of oneself-as-another transforms the limit into a *threshold* where strangers may encounter one another (cf. 3.3.1). Could the image of a translator, in terms of Paul Ricoeur's "ontological paradigm of translation," not perhaps be a useful image to describe the work of a theologian at the limit, or in this case, *at the threshold*?

This image might be particularly appropriate in contexts of estrangement. Just as translators become necessary where people have the experience of coming up short, of mis-understanding, of encountering a strange language or strange meanings within one's own language, so theologians become translators in contexts of estrangement. The causes of estrangement could be obvious, like when theology encounters other disciplines such as science, or the encounter between different faith traditions, or between conflicting interest groups. However, translation may also be required in cases where we become estranged within a familiar, intimate setting, like when adherents of a faith tradition become estranged from concepts or terms within their own language of faith, or have the experience of not being able to relate the resources of their faith tradition to new challenges as these emerge, or the more radically immanent experience of being estranged from the workings of one's unconscious. It would seem that each of these cases of estrangement may benefit from an act of translation, not as an attempt to collapse the strange into the same, but by facilitating a mutual welcoming of strangeness; by (re)starting the dialogue.

There are a number of things that would characterise translation if it were used as a model for theological hermeneutics at the threshold. I will only mention some: *Firstly*, it would want to give expression to the plurality of theological languages, in their relatedness to a diverse

traditions, contexts and communities of interpretation. Furthermore, it would view such plurality as the very precondition of keeping the theological dialogue alive and, therefore, as something to be celebrated and not traded in for a dream of some perfect, ideal theology. No theological tradition or language is self-sufficient or capable of containing the fullness of God. Thus, as translators at the threshold, theologians facilitate a never ending dialogue, serving better understanding and mutual enrichment between dialogue partners, respecting the “strangeness, the particularity and the legitimate claims of the *other*,” while always pointing beyond the dialogue itself to the *sache* of the conversation. *Secondly*, it would give expression to the experience of something always being lost in translation. Because the language of faith always says more than what can be translated, the possibility and need to translate something *again* and *otherwise* always remains as an ongoing task. *Thirdly*, while translation brings joy and “rewards the translator,” the translator also “suffers the differences between languages” as he/she respects that which is untranslatable in every translation (Kearney & Semonovitch, 2011: 14–15). Similarly, as translator at the threshold, the theologian would strive to offer “linguistic hospitality” to the divine Stranger, by saying the unsayable in such a way that “difference never effaces similarity any more than similarity effaces difference” (2011: 15).

These tentative thoughts on the theologian as translator may hopefully serve as a catalyst for further exploration, which, I believe, it certainly deserves. It expresses a vision of theologians willing to take the risk of becoming boundary dwellers at the threshold where strangers (human, animal and divine) make their appearance; serving truth, justice and the glory of God by making the overly strange that bit more comprehensible, and the overly familiar that bit more strange.

#### 4.3.3. A Poet

Lastly, I would suggest the metaphor of a poet to describe the role of a theologian at the limit. I do not intend “poet” in the narrow sense of someone who writes poems, but in the broader sense that Kearney elicits when he speaks of *poetics*. What is most important about this image for our purposes is that it emphasises the role of imagination in the various theological tasks. John de Gruchy (2013: 30) distinguishes between four types of imagination that each play an important role in theology at the limit:

“*Historical* imagination describes the way in which historians re-construct the past in relation to the present, reading texts, including biblical texts, with fresh eyes and from different perspectives... *Theological* imagination describes the way in which we

construct ‘images of God’ in relation to ourselves and the world in dialogue with the biblical text, the history of tradition, and the contemporary context. *Prophetic* imagination describes the activity of prophets of social justice, their ‘capacity to generate, evoke, and articulate alternative images of reality that counter what hegemonic power and knowledge have declared to be impossible’. Likewise, *poetic* imagination is not just important for expressing personal experience, but also critical for the well-being of society, and is closely aligned to the theological exploration of mystery.”

While de Gruchy calls only one of these tasks “poetic,” it is clear that there is an element of imaginative creativity in each of them. And while only one is called “theological,” theologians at the limit are required to fulfil all four of them at various moments.

Kearney’s search for a modern poetics, able to maintain a creative tension between the inventive freedom of the imagination and a *phronetic* concern for justice, raises the question of a responsible *theological* poetics or even *theo-poetics*. While Richard Kearney does not offer a comprehensive response to the question of a theological poetics, his position at the border between theology and philosophical hermeneutics offers some stimulating examples of what such a hermeneutic approach could look like.<sup>113</sup> If in some of his works Kearney employs what may be called a “theopoetics,” according to Catherine Keller, “he does not seek to define the proper style for God-talk, so much as perform it by example” (2004: 890). Remarking on an essay entitled, *Poetics of a Possible God* (Kearney, 2006e), Keller notes that where Kearney retrieves “explicitly poetic epiphanies of the possible,” “he does not thereby attenuate the (possible) content of God-talk so much as gently shift its potency from the propositional to the imaginal.”<sup>114</sup> Keller (2004: 890–891) continues to make the valid point that...

“...Kearney’s appeal ... to a deity ‘of transfiguration rather than coercion, of *posse* rather than power, of little rather than large things,’ pertains to rhetorical genre as well as to dogmatic content. For a God of coercive power requires a theology of coercive

<sup>113</sup> Besides *The God Who May Be* (2001), see especially, Kearney, R., 2006. “Poetics of a Possible God”. In L. Boeve et al., eds. *Faith in the Enlightenment? The Critique of the Enlightenment Revisited*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, pp. 308–326. To name a few theological responses and exchanges with Kearney in this regard: Boeve, L., 2005. “God, Particularity and Hermeneutics.” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*, 81(4), pp. 305–333; Hart, K., 2014. Mystic Maybe’s. *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, 60(4), pp.1011–1024; Keller, C., 2004. “Richard Kearney’s endless morning.” *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 30(7), pp. 890–896; and McFague, S. 2004. “Some reflections on Kearney’s hermeneutics of religion.” *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 30(7), pp. 887–889.

<sup>114</sup> According to Keller (2004: 890–891): “This hermeneutic motion supports the sense of those who believe that theology must risk a return *in style* to the heteroglossia of scripture and the multi-media of liturgy, to the affective and aesthetic genres of the spiritual imaginations – if it is to stand a chance of postmodern rebirth. And if therefore it is to address anyone besides so-called ‘believers’.” I sympathise with this concern, but would add that this need not be at the expense of the other theological tasks called upon by its academic, societal and ecclesial publics. One might also add to Keller’s last remark that such a “return in style” may be as necessary for theology to re-address the “so-called believers” themselves.



arguments... What we may call a transfigural discourse does not control but ‘enables’ its significance. So also a deity of transfiguration does not control but enables its creatures. In other words, a theopoetics in genre disables divine omnipotence in dogma. In so doing it enables Kearney’s ‘enabling God’, as a God who enables the creatures in their own creativity.”

Is it not with such a shift in “rhetorical genre” in mind that Kearney’s thought may be of value to a theological hermeneutics in search of new currencies of meaning *beyond* coercion and manipulation? By tracing the development of his thought, this study has hopefully shown that Kearney’s “theopoetic performances” are not *ad lib* improvisations, but the fruits of a deep, critical engagement with his hermeneutic phenomenological heritage and Judeo-Christian faith tradition – an engagement that we have tried to understand as a *transfiguring at the limit*. An intelligent theological response would therefore not be satisfied with only an assessment of the content of his God-talk (although this is necessary); nor with an attempt to imitate his richly figurative rhetorical style (although this is tempting). Rather, recognising the inherently rhetorical nature of God-talk as such, it would want to understand how Kearney facilitates such a turn and draw from it in order to enable an analogous shift in “rhetorical genre” that is appropriate to the theological enterprise.<sup>115</sup>

From this perspective one may fleetingly recall some insights from this study that, I would suggest, may facilitate such a shift in rhetorical genre. Our turning to *face the limit* implies *firstly* that one acknowledges the “finite, mortal and natal” character of human existence as temporally embodied creatures, living in community. Along with this comes the rhetorical charge of humour and humility; of recognising one’s limits and boasting in one’s weakness; of contemplating one’s death and wondering in creation (cf. 3.4.2). Here, especially, de Gruchy’s *poetic* and *theological* imaginations overlap, for how else can paradoxical notions such a “the power of the powerless” be communicated? Quoting Karl Barth, de Gruchy (2013: 30–31) says that there are mysteries that “find expression only in the freer observation and speech of poetry” and that such poetry “is an expression of faith struggling with experience before reason tries to analyse it.” A theo-poet at the limit would want to make a contribution to such “an expression of

---

<sup>115</sup> I believe Kearney would agree. At the end of his essay, *Poetics of a Possible God*, Kearney says: “The above conjectures operate, for the most part, in the realm of hermeneutical poetics, which enjoys a certain imaginative liberty vis-à-vis the strictures of theological dogma, speculative metaphysics, or empirical physics. Though, I hasten to add, a fruitful dialogue remains open with all three disciplines.” Hopefully this study would count as a contribution to such a “fruitful dialogue.”

faith struggling with experiences” from time to time, and if he/she is not much of a poet, at least play the role of curator, preserving works of the imagination that lead us into mystery.

Along with this comes a *second* re-discovery: of every human being’s singular *freedom* and *responsibility* and the accompanying rhetorical charge of motivating without determining; inspiring commitment without coercion. As Kearney reminds us, it is through creative works of the imagination that we are freed from the tyranny of the present, enabled to empathise with those who are suffering and returned to the world of action, with at least some possible answers to the question, “what is to be done?” Thus, I would suggest that a responsible theo-poetics represents the passage between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, a threshold that theologians at the limit should learn to cross with greater ease. This aspect corresponds well with de Gruchy’s vision of a *prophetic* imagination mentioned above.

*Thirdly*, by returning theologically, as Kearney does phenomenologically, to an appreciation for the flesh and the mundane, it would acknowledge the possibility of authentic existence *everywhere* and for *all*. Along with this comes the rhetorical charge of enabling “epiphanies of the everyday” by practicing linguistic hospitality to theology’s “forgotten others” whether this refers to overlooked people,<sup>116</sup> aspects of life, or the non-human creation.<sup>117</sup> Kearney’s “multiplicity” and “plurality” may find its theological equivalent in catholicity or ecumenicity, understood in the broadest possible terms, yet without sacrificing particularity.

*Fourthly*, as Kearney’s *prosopon-persona* so vividly illustrates, a theo-poet would tread carefully when crossing the threshold by acknowledging the other as the limit of my (creative) powers, while restoring the ethically mobilised, relatedness of one-*for*-the-other. Rhetorically, this “entails an *ethical* engagement to enter into dialogical interaction with others, whose freedom is

---

<sup>116</sup> This would include those outside of what is generally categorised as the church. Dutch theologian Ruard Ganzevoort remarks, for example, in an essay entitled *Spelen met heilig vuur* that many in the secular context of Europe have become estranged from the language of Christian faith, where concepts such as “sin” and “grace” (not to mention “election” or “sacrifice”) have become “zombie categories,” no longer alive, but simply having “forgotten to die” (Ganzevoort, 2013: 6). The phenomenon of “zombie categories” may be more widespread than one may think, even in countries like the United States and South Africa. Is the recent explosion of zombie movies, often presenting zombie apocalypses, but more recently also of the subjective experience of being a zombie (cf. for e.g. *Warm Bodies*, 2013), perhaps communicating something of the unconscious experience of being estranged from language that used to mediate spiritual realities, but no longer do? In any case, this seems to be a task for the theologian as “poetic translator” to help make the strange more familiar and the familiar more strange.

<sup>117</sup> According to Ganzevoort (2013: 44), theology can and should have something to say about the whole range of human experiences and questions, such as “mourning and love, desire and anxiety, human rights and oppression, sexual fulfillment and perversion, laughter and silence, human and animal, work and rest.”

safeguarded by a certain *poetic* playfulness (of question and answer) that refuses to reduce otherness to my subjective will” (Kearney, 1995: xvi - my emphasis). It would call for nuanced works of the imagination that do justice to the *face* of the other and “clear a passage towards the other” (cf. 1.5; Chapter Three).

If these shifts may seem like nothing more than rhetorical window-dressing, a comment on how Kearney’s turn to “face the limit” may help to revive dogmatic *content* is in order. In the quote above, Keller rightly makes the link between rhetorical genre and dogmatic content, thus, acknowledging the fundamental role of the imagination in constructing images or symbols of God. Yet, Keller (and Kearney at times) may be too quick to claim that “a theopoetics in genre disables omnipotence in dogma.” While this is certainly the case of “omnipotence” understood in rigid onto-theological terms, a hermeneutic theopoetics may assist systematic theology in restoring non-manipulative understandings of power and of re-imagining omnipotence as God’s ability, *always* and *everywhere*, even where it seems impossible, to *enable* creatures in their creativity:<sup>118</sup> *For humans it is impossible, but not for God; because for God everything is possible* (Mark 10:27). Thus, poetics and dogmatics need not stand in competition with each other, but may mutually enrich and interrupt conventional lines of thinking in each.

In a similar manner, Kearney’s phenomenology of the *persona* may be a valuable resource for reviving personal language for God. While Scripture and Christian tradition is saturated by personal language, it has often succumbed to “onto-theological mis-readings,” with some theologians considering denying its use (cf. for e.g. David Tracy’s comments in Sheppard, 2004: 874). By contrast, the concept of the *persona*, offers ways of rethinking notions such as revelation, truth, faith, presence, and transcendence (to name but a few) in personal and relational terms, thus in critical tension with ontological categories (towards which the Roman

---

<sup>118</sup> Of course, poetics or theological imagination is not enough for such a task. It also requires hermeneutical enquiry (to which we will turn in Chapter Two) as well as analytical theological reflection that judges truth claims according to academic standards of inter-subjective criteria. With regards to the latter, see Anthony Thiselton’s chapter entitled “The Rhetoric of Theological Models and Currencies of Meaning” in *Interpreting God and the Post-modern Self* (1995: 27–32) where he maintains that “if many theologians reject as inadequate a purely functional or pragmatic view of truth, this is not in order to reinstate some metaphysical imperialism.” With the notion of “omnipotence” in mind, Thiselton recalls the critical theological task “to attempt to disentangle manipulative power-bids from non-manipulative truth-claims, and to distinguish evidence, argument, or valid testimony from modes of rhetoric which rely on seduction, disguised force, or illegitimate appeals to privilege.” He refers to the work of Vincent Brümmer and his students, who exemplify this theological task. One might suggest that Brümmer, who loves quoting St. Francis saying that “faith is not a thing like a theory, but a thing like a love affair,” would not see this theological task as opposed to a more poetic form of theology.

Catholic tradition tends), with epistemological categories (as orthodox Protestantism is more likely to think), or even with ethical categories (as someone like Levinas tends to overstate).<sup>119</sup>

As a final word, we may say that a theo-poetics inspired by Kearney's thinking at the limit, does not mean giving free license to the authorial genius of the theologian. It is rather intended as a humbling recognition of the role that imagination plays in theological reflection. The theo-poet at the limit knows that creating is but a form of discovering what is already there, and that any act of speech worth the effort begins with an act of listening.

---

<sup>119</sup> Kearney's interpretation of Biblical narratives through the lens of *transfiguration* and *persona*, such as the burning bush narrative in Exodus 3 (with the giving of the divine name in Exodus 3:14), already offer a constructive attempt to do so (cf. 2.4; Kearney, 2001).

# Bibliography

- Baynes, K., Bohman, J. & McCarthy, T. 1987. General Introduction. In *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*. K. Baynes, J. Bohman, & T. McCarthy, Eds. Massachusetts: MIT Press. 1–18.
- Bole, W. 2008. Kearney's Choice. *Boston College Magazine*. 41–47.
- Brand, G. 2002. *Speaking of a Fabulous Ghost: In Search of Theological Criteria, with Special Reference to the Debate on Salvation in African Christian Theology*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Brand, G. 2014. *Godverlanger: 'n Hudigingsbundel vir Gerrit brand - met 'n keur uit sy skrywes*. W. De Vries & R. Vosloo, Eds. Stellenbosch: SUN Press.
- Caputo, J.D. 2002. Richard Kearney's Enthusiasm: a philosophical exploration on "The God Who May Be." *Modern Theology*. 18(1):87–94.
- Fouché, H. & Smit, D.J. 1996. Initiating a Dialogue on "Dialogue." *Scriptura*. 57:79–102.
- Ganzevoort, R.R. 2013. *Spelen met heilig vuur: waarom de theologie haar claim op de waarheid moet opgeven*. Ten Have: Uitgeverij Ten Have.
- De Gruchy, J.W. 2013. *Led into Mystery: Faith seeking answers in life and death*. London: SCM Press.
- Kearney, R. 1984. *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: the phenomenological heritage*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Kearney, R. 1988. *The Wake of Imagination: toward a postmodern culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kearney, R. 1995. *Poetics of Modernity*. New York: Humanity Books.
- Kearney, R. 1998. *Poetics of Imagining: modern to post-modern*. 2nd ed. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Kearney, R. 2001. *The God Who May Be: a hermeneutics of religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Kearney, R. 2002. *On Stories*. London: Routledge.
- Kearney, R. 2003a. *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*. London: Routledge.
- Kearney, R. 2003b. Narrative and the Ethics of Remembrance. In *Imagination and Its Pathologies*. J. Morley & J. Phillips, Eds. Cambridge: MIT Press. 51–63.
- Kearney, R. 2004. *On Paul Ricoeur: the Owl of Minerva*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Kearney, R. 2005a. Hermeneutics of the Possible God. In *Givenness and God*. I. Leask & E. Cassidy, Eds. New York: Fordham University Press. 220–242.
- Kearney, R. 2005b. Time, Evil, and Narrative: Ricoeur on Augustine. In *Augustine and Postmodernism*. J.D. Caputo & M.J. Scanlon, Eds. Indiana: Indiana University Press. 144–158.
- Kearney, R. 2005c. Thinking After Terror: An Interreligious Challenge. *Journal of the Interdisciplinary Crossroads*. 2(1):1–96. Available:  
[http://www.academia.edu/download/31116802/002\\_Kearney\\_printVersion2\\_1-2006.pdf](http://www.academia.edu/download/31116802/002_Kearney_printVersion2_1-2006.pdf) [2014, January 30].
- Kearney, R. 2006a. Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology. In *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*. J.P. Manoussakis, Ed. New York: Fordham University Press. 3–20.
- Kearney, R. 2006b. On the Hermeneutics of Evil. *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*. 50(2):197–215. DOI: 10.3917/rmm.062.0197.
- Kearney, R. 2006c. In Place of a Response. In *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*. J.P. Manoussakis, Ed. New York: Fordham University Press. 365–387.
- Kearney, R. 2006d. Ricoeur’s philosophy of translation. In *On Translation*. Translatio ed. London: Routledge. vii–xx.
- Kearney, R. 2006e. Poetics of a Possible God. In *Faith in the Enlightenment? The Critique of the Enlightenment Revisited*. L. Boeve, J. Schrijvers, W. Stoker, & H.M. Vroom, Eds. Amsterdam: Rodopi. 308–326.
- Kearney, R. 2007. Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Translation. *Research in Phenomenology*. 37:147–159.
- Kearney, R. 2010. *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kearney, R. 2011. Welcoming the Stranger. In *All Changed? Culture and Identity in Contemporary Ireland*. P. O'Duibhir, R. Mc Daid, & A. O'Shea, Eds. Dublin: Duras Press. 167–178.

Kearney, R. 2012. Diacritical Hermeneutics. In *Hermeneutic Rationality / La rationalite hermeneutique*. M. Portocarrero, L. Umbelino, & A. Wiercinski, Eds. Berlin: Lit Verlag. 177–196.

Kearney, R. 2013. Forgiveness at the Limit - Impossible or Possible? In *What happened in and to Moral Philosophy in the twentieth century? Philosophical Essays in Honor of Alasdair Macintyre*. F. O'Rourke, Ed. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. 304–320.

Kearney, R. & Semonovitch, K. 2011. At the Threshold: Foreigners, Strangers, Others. In *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality*. R. Kearney & K. Semonovitch, Eds. New York: Fordham University Press.

Keller, C. 2004. Richard Kearney's endless morning. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*. 30(7):890–896. DOI: 10.1177/0191453704047015.

Manoussakis, J.P. 2006a. Toward a Fourth Reduction? In *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*. J.P. Manoussakis, Ed. New York: Fordham University Press. 21–33.

Manoussakis, J.P. et. al. 2006b. *After God: Richard Kearney and the religious turn in continental philosophy*. J.P. Manoussakis, Ed. New York: Fordham University Press.

Murchado, F. & Kearney, R. 2004. A Conversation with Richard Kearney. *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy*. 8(3):667–683.

Ricoeur, P. 1967. *The Symbolism of Evil*. New York: Harper and Row.

Ricoeur, P. 1980. Existence and Hermeneutics. In *Contemporary Hermeneutics*. J. Bleicher, Ed. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 236–256.

Ryan, R. 2006. Philosophy at the Limits of Reason Alone: A Group Interview With Professor Richard Kearney. In *The Leuven Philosophy Newsletter*. V. 14. R. Ryan, Ed. Leuven: KULEuven Press.

Sheppard, C. 2004. An interview with David Tracy. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*. 30(7):867–880. DOI: 10.1177/0191453704047012.

Taminiaux, J. 1994. Philosophy of existence I: Heidegger. In *Continental Philosophy in the 20th Century*. Routledge ed. R. Kearney, Ed. New York: Routledge. 38–73.

Thiselton, A.C. 1995. *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*. Cambridge: Eerdmans.



Thiselton, A.C. 2007. *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*. Cambridge: Eerdmans.