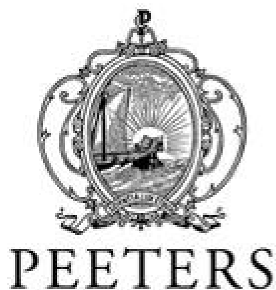

RICHARD KEARNEY'S 'PHILOSOPHY AT THE LIMIT'
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KRITISCHE STUDIES

RICHARD KEARNEY'S 'PHILOSOPHY AT THE LIMIT'

by Michael DUNNE (Maynooth)

Richard KEARNEY, *On Stories* (Thinking in Action, editors Simon Critichley and Richard Kearney). London/New York, Routledge, 2001, XII-193 p.[1]

Richard KEARNEY, *The God Who May Be.* A Hermeneutics of Religion (Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion, general editor Merold Westphal). Bloomington (Ind.), Indiana University Press, 2001, IX-172 p.

Richard KEARNEY *Strangers, Gods and Monsters.* Interpreting Otherness, London/New York, Routledge, 2003, X-294 p.

The author of these three works, Richard Kearney, The Charles Seelig Professor in Philosophy at Boston College and Cardinal Mercier Chair in Philosophy at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in 2005, will already be known to many as a philosopher and novelist, as an intellectual *engagé*, as a cultural commentator and an expert on Contemporary European Philosophy, especially French Philosophy.[2] Not every-

Michael DUNNE (1962) lectures on Ancient and Medieval Philosophy and the Philosophy of Religion in the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. He has recently co-edited with J. MCEVOY, *History and Eschatology in John Scottus Eriugena and his Time* (Leuven University Press, 2002).

[1] Dutch translation: Richard KEARNEY, *Vertellingen*. Vertaald door Ruud VAN DE PLASSCHE. London/New York, Routledge, 2003, 216 p.

[2] In a recent select bibliography of Kearney's writings from 1974-2004, there are 303 entries, including 31 books of which he is the single author of 17. I would pick out the following as representative: *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, Manchester University Press, 1984; *Poétique du possible: Vers une phénoménologie de la figuration*, Paris, Beauchesne, 1984; *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*, Manchester University Press, 1986; Editor, *Continental Philosophy in the 20th Century* (Vol. 8 of *Routledge History of Philosophy*), London/New York, Routledge, 1994; Co-editor with M. RAINWATER, *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, London/New York, Routledge, 1996; Co-editor with M. DOOLEY, *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, London/New York, Routledge, 1998; Co-editor with D. RASMUSSEN, *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2001.

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one will agree with his approach, his analysis or conclusions, but everyone will be challenged by his exuberant presentation of contemporary philosophical debate.

On Stories

In a footnote to chapter one, the author informs us that these three books make up a trilogy entitled 'Philosophy at the Limit' and writes that

> Each 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. The three volumes share an abiding conviction that when we are confronted with the apparently inexplicable and unthinkable, *narrative matters*.

For Kearney narrative offers a newly imagined way of being in the world, it opens up to us the possibility of seeing the world as "otherwise". Indeed, as he states "the unnarrated life is not worth living" (p. 14): what would a life be where we could not continually imagine other possibilities or identify with characters in other narratives? In chapter three he turns to psychoanalysis and the notion of a talking cure. Narrative and real life do intersect, telling stories and listening have existential and ethical implications. It matters not whether or not the narrative relates facts, what matters is the telling. The author is critical of Freud (p. 41). He suggests that Freud took himself too seriously as a medical rationalist and was reluctant to accept that psychoanalysis involved a process of narrative transference and projection, that it has as much to do with narrative as with "fact". This is contrasted with the position of the neo-Lacanians who see psychoanalysis as an open-ended narrative with no fixed idea of dénouement and the refusal of closure. The author concludes with the suggestion (p. 45) that narrative as therapy serves to emancipate the past in order to open up future possibilities. "It talks two to story" and so it seems that talking alone is good. In terms of narrative recall, Kearney passes over the scientific and relativistic interpretations to what he calls "the hermeneutic hypothesis" where the past is reread in the light of the present:

> This third approach requires that narrative *works* for us in the present as well *as being as true as possible* to the sufferer's own past. It is both therapeutic and referential in its claims and the wiser for it. (p. 46)

In chapter four the question of the relationship between narrative truth and historical trauma is traced in the experience of the holocaust. Primo Levi pointed out that if events are forgotten then there is the danger that history will repeat itself. It is, therefore, important to retrieve an ethical consciousness of evil through narrative remembering. There are, however, problems. As the author notes, the experience of this kind of absolute horror may be something which is incommunicable. In the camps, there was no communication; the voice of the survivor may speak for the

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dead but there is no catharsis or purgation because there are no emotions or sensations and no reconciliatory conclusion (p. 53). The recounting of the Shoah runs the risk of either being "kitsch melodrama" or mere entertainment. Thus, Kearney points out certain pitfalls to be avoided which include the option for a Master Narrative which would explain everything away. The author dismisses the option of a total silence regarding the holocaust (p. 68). He states that we have a double duty to narrate the event and to point out its difference from other events. However, it is strange that on the next page we are told that in places such as Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and Rwanda, the past should be "actively forgotten". It is not clear why this should be so.

Part Three is entitled 'National Narratives' and runs from chapter six to chapter ten. It deals with how communities are historically constituted by the stories which they recount to themselves and to others. A story is important to make a community but it is often the case that society forgets that it is just a story. Thus, in chapter 7, the author examines the foundation myths of ancient Rome as a mixed narrative of fantasy and fact, recounting a divine origin of society, of enemies and scapegoats to cover up an original sin of violence.

Chapter 8 deals with the relationship between Britain and Ireland and is what the author acknowledges to be the story which he knows best. The borders between Irish and Other shift constantly over the years so that most people in Ireland could claim two or more identities. This opens up a multiple post-national identity "where a thousand stories could be told" (p. 96). This lack of achievement of a unitary nation left/leaves Ireland as ambiguous and as exercising a certain attraction/repulsion where England is concerned.

In contrast to Ireland, the United States has been very successful in achieving a unitary state. In chapter 9, Kearney explores American "otherness" as narratives of the extraordinary other. The nation is forged through the purging of the alien (in this case the native Americans), as strangers in a foreign land, the land is conquered through the expulsion of all local misfits and monsters (p. 104). Another internal enemy is the black slave who allows the whites to come together as a community with a sense of racial superiority and control over the other.

This leads the author in the next chapter 'Border Crossings' to state that the task of philosophy is to address contemporary psychodramas of inclusion and exclusion (p. 121) and to address the problem of those aliens and monsters in the shadow lands who are neither one or the other. The author promises us a treatment of this challenge to our political and social norms in the third book of the trilogy *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*.

In Part Four, 'Narrative Matters', the author argues that with the passing of the former Master Narratives: Judaeo-Christian Redemption, Revolutionary Liberation, Enlightenment Progress, such narratives are giving way to new stories and their emerging possibilities. As he puts it: those "who proclaim the death of the author sign their books" (p. 126). The author then proposes the following challenge:

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> I personally endorse the affirmative view of narrativity advanced by theorists like Ricoeur, Taylor, Rorty, MacIntyre or Nussbaum [...] I would like to throw down the gauntlet and champion the irrepressible art of the story [...] I propose to do so under five summary headings [...] plot (*mythos*), re-creation (*mimesis*), release (*catharsis*), wisdom (*phronesis*), and ethics (*ethos*). (p. 128)

This is motivated by the author's aim to bring Aristotle's theories of narrative into critical dialogue with modern theories. Each of these topics is then examined with reference to such contemporary authors as Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, MacIntyre and Taylor. The author sides with Ricoeur and rejects the structuralist maxim that the text relates to nothing other than itself — a text refers back to the life of the author and forward to the life of the reader (p. 133). The author is generally optimistic but sometimes minimises certain negative consequences. Whereas narrative sympathy may enable us to see the world from the other's point of view, I am not so sure that it will always inculcate positive feelings in us — they may make us hate as well as love (p. 140).

The drive of post-modernism has always been towards aesthetic and political concerns. The merit of Kearney's work is that he also concentrates upon the ethical. However, I am not so sure that his fundamental principles can always support what he wishes to be the case. Can history be narrative and also true, without being simply relativistic. His solution is the following:

> I would suggest [...] that every narrative history be subject to *both* the external criteria of evidence *and* the internal criteria of linguistic/genre appropriateness [...]. (p. 145-146)

Thus, one must employ as many criteria as possible, linguistic, scientific, moral in order to see if one account is more real, true or just than another. This is important for the author in order to counter those who would deny the historical fact of the holocaust which can be both history and story. In his condemnation of Irving, Kearney states that history is a form of truth which is neither absolute nor relative but is something in between, closer to art than science (p. 150). Value is associated by the author with what is communicable and memorable and thus judged to be worthy of narrative (p. 154). For Kearney the heart of morality would seem to lie in how the customs of society can be changed so that everyone can be understood. In this articulation of a possible solution, morality, politics, poetics and rhetoric all seem to have a role to play. The following lines seem to capture the author's sense of the heart of morality:

> There is no narrated action that does not involve some response of approval or disapproval relative to some scale of goodness or justice — though it is always up to us readers to choose for ourselves from the various value options proposed by the narrative. (p. 155)

The author states that no story can be regarded as ethically neutral. But how is the individual supposed to choose between competing narratives? There seems little here to tell us how to choose well other than we should do so.

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The God Who May Be

The next volume of the trilogy *The God Who May Be* is a very interesting contribution to the Philosophy of Religion. The tone of the work again reflects the contemporary scene where there appears to be no firm consensus as to the phenomenon of religion. The author declares his position from the beginning, he is neither atheist nor theist, he is instead hopeful, waiting for the God who may be. God is, therefore, to be thought of as possibility rather than actuality. In this regard, the author proposes a new hermeneutic of religion to explore the two rival ways of interpreting the divine: the eschatological and the onto-theological. It is the former which he endorses, God as a hoped-for eschaton. The role of each human being is to make the divine "possible" ever more incarnate and alive, a response to divine invitation which Kearney terms *persona*.

Kearney traces the historical antecedent of his conception of the divine back to Nicholas of Cusa and states that this God of possibility, of desire and promise is much closer than the old deity of metaphysics and scholasticism (p. 3). Contemporary sources and influences which he acknowledges are listed on page 3, beginning with Derrida and include Levinas, Ricoeur, Caputo.

At this point, I have to state that I feel that the author is not quite accurate in his understanding and criticism of Scholasticism. A scholastic position recounted quite often in the author's writings is that for Aquinas and others God is pure act, or as he puts it here "the abstract subsistent being (as scholastic theologians assumed)." Immediately St. Bonaventure comes to mind, one could hardly say that his God is not a God of desire and love, He certainly is not 'an abstract subsistent being'. But let us take Aquinas' notion of God as pure act. Aquinas uses the language of Aristotle but employs it in a very different context than the Stagirite did. Aquinas' God is the God of Scripture, whose name is "I am who am", a powerful God who intervenes in human history and who will come again as the righteous Judge at the end of time. Aquinas' God is *omnipotens* (*omnis+posse*), that is, open to every possibility precisely because He is pure act: *posse sequitur esse*. Nor does the fact that God is pure act remove potency from God. Aquinas never denied that there was active potency in God, what he denied was that there was passive potency in God, i.e., that God's perfection could be added to from outside. Aristotle's God might be regarded as static and self-absorbed but Aquinas' God continually makes all things anew, continually holds everything in being and will eventually bring all things back to himself.

I am fully in agreement with the author that thinking about God does make a difference and that it encourages self-transcendence. The thought of an end of time and our response to this, is something that makes us question our prejudices and presuppositions (p. 4). Our response to this invitation is something that matters and the future possible is extremely important in human life. The author seems to be quite Hegelian in his notion of our role in this. He writes

> Transfiguring the possible into the actual, and thereby enabling the coming kingdom to come into being, is not just something God does for us but also something we do for God. (p. 4)

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And again:

> And if we say no to the kingdom, the kingdom will not come. (p. 5)

His conception of history as a human and divine venture reflects perhaps a conception of a mutual interdependence between God and the history of humanity, each progressing and advancing at the same pace.

At the bottom of page 5, the author again makes a statement of his own position. From a philosophical point of view he states that he begins from a phenomenological perspective in order to give descriptions of various phenomena associated with 'the religious' before beginning hermeneutic readings. Influences listed here are Husserl, Heidegger, Levinas, Ricoeur and Derrida. From a religious point of view he acknowledges that he comes from a Catholic tradition with the following proviso:

> [...] where Catholicism offends love and justice, I prefer to call myself a Judaeo-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*. (p. 5-6)

Clearly, the author wishes to offend no-one but it is also clear that it is difficult to pin him down to any one position except that of someone who seeks for love and justice. Thus, he notes that the reflections in the book are thought to be "vigorously ecumenical". Although he subscribes to Charles Taylor's view of certain common elements to be found in Christianity and Buddhism, he excuses his lack of references to non-Western religious thought because his "limited competence" confines him to the Judaeo-Christian and Greco-Roman tradition.

In addition to approaching God as *posse*, in borrowing the term *metaxology* from William Desmond, Kearney sees himself as choosing a middle way between two opposite ways of contemporary thinking: God as so beyond-being that one cannot speak of Him (Levinas, Marion, Derrida) and as a primordial unnameability coinciding with the "monstrous" (Cambell, Žižek), the "abject" (Kristeva) and so on (p. 7). For both approaches God is ultimately and utterly unthinkable and unnameable. Our author seeks to engage in a mediation between both approaches.

A third term to indicate his approach is that of *metaphorology*, i.e., his understanding of religious language as the attempt to say something about the unsayable. The influence here is that of Ricoeur who holds that a hermeneutic reading of religious texts can produce "a rich play of metaphoricity resulting in a radical semantic augmentation" (p. 7). From the interplay and intersection of metaphor, both new and previously-lost meanings can emerge from the reading of any of the great religious texts. Indeed, here no one form of metaphorization can be held to be superior to the others.

In chapter one, we are presented with the author's notion of *persona* (p. 10): "that eschatological aura of 'possibility' which eludes but informs a person's actual presence here and now". It refers to the "otherness of the other" as well as it is designating

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the other as an other-like-me. The following pages (p. 11-19) scintillate with fascinating metaphors and notions: *persona* as presence/absence, otherness, difference, independence, uniqueness, as something transcending our gaze, as temporality/futurity/altereity, as non-place, as an "ego in drag". The recognition of the other as other has ethical and political implications in terms of our mutual coexistence as persons — something which "holds out the promise of a perichoretic interplay of personas, meeting without fusing, communing without totalizing, discoursing without dissolving" (p. 15) There then follow sections dealing with *persona* as "chiasm" and as "prosopon". Of great interest is the author's exploration of *prosopon/persona*. It would have been interesting to see the author develop something more of his thoughts on the similarity/dissimilarity of the Greek and Latin understanding of person. The sameness and difference that we find in the other is what the author terms "transfiguration" and this leads on the discussion in the next chapter to the notion of religious transfiguration.

The encounter of Moses with the burning bush as recounted in Exodus provides the author with his first example of religious transfiguration (p. 20). He proposes a hermeneutic retrieval of the text on three levels, rabbinical, exegetical and philosophical. In the pages which follow Kearney proposes that a better expression of the *Tetragrammaton* would be "I am who may be" rather than the traditional "I am who am". This he puts before us as a wager. I am afraid that I am not a biblical scholar and must leave the ultimate judgment as to whether this is a valid reading of the Biblical text to others more competent in this area than me. The traditional or ontological reading of the text is explored with reference to Augustine and Aquinas as giving expression to God's unchanging mode of being. This led Aquinas to the insight that God's essence is existence or 'to be' itself. The accusation of onto-theology by Heidegger is repeated, the reification of God by reducing him to a being and so risking idolatry. However, it should be remembered that Augustine, Aquinas and many others were first and foremost people of deep religious insight and that their conceptual systems were meant to give an understanding to faith and not constructed as a system for its own sake. The accusation of onto-theology by Heidegger is often presented as a *fait accompli* or one of those things that go without saying, but I am not so sure that Heidegger's opinion is critically grounded — time perhaps will tell.[3] One thing that I think is mistaken is to state that conceptions about God were essentialist in medieval metaphysics (p. 25). Medieval thought spans more than a thousand years, modern thought less than four hundred. It is hard to make such

[3] An interesting discussion is to be found in Thomas A.F. KELLY, 'On Remembering and Forgetting Being: Aquinas, Heidegger, and Caputo', in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 76 (2002), No. 2, p. 321-340 and in the same a reply by John D. CAPUTO 'Auto-Deconstructing or Constructing a Bridge? A Reply to Thomas A. F. Kelly', p. 341-344. William DESMOND, in a review of three of Kearney's works in the *Irish Theological Quarterly* 54 (1988), p. 237-242, voiced a similar concern with the way in which the accusation of onto-theology is accepted and used.

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generalisations about so many different medieval authors and schools of thought. A medieval candidate might be Nicholas of Cusa. If anything, the criticism is truer of modern metaphysics and contemporary philosophy of language which, where God is concerned, deals more with meaning than with existence.

Clearly, the author has very little regard for traditional theistic attempts to articulate the divine when faced with the God of biblical language:

> God may henceforth be recognised as someone who *becomes with us*, someone as dependent on us as we are on Him. God's relation with mortals is, in other words, less one of conceptuality than of covenant. From which it follows that most philosophical reflections on God are in need of revision. And certainly the orthodox onto-theological categories of omnipotence, omniscience, and self-causality, originally forged *sub specie aeternitatis*, could do with a radical rethink *sub specie historiae*. Faced with the burning bush, one doesn't merely speculate; one runs, or if one holds one's ground, one praises, dances, acts. (p. 29-30)

The last lines appear to echo Heidegger's words criticising the "god of the philosophers" and the passage as a whole can be taken as declaring the past tradition to be in need of radical reconstruction. In this regard Kearney argues that the conceptual atheism of Nietzsche and Heidegger becomes one of the best weapons against the "conceptual idolatry" of onto-theology (p. 31). At the same time Kearney wishes to avoid the extremes of seeing God as a monster, as something horrific, the dark side of God as in Heidegger's last God. He also wishes to avoid the excess of certain postmoderns even if he regards it as salutary "to shock theological orthodoxies and unsettle the self-righteous" (p. 34). He tries to steer a middle way and to interpret the Exodus story from an onto-eschatological perspective (p. 34-38), a poetics of the possible, of a God who may be, but 'is' not yet.

Further scriptural readings abound in chapter three: the transfiguration on Mount Tabor, and those of the resurrected Christ. The author remarks that he is not embarking on a theological exegesis *per se* but rather that of a phenomenological-hermeneutic retrieval (p. 39). Something of the author's approach can, I think, be gained from the following quotation and why it is hard to condense such material into a review when only a personal reading of the full text will suffice. Commenting upon the bright whiteness of Christ at the transfiguration and then passing on to consider how Melville describes the whiteness of the whale in *Moby Dick*, the author remarks:

> The thin white line between atheism and theism marks the seemingly undecidable frontier of faith. God-man as double bind. The Christic crossing of *persona* and person. A holy braille to be deciphered in blinding light. Which is why the transfiguring God calls at all times for hermeneutic vigilance and discernment, setting us at a critical distance — yet never so distant as to forfeit grace. For in its very 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 (p. 41)

Much of what follows in the rest of the chapter, I find that I am not competent to comment upon as it deals with material which is scriptural, patristic and theologi-

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cal. One has to admire the ability of the author to move with ease through all of these varied backgrounds and sources. Note 23 contains some very interesting notions which I hope that the author may develop further in a future publication. He comments that while he makes many references to the Jewish tradition that he is not trying to impose a Judaeo-Christo-centric bias. "Messianic time (as variously outlined by Levinas, Benjamin, Derrida, Marion, and even Heidegger in his pre-*Being and Time* period) marks a universal quasi-transcendental condition which may include all religious experience of some sacred "other" time, be it monotheistic or otherwise." (p. 133)

In chapter four, we are provided with various readings of the *Song of Songs* in order to uncover something of the desire of/for God. In note 6 he comments that in contrast to Karl Barth, his own eschatological reading rereads the *Song of Songs* with Ricoeur, holding that the good of *eros* is not wiped out through original sin. There is much here again in this chapter for the reader to ponder and I wish simply to draw out some of the more salient points. The onto-theological reading of desire is presented and criticised as focussing only in terms of desire as lack (p. 61). Nietzsche is quoted to the effect that Christianity gave *eros* poison to drink, but this, our author argues, is not the full picture. The notion of desire remained strong in certain aspects of Christian writings, particularly those of the mystics. Levinas is also referred to on the relationship between eschatology and desire (p. 62-69). The deconstructive readings from Derrida to Caputo are given on pages 69-78. In particular, Derrida's views on atheism are interesting: "a general openness to altereity without name", "a renunciation of a specific God (or Gods)" — a renunciation which serves as the condition of the possibility of a God yet to come, or yet to be named (p. 71). In the end it seems that we must have trust and Kearney quotes Derrida to this effect: "Je ne sais pas, il faut croire" (p. 78).

In chapter five the author develops his suggestion that an eschatological reinterpretation of God as possible will serve to amplify his own conjecture that God neither is nor is not, but may be. He proposes to examine some scriptural and philosophical texts and then to look at the notion of the possible in contemporary thinkers such as Husserl, Bloch, Heidegger and Derrida.

In his consideration of God as *posse* rather than *esse* Kearney examines the importance of the later Husserl, of Ernst Bloch and humanistic utopianism, of Heidegger, and I was pleased to see the connection made with Leibniz. Indeed, I would have liked to have seen the author compare his position more closely with Leibniz's since the latter does explore the notion that possibility precedes existence. Heidegger's position seems to be fairly ambiguous and it would be hard to build anything on such a foundation. Derrida is again mentioned, even though we are told that Derrida is a self-confessed atheist, one who is not interested in pursuing his reflections in a theistic manner. "Derrida points to such possible paths but he does not choose to walk them" (p. 98). It is at this point that the author parts company with Derrida.

The concluding chapter raises the question as to how we might describe the infinite May-be? The Aristotelian subjugation of potentiality to actuality character-

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istic of onto-theological concepts of the possible is again criticised. A reinterpretation of the agent intellect is suggested (p. 102) but the suggestion that its light might be a participated light, or might indeed be reconciled with earlier illumination theories was already put forward in the thirteenth century. I think that whereas this section on medieval noetics is suggestive and highly speculative, a clearer presentation is called for. Aristotle had left the issue of the relationship between the intellect and the human soul unclear. Greek commentators were not unanimous either and their hesitation was reflected in Arabic thought. Aquinas' condemnation of Averroes was motivated by Averroes' separation of the *intellectus passivus* from the individual and attributing the functions of understanding to a transcendent *intelligentia*. This meant that you and I do not really think but rather someone else in us. It also led to the denial of a personal immortality and the notion of a personal providence or relationship with God. Apart from this Aquinas criticised Averroes for being a poor philosopher and a bad interpreter of Aristotle's principles.

Although a very good read, I have one comment about the conclusion: it introduces a lot of extra material which perhaps might have been better presented in a separate chapter. The same criticism I have to make about the notes, the book is a rather slim 111 pages with 48 pages of endnotes.

In the end, it would seem that for our author God and man need each other. "Creatures need a Creator and a Creator needs creatures" (p. 102). God plays with creation and shows us how we must let go (p. 108). The notion of God as *posse* reminds us of the possibility of a new heaven and a new earth. Kearney concludes:

> Is such a thing possible? Not for us alone. But it is not impossible to God — if we help God to become God. How? By opening ourselves to the "loving possible," by acting each moment to make the impossible that bit more possible. (p. 111)

Strangers, Gods and Monsters

The third volume of the series, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters — Interpreting Otherness* deals with how we view ourselves in relation to the other, especially in terms of the three 'outsiders' of the title. In particular, how do we cope with otherness — do we try to understand it, or do we project our unconscious fears and dislikes, onto the other? The other is a challenge to us to think again (p. 3). The author tells us that in trying to build a hermeneutic bridge between ourselves and the other, he will respect the border limits that defer all Final Answers (p. 10) Not for him the Master Narratives of totality or closure, the redundant ontologies of the *ens causa sui* or *cogito ergo sum*; nor does he wish to be accused of ontology, onto-theology or logocentrism, a "form of totalising reduction bordering on violence" (p. 9). His stated aim is to make the foreign more familiar and the familiar more foreign so that we can welcome strangers, respect gods and acknowledge monsters (p. 11). Kearney tells us that the path he will take is a winding one between the ontological and the

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ethical categories of Otherness using a proposed method of diacritical hermeneutics (p. 17). Diacritical hermeneutics is distinguished from both the romantic hermeneutics of Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Gadamer and the radical hermeneutics of Caputo. In taking this approach the author hopes to explore the posssibility of intercommunion between distinct but not incompatible selves and the realisation that friendship begins by welcoming difference. Diacritical hermeneutics is also open to other disciplines:

> Thus while striving to remain loyal to the demands of philosophical lucidity and coherence, our dialogue proposes to also reach across strict disciplinary divides and engage in a cross-hatching of intellectual horizons (p. 19).

Hermeneutics is seen as extending horizontally across disciplines and also across history, reinterpreting myths and memories and so renewing the traditional philosophical claim to universality — a claim which the author retains as a wager rather than a presumption (p. 19).

In Part One, we begin with an examination of the phenomenon of the scapegoat. The scapegoat allows us to define ourselves through the exclusion of the other; it purports to keep us pure by purging and persecuting those who are different (p. 33). Ultimately scapegoating cannot succeed, because it is an example of society lying to itself. Anthropological and theological readings of the phenomenon follow (p. 33-40). Kearney refuses a Judaeo-Christian solution to the problem of scapegoating:

> I have as much difficulty accepting that a single confessional theology has the remedy to the enigma of otherness as I would accepting similar claims for a positivist, Marxist, Freudian or any other interpretative model. Each has its unique light to shed on the puzzle, but none possesses the ultimate answer (p. 40-41).

Indeed, the author has problems with absolutes of any kind and states here that monotheism has much to learn from Eastern traditions, since monotheism does not necessarily have an exclusive or superior insight (p. 45).

Chapter 2 'Rights of Sacrifice' explores the sacrificial demon in some recent films. The important thing, he suggests, is not to kill the monsters but to learn to live with them:

> Yet at the same time, embracing monsters doesn't mean you have to invite them to dinner — or set up house. Some monsters need to be welcomed, others struggled with. The important thing [...] is to try to tell the difference (p. 62).

Chapter three presents something of Levinas and Derrida's accusation that the Western metaphysical heritage as grounded in Greco-Roman thought is guilty of discriminating against the Other in favour of the Same (Logos, Being, Substance, Reason or Ego) — a prejudice called the "ontology of Sameness" by Levinas and "logocentrism" by Derrida. The author calls the openness to the Other beyond the Same "justice", for Levinas it implies "infinite responsibility", for Derrida "absolute hospitality" (p. 67) but as was pointed out in the conclusion to the previous chapter,

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how are we to tell the difference between benign and malign others? Kearney is critical of Derrida's notion of an absolute hospitality. There has to be, for example, some form of immigration law, some way of distinguishing ethically between good and evil aliens (p. 70). Levinas' notion that my responsibility for the other is so unlimited that I am responsible for persecution is regarded by the author as hyperbolic language bordering on masochism and paranoia (p. 13). How then are we to decide between Siddharta and de Sade? are we to accept everyone and everything? In giving an answer, the author (surprisingly) revives the Aristotelian and Scholastic notion of practical wisdom and right action:

> If there is a difference between Jesus and Jim Jones, between St. Francis and Stalin, between Melena and Mengele, between Siddartha and de Sade — and I think most of us would want to say that there is — then some further philosophical reflections are needed to supplement the deconstructive scruple of absolute hospitality. Deconstructive non-judgmentalism needs to be supplemented, I suggest, with a hermeneutics of practical wisdom which might help us better discern between justice and injustice. For if we need a logic of undecidability to keep us tolerant — preventing us from setting ourselves up as Chief High Executioners — we need an ethics of judgment to commit us, as much as possible, to right action. (p. 72)

Before attempting this hermeneutic of practical wisdom the contribution of Freud and Kristeva is presented (p. 72-78) focussing on the notion of the "uncanny" (*das Unheimliche*), that is, the sense of anxiety which the other produces in us as the familiar and homely becomes unfamiliar.

Finally the promised section on discerning between different kinds of otherness (pp. 78-82) is introduced by the author's assertion that in this regard both deconstruction and psychoanalysis are lacking. His suggestion is that one of the best ways to de-alienate the other is to firstly recognise ourselves as other and secondly to accept that the other is another self (p. 80). Somewhat disappointingly, this brief section has not retrieved the notions of prudential wisdom and right action. We are told (p. 82) that moral critique should not be pushed to moralistic extremes; that every judgement necessarily ends up in a conflict of interpretations, where there is no black and white but only greys. Although the author states that this is not relativism but rather a call to judge justly, it is hard to see from a practical point of view how his diacritical hermeneutic of action is able to help us to discern between good and bad otherness. Clearly, he has succeeded in listing various kinds of otherness, but upon what criteria can we judge between them if there can never be agreement in terms of interpretation?

In looking at the question of evil in the next chapter, the author examines four readings: the mythological, scriptural, metaphysical and anthropological. None of these readings seems to satisfy the author, the personal nature of undeserved suffering remains aporetic. In what follows, the author presents what he calls the post-modern teratology of the sublime (pp. 88-96), dealing with such authors as Kristeva, Lyotard and Žižek. I think that it is fair to say that the author is uncomfortable with

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some of the conclusions reached by these authors. The fascination with deprivation and degradation raises troubling ethical implications (p. 93). He has particular difficulties with Lyotard's notion of the aesthetic sublime:

> [...] let me say that I find it somewhat disquieting that Lyotard can attribute the same model of the sublime to the unspeakable horror of the holocaust and the equally unspeakable altereity of the Hebrew Lord [...] any equivalence between the unspeakability of the Most High Lord (*makom*) and the unspeakability of abyssal evil (*privatio boni*) must, I suggest, give room for pause. If the divine becomes sublime to the point of becoming sadism it has, in my view, ceased to be divine. (p. 95)

However, has Lyotard not simply followed the postmodernist logic to its conclusion — if there is always to be a conflict of interpretations how can he be critiqued? Many societies do have a divinity identified with evil and do worship him/her. Surely more is required than a pause to think. Again Žižek is accused (note 48) of uncompromising scepticism even nihilistic cynicism and Kearney goes on to state:

> [...] I fully endorse this search for a new practice and ethos [that of Brockelman] issuing from the crisis of modernity as it faces into the delirious ex-centricities of postmodernity, shedding the old humanist illusions, but clinging to the hope that new modes of protest and emancipation may be disclosed and enacted [...]

The author insists that there must be something else and suggests what might be done (p. 100-106). Here a notion of practical understanding is put forward as appropriate for dealing with the problem of evil. It deals with individual cases while not abandoning all claim to "quasi universal criteria". It shows us that evil must be contested. In acting against evil it must be possible to discern it. Practical wisdom is supplied by narratives, is driven by "moral justice" and enables us to judge in some fashion (p. 101). Narrative opens out the possibility of thought experiments which help us to see connections between ethical aspects of human conduct, and fortune and misfortune. Inaction is condemned (p. 102) and just because we cannot gain a total understanding of the problem does not mean that we should not respond to evil. Finally in an appendix entitled 'Deconstruction and the Sublime', Derrida's position (and that of deconstruction) that there is no way of telling the difference between monsters and messiahs; that in the coming darkness all gods may be black, is again explored and rejected by Kearney, since it does not adequately distinguish between differing kinds of otherness.

Chapter five is entitled 'On Terror' and deals with the aftermath of the destruction of the Twin Towers skyscrapers in New York. How is such terror to be understood? The author considers some philosophical responses; the first is that of Jean Baudrillard and the second that of Kant. Baudrillard has a rather heavy interpretative stance regarding the significance of the events of September 11th: for example, the towers symbolise a duality which gives the illusion of choice in a capitalist society. Again, he sees the collapse of the Twin Towers as marking the self-collapse of the American Empire collapsing from within. Baudrillard's position is condemned by

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Kearney as nihilistic, as fanciful and objectionable (p. 127). Again, our author will not accept that nothing can be done, that there is no way out of this labyrinth, but he is silent on the alternatives. Kant's notion that war is sublime and peace is mediocrity and effeminacy (p. 131) also strikes a jarring note with contemporary readers. Art and philosophy can offer a diagnosis but what about a prognosis? One has to get into the mind of the perpetrators of terror as the quote from Chomsky states (p. 135). The author then suggests that we should pardon our enemies. The example of Socrates is placed before us as someone who refused to do harm in response to wrong, who refused to scapegoat others (p. 137).

In part two, chapter six we are treated to an examination of the role of memory from Shakespeare to Joyce and its connection with mourning. The next chapter deals with the notion of melancholy. Two types of melancholy are identified. The first concerns the inability to face up to loss; the second is that of a detached wisdom which Aristotle informs us is a characteristic of those who excel in arts, poetry, philosophy and politics. Again, *Angst* in Existentialism is seen as something which liberates, something which shakes us and makes us stand out from the crowd. I was particularly glad to see the mention of Guardini's work in this regard, a figure who is perhaps unjustly passed over nowadays. The *melancholia generosa* of Ficino is also mentioned — seen as a creative gift, melancholy could lead to genius. Thus melancholy can be seen as having two aspects, a tendency towards self-destruction or self-creation (p. 176).

Chapter 8 deals with memory from the point of view of remembrance, what it is we remember and why. How is it that one is supposed to recover the past? Should certain experiences remain unremembered? Postmodern theorists such as Derrida and Lyotard have challenged the hermeneutic capacity to retell the past. They argue that some things cannot be said and so the most appropriate attitude is one of silence before the "immemorial" (p. 184). Kearney is critical of this since it would make the past unnecessarily inaccessible and would take away the important duty of historians to distinguish between the "truer and less true retellings of the past". Postmodernism has proclaimed the end of the self but it is Kearney's hope that after the necessary work of deconstruction there will be a role for a post-metaphysical self in a postmodern culture even if this is something which is full of "puzzles and anxieties". It would seem, however, that the author is unable to offer anything at present other than the hope that the notion of a self can be preserved and so that of the other — it may be so but not yet. Is this sort of postponement (the differing, deferring of Derrida) not, however, the consequence or outcome of the preference for possibility over actuality?

Chapter 9 deals with the exploration in contemporary philosophy with the notion of *khora*, first found in Plato's *Timaeus* as "a placeless place from which everything comes" and how this might relate to the divine. In a psychoanalytic reading Kristeva holds that it is a primordial matrix which the ego dismisses as irrational and confused, as eroding the paternal logos of naming. For Kristeva, *khora* is a pre-verbal

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semiotic space, a "placeless place" before language, law or cognition. For Žižek, on the other hand, it is the place of the monstrous, the pre-ontological night of the world (p. 197).

With Deconstruction, and the work of Caputo in particular, *khora* is more explicitly linked to God. God is seen as beyond being and *khora* as beneath being or before being. *Khora* is something which cannot be grasped, it is neither sensible, nor intelligible but is a third kind of thing. For Caputo there is a certain undecidability between God and *khora* and that Derrida, although an atheist, opts for *khora*, this leads Caputo to regard him as a "saint", an "an-khora-ite" who has chosen the desert. Kearney has problems with this option for *khora*, however. This desert is one which embodies a dark night, without exit or response — it is not somewhere where one would like to dwell. We have to hope that there is more than this. Kearney again proposes a middle way, this time between *khora* and *hyperousia* and that is his notion of a "possible" God. Yet, at the same time, he has a certain admiration for people such as Caputo and Derrida:

> Higher than the children of faith are the knights of *khora* who brave the long day's journey into never-ending night. And never look back. (p. 206)

An appendix follows, entitled 'Derrida and the Double Abyss'.

The final chapter is entitled 'Last Gods and Final Things — Faith and Philosophy' and it deals to a large extent with Heidegger's notion of the divine. It notes how ambiguous Heidegger's stance on religion is. In his separation of theology from philosophy the inference is that philosophy should be atheism. When Heidegger stated that "only a God can save us" what he intended was the god of the poets. His notion of the "holy" which the poets detect has much in common with the Greek aesthetic of the divine. The absence of God creates a space, the emptiness of the Judaeo-Christian tradition will allow new gods to arise. Kearney has problems with the non-personal and non ethical character of Heidegger's new divinity. For Heidegger there will be no redemption and he has no time for the ethico-eschatological God of Scripture. Despite these failings, Kearney does acknowledge the contribution made by Heidegger in overcoming onto-theological metaphysics. This, the author hopes, may contribute to a new theology as well as a new ontology but not yet and not here, it seems. In his conclusion he acknowledges that we live in a contemporary situation which is confused, where we have no maps, where we do not know and where we are disorientated.

Conclusion

These three books contain a wealth of material which is both stimulating and challenging. My criticisms, such as they are, regard but a few aspects of these works.

Firstly, it is not clear as to how these three books hold together as a trilogy except insofar as they reflect the thought of the author at a particular time. Certain themes

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and concerns are repeated throughout. Perhaps one should think of each book as being an invitation to begin reflection and then leading out to and interacting with the others?

Generally speaking, I think that the material presented in the notes is too long. Either some judicious pruning should have been employed or the material should have been integrated into the general discussion of the text. Most readers will not read endnotes and it is a pity that such valuable material will be left unread. The same is true, I would venture, of the appendices in the third volume, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*.

As I suggested in my introduction, these books should interest a wider audience than a strictly academic one. Therefore, I have a problem with the use of technical terms and phrases throughout these books which are not explained in the texts themselves. Perhaps a glossary of terms could have been placed at the end of the book. For those familiar with the history of philosophy terms such as *causa sui*, *sensus communis*, *coincidentia oppositorum*, will be familiar but contemporary readers would require some explanation as to what the author means by these terms.

The author's main focus of interest would seem to lie in a fruitful dialogue and interaction between French and North-American authors. These three works are extremely important in presenting us with the essentials of how this debate stands at the moment and the author's views regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the contemporary scene. Now whereas Husserl and especially Heidegger are referred to, something of the debate from, say, Germany, Italy or Spain would also be interesting. Some sort of 'bridge' towards contemporary analytical thought might also be fruitful.

The author is at his best when describing and relating various currents of contemporary thought. It is clear, however, that he does seem to think that contemporary European thought is often deficient from an ethical point of view. Kearney is concerned with trying to find a *via media* between the various positions. What we have here as proposed solutions to some of these difficulties is as yet quite brief but we look forward to a future development of these notions.

SUMMARY:

This paper examines a recent trilogy of books by Richard Kearney collectively entitled 'Philosophy at the Limit'. Kearney is perhaps best known to the wider academic world because of his publications on, and dialogues with, Contemporary European Philosophy. In the first of these books, *On Stories*, Kearney, in common with many contemporary thinkers seeks to push back the frontiers of philosophy to include all forms of narrative such as literature, film, theatre as well as other disciplines such as biblical studies and psychoanalysis. What dis-

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tinguishes Kearney's approach from others is that his writings embody a concern for the ethical. The second work, *The God Who May Be* is perhaps the more interesting of these books, philosophically speaking. Here Kearney sheds new light on an old question and challenges many of the traditional theistic conceptions. Finally, in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* we have a contemporary reflection on the notion of 'otherness'. In all, these three books contain an interesting and engaging presentation of some of the central themes under discussion in the continental tradition.

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