

A Conversation with Richard Kearney

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For over two decades now, Richard Kearney has been a leading voice in Continental philosophy. His is a voice of moderation, one that engages with the radical ideas of postmodernism while insisting on fidelity to such values as responsibility, creativity, and freedom. His work on the philosophy of imagination, on narrative, and more recently on the philosophy of God is characterized by an openness, which is true to the hermeneutical philosophy of his mentor, Paul Ricoeur. Indeed, he ranks as one of the leading proponents of philosophical hermeneutics in the world today. He is presently Charles Seelig Professor of Philosophy at Boston College. He is Irish, that is, he comes from the land of Eriugena, Berkeley, Swift, Shaw, Wilde, Yeats, Joyce, Beckett, and the land with a history of colonization, war, and tribal hatred. Both elements, the literary/intellectual heritage and the inheritance of conflict and division, influence and mould his philosophical outlook. He is a prolific writer. He has written numerous articles and more books than can be mentioned here. His most important philosophical works include *Poétique du Possible* (1984), *The Wake of Imagination* (1988), *Poetics of Imagining* (1988), *Poetics of Modernity* (1995), *The God Who May Be* (2001), *On Stories* (2001), and *Strangers, Gods, and Monster* (2002). His most important book-length contributions to the debate regarding interpretations of Ireland's intellectual and cultural situation in the light of the Northern Ireland conflict are *The Irish Mind* (1985), which he edited, *Transitions* (1988), and *Postnationalist Ireland* (1997). He is also the author of two novels and a book of poetry.

Ó MURCHADHA: Professor Kearney, may I begin on a biographical note? What led you to philosophy?

KEARNEY: I first became interested in philosophy when I was a student at secondary (or high) school in Ireland. I was educated by Benedictine monks at Glenstal Abbey in County Limerick, who introduced philosophy into most of the subjects they taught—French, Latin, Greek, English literature, religion. Any excuse would do. It was the real humanist curriculum, with a very contemporary twist. Several of them had been educated in France in the sixties and seventies—mainly in Paris and Strasbourg—and had returned with lots of radical ideas. Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus, Derrida, Ricoeur, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, these were almost household names in some of our classes, particularly those given by Mark Patrick Hederman and Andrew Nugent, both great teachers and both monks. So my introduction to philosophy was in fact deeply interdisciplinary. From the start the main questions that lit bonfires in my young imagination were those

relating to the philosophy of religion and the philosophy of literature. And I would say that these are the questions which have continued to haunt and pre-occupy me to this day, almost thirty five years later!

Ó MURCHADHA: What made you opt for "Continental philosophy"? Philosophy in Ireland in the 1970s was more orientated toward the scholastic tradition, was it not?

KEARNEY: Ireland was my first philosophical stable. First at Glenstal Abbey, as mentioned, and then at University College Dublin. There I was immersed in the history of philosophy, Thomist scholasticism, and Continental philosophy. I was particularly encouraged as a university student by an Irish philosopher, Patrick Masterson, who had just written a wonderful book called *Atheism and Alienation*. Like the Benedictines, Masterson was a committed believer but a very liberal one intellectually who promoted a plurality of views and opinions. There was never any question of some party line being imposed, and theism was never a compulsory perspective. In fact theology as such had been banned from all the national universities after the founding of the Irish state, by way of trying to ensure a non-denominational, non-confessional climate of think-ing. Theology was for seminaries, not for secular statutory colleges. I found this very liberating and had no hesitation about taking on questions of God and religion because I never felt that I was about to receive a belt of the Crozier. Nevertheless, once I started to publish, some of my books were to be roundly criticized and condemned by high ranking members of the Irish Clergy, in particular Bishop Newman of Limerick. But this was really the exception. One of my teachers, and later colleagues, at University College Dublin, Monsignor Desmond Connell (who later became Cardinal of Ireland), expressed frank disagreements with me on several issues, but he always remained cordial. When I published my first philosophical work, *Poétique du Possible*, in 1984 he called me into his office and said: "I feel like saying to you what Yahweh said to Adam after the Fall—*Where are you?*" But he meant it, I felt, as an expression of concern for my waywardness rather than of censure.

Ó MURCHADHA: Your biography is linked to three very different countries (apart from Ireland)—Canada, France, and the United States—in which you have lived, studied, and taught. How has your thought been influenced by these diverse cultural contexts?

KEARNEY: France was where I did my doctorate on the philosophy of imagination. While at the University of Paris I studied closely with Paul Ricoeur (my thesis director) at le Centre de Phenomenologie et d'herm-

eneutique at Avenue Parmentier, housing the Husserl Archives, and also with Levinas. Both were on my *Jury de these* along with Stanislas Breton, another big influence on my early thinking. I also attended seminars by Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze, Levi-Strauss, Beaufret, and others, but they never marked me in the same way. Jean-Luc Marion and Bernard Henri Levi—it was the era of the *nouveaux philosophes*—were contemporary sparring partners; the latter published *Heidegger et la Question de Dieu* (1981) which I co-edited with Joseph O'Leary. Marion was a key contributor to that volume. Sartre unfortunately died the year I arrived in Paris and de Beauvoir not long afterwards. So I never actually got to talk to them, though I had corresponded with them from Ireland before arriving in Paris. Derrida was everywhere but I never actually met him while a student in Paris. It was later, after I started teaching in UCD and Boston College in the eighties and nineties that he became an intellectual colleague and friend. My first real encounter with him was our exchange in 1982, entitled "Deconstruction and the Other" and published in *Dialogues* (1984 and again in the Fordham University Press edition in 2004). So the main philosophical influences on me, from the French point of view, were phenomenology, hermeneutics and de-construction.

Finally, North America was where I began to spread my wings, so to speak, especially thanks to my annual visiting professorship at Boston College—formerly held by Gadamer and Habermas—where I was lucky to count major Continental thinkers like William Richardson, Jacques Taminiaux, and later again, Jean-Luc Marion, as colleagues. Predating the Boston connection, of course, there was my time with Charles Taylor as a Masters student at McGill University, Montreal (1975–6), where I learned much about the political philosophy of postnationalism and federalism. The Villanova conferences on Postmodernism and Religion, centered around Derrida and Caputo, were also very creative and challenging events for me personally. At Boston College, Villanova, and several other American universities, I found an open intellectual forum for interdisciplinary debate—especially between my three chosen areas of investigation: philosophy, literature, and religion. If I had not been fortunate enough to participate in these lively and robust (but never acrimonious) debates I am not sure I would ever have written my recent trilogy, "Philosophy at the Limit." But I would add that even when I took the Charles Seelig Chair in Philosophy at Boston College in 2000, it was extremely important for me to keep my contacts with Ireland and Europe alive and kicking. I return each year to conduct seminars at several universities such as Dublin, Louvain, Paris, Florence, and Athens. This bilateral intellectual belonging is crucial for me. If I think better in Europe, I breathe better in America. The first gives me a sense of time, the latter a sense of space. I need both.

Ó MURCHADHA: This interview is to form part of a special issue of *Symposium* on aesthetics. If I am not mistaken, your work has been concerned not so much with aesthetics per se (e.g. questions such as, what is beauty?, what is an aesthetic experience?, what is a work of art?), but rather with the interface of art and history, politics, ethics. Why this particular focus?

KEARNEY: In a way almost all of my work has been about "aesthetics," understood in the broadest sense of that word—a sense I equate with the term "poetics." Three of my books feature this term in their titles: *Poétique du possible* (1984), *Poetics of Modernity* (1996), and *Poetics of Imagining* (1992). Others, like *The Wake of Imagination* (1987), *Transitions* (1988), and *On Stories* (2002), are equally concerned with the question of "poetics" as redefined by Ricoeur and other hermeneutic thinkers. The term covers my attempts to explore the role of creativity—or what in *Poétique du Possible* I call "figuration"—in life as much as in art. This involves a whole range of activities from the dream-work of the unconscious to the functioning of symbol, myth, narrative, image, and metaphor in our cultural and social lives; and of course it also covers the ways in which these poetic functions operate in the arts themselves, that is, at an exemplary or explicit level. In other words, art and literature express at a secondary level the poetic activity that is going on at a primary level in all our lives. So if one uses the term "aesthetics" to refer to this secondary level of formal artistic creation, then you are right to say that most of my work is not about "aesthetics per se" (though a good portion of my writing on "poetics" does indeed deal with works of literature, painting, cinema, etc.). But if we understand aesthetics in the larger sense—more Greek than modern if you like, more general than specific—then I would say that I have hardly written a text that is not concerned with *aesthesis* and *poiesis*. Even in my books on politics, like *Postnationalist Ireland*, or on the philosophy of religion, such as *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* or *The God Who May Be*, I devote much attention to aesthetics in both senses of the term, from the myths and narratives of religion to the "social imaginaries" of politics (e.g. utopia and ideology) which deeply influence our everyday behavior as well as our more formal artistic activities. My basic argument is that we are creating and recreating all of the time, awake and asleep, for there is practically no moment of our lives when we are not figuring, refiguring, defiguring, or configuring the meanings of our existence, conscious and unconscious. In this respect, and in spite of my frequent engagements with postmodern philosophers, I am still indebted to the existentialist insight that we are responsible and answerable for all our acts, as I am indebted to the romantic discovery of "primary imagination" (in Coleridge and the poets, but also in

Kant's and Schelling's notions of "transcendental imagination"). The reason I chose to replace the term "imagination" with the term "figuration" is that the former had become too narrowly associated with a certain late romantic notion of aestheticism and elitism, as if creativity was somehow the prerogative of a few *poetes maudits*—misunderstood geniuses composing chefs-d'oeuvres of great genius far from the madding crowd. And, incidentally, I believe it was for similar reasons that Heidegger chose, in the conclusion to *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, to replace the term "imagination" with "Dasein." The latter term served to cover all of the synthesizing and schematizing functions of the productive transcendental imagination without the dualist connotations of nineteenth-century romantic idealism, based as it was on the regrettable opposition between art and life, the imaginary and the real. In this sense, my understanding of poetics follows the hermeneutic lineage of Heidegger and Ricoeur, and opens out onto an interdisciplinary conversation between art, history, politics, psycho-analysis, literature, and religion. In fact, most of my works feature some discussion of the critical rapport between "poetics and ethics." The basic hypothesis being that poetics needs to keep in contact with ethics so as to remain responsible, while ethics needs poetics so as not to degenerate into sanctimonious censorship. This amplification of the habitual understanding of the term "aesthetics" to embrace "poetics" in the broad sense does not mean that I abandon the notion of imagination. Not at all. It only means that I try to reposition it alongside other modes of expression—e.g. perception, signification, cognition, etc.—as one of several kinds of creative transfiguration and transformation, albeit the most exemplary one in the domain of what we call "art" proper.

Ó MURCHADHA: Your hermeneutical concern has consistently been with dialogue in the face of conflict. What is the role of art in such a hermeneutics?

KEARNEY: It is true that my hermeneutical commitment to dialogue has been a response to conflict. This in two senses. First, in the sense of my experience of political conflict in Northern Ireland. How do we find a space of conversation and exchange between the antithetical positions of Unionism (with its claim to a United Kingdom) and Nationalism (with its claim to a United Ireland)? How reconcile the irreconcilable? How mediate between two mutually exclusive claims? How negotiate with warring factions? Of course, the problem of Northern Ireland was only one of many in the context of world politics. South Africa, Jerusalem, Rwanda, Sarajevo, Iraq, these were other examples of internecine struggle which challenged the resources of philosophical understanding. My own wager in this regard was to accept,

along with Ricoeur and other hermeneutic thinkers, the inevitability of a "conflict of interpretations"; but in so doing also to recognize that what people took to be literal truths and certainties were in fact historical *interpretations*. So often the conflict between rival histories is a conflict between rival stories. Once one acknowledges this, there is greater hope for some kind of mediation, though such mediation will always fall short of a perfect solution; we can never exit completely from the hermeneutic circles of our social imaginaries (ideological and utopian). There is no pure scientific or transcendental viewpoint, no God's eye view on history from above, which might finally resolve all contradictions and differences. (At least, not for us mortals). So, as long as we are engaged in finite, human experience, bound by time and space, we are condemned to a certain plurality of interpretations; and this, after all, is the very basis of democracy. So how does art fit into this? I would say that by appealing to the poetic functions of imagination, art can deepen our sensitivity to paradox and amplify our sense of empathy for positions other than our own. If artistic genius is, as Coleridge defined it, the "juxtaposition of opposite and discordant qualities," then art can make us more tolerant of our enemies and more sympathetic to their interpretations of things. In relation to Irish politics this is why the journal which I co-founded in 1977, *The Crane Bag*, explored the legendary model of a "Fifth Province"—a province of imagination where the conflicts between the four existing geographical provinces of Ireland might be accommodated. In philosophical terms, I have sought to develop this notion of a hermeneutic imagination, from the conclusion of *The Wake of Imagination* to the final section of *On Stories*, drawing from such disparate precedents as Aristotle's analysis of *phronesis-mimesis-muthos*, Kant's notion of "aesthetic reflective judgment," and Ricoeur's notion of "narrative understanding." I do believe that these three variations of hermeneutic imagination have a key role to play in both art and politics. For each teaches us, in its particular way, how to negotiate between the particular and the universal—a problem that lies at the very source of so many of our contemporary political crises, not least that between the resurgence of nationalisms, on the one hand, and the cosmopolitan aspiration to a new internationalism or transnationalism on the other. This is, at root, a question of translation. And art is the great teacher here. As Joyce says, art is the "bringer of pluralities." It enables us to think and feel otherwise, to open our minds to perspectives other than our own. In this sense, we might say that murder is a lack of imagination.

Ó MURCHADHA: You first came to public prominence in Ireland as the co-editor of the *Crane Bag Journal of Irish Studies*, a revolutionary journal during the late 1970s and 1980s in Ireland, which brought together articles

on the arts, politics, economics, etc. Your first article in this journal started with the ringing declaration: "Politics is far too grave a matter for the politician. Art is too potent a medium for the artist. Beyond this entrenchment is a place where the two can meet." Can you explain what you meant by this?

KEARNEY: The reason I argued in that 1977 editorial of *The Crane Bag* that politics is too grave a matter for the politician and so needs to be supplemented by art is much for reasons rehearsed above. But let me say a little more on the subject. Politics without the empathic and cathartic functions of imagination cannot in my view be fully democratic, for without the imaginative power to translate between contrary cultures, classes, and creeds there is little hope of peaceful and equitable co-existence in today's world. Besides, politics is deeply beholden to the powers of imagination whether it likes it or not. How else does a nation or state solicit popular consent and motivate its citizens if not by means of myths, narratives, and symbols? When this is unacknowledged, such myths and narratives can easily become a form of propaganda or manipulation. This is what Walter Benjamin meant when he said that the "aestheticization of politics" is fascism whereas the "politicization of art" is revolution (in the positive and progressive sense). But one cannot ignore the deep relationship between politics and aesthetics. Likewise, when I argued that art was too powerful a medium to be left to artists, I was challenging the formalist notion of art for art's sake, or indeed the structuralist claim that literature refers only to itself. I was advancing the basic hermeneutic argument that every aesthetic work or text involves *someone saying something to someone about something*. This means that for all the talk of the death of the author, the demise of the subject, and the disappearance of the real into the imaginary (simulation, simulacrum, similitude, etc.), art remains a matter of inter-human communication about a lived world. Or, to put it in Ricoeur's terms, art is a configuring process which gives form to the prefiguring actions of the social lifeworld, thereby releasing the first-order reference of empirical experience into a second-order reference of possible worlds. Art thus serves as a hermeneutical exchange between the real and the imaginary—a circular process whereby we move from action to text (the aesthetic work) and then back again from text to action (the lived world). This latter move back from art to a community of readers and actors is what Gadamer calls "appropriation" and what Ricoeur calls "refiguration." Finally, there is the basic point that the aesthetic imagination taps into vital psychic and affective forces—what Joyce called our "nighttime consciousness"—which often remain occluded or hidden. While imagination brooks no censorship within the realm of art itself (*pace* moralistic attempts from Plato to Stalin to

impose such censure), once the aesthetic energies released by art are received back into the lifeworld—whenever we close the book or leave the theater or cinema—very real questions of political and ethical responsibility arise. And it is at this level of reception or refiguration in the real world that art ceases to exist solely for art's sake and becomes translated into social, human action. It was this critical and extremely complex translation of art into politics and politics into art that we were trying to explore in *The Crane Bag* journal. I don't know how well we succeeded, but we certainly had many lively contributions from both artists and politicians.

Ó MURCHADHA: This space beyond art and politics is one that you are pointing to as a philosopher. Are you in a sense claiming to mediate between politics and art, to take up a position as it were beyond art and politics? Is that which is too grave and too potent for the politician and the artist tamed by the hand of the philosopher? In a word, how does your own *position* as a philosopher (as opposed to the actual way in which you envisage art and politics interacting) relate to that claimed by Plato in the *Republic*?

KEARNEY: I think philosophy does take a step back from both art and politics, to the extent that it reflects on the meanings and presuppositions—what Kant calls the “conditions of possibility”—of these disciplines. However, rather than claim with Kant that philosophy is some transcendental, neutral standpoint I would embrace a more hermeneutic position which sees philosophy as an arbiter of interpretations, whose very act of arbitration is itself an interpretation. There is, I repeat, no absolute standpoint of consciousness which remains unaffected by aesthetic and political considerations. The temptation of total knowledge, which Plato alas yielded to in Book 10 of the *Republic*, runs the risk of censoring art and condemning artists. This is an age-old danger running from imperial intolerance to totalitarian diktats and autodafes. The irony is that while Plato qua artistic philosopher was able to create such wonderful dialogues, qua speculative metaphysician he was capable of declaring him-self an energetic opponent of the poetic activities of imagination. This is one of the creative paradoxes of Platonism—that it assigns *phantasia* both the lowest and highest of roles. Thus, while the poet is banished from the ideal republic, in some of Plato's mystical dialogues (later celebrated by certain neo-Platonic and Renaissance thinkers) he is praised for surpassing the limits of reason itself!

Ó MURCHADHA: A central theme in the *Crane Bag* article I have just referred to, and indeed in your philosophical journey, has been that of possibility. What is the role of possibility in art?

KEARNEY: Art opens up possible worlds in which we may imaginatively dwell. This is something I have been trying to explore since *Poétique du Possible* and *The Wake of Imagination*. The basic idea is that the artistic or poetic imagination suspends our primary reference to the actual, empirical world and recreates this world in the light of a secondary reference to the realm of fictional possibility. Here, at the level of secondary reference, the imagination knows no censorship. It operates with total freedom. In fact, it could be said to correspond to what Husserl calls “the free variation of pure possibilities,” the third stage of his phenomenological method. What are these possibilities disclosed by the aesthetic imagination? They are, I would hold, both epistemological potentialities of our human consciousness and ontological potentialities of the lived, real, material world. And they may even signal—but this brings us to the threshold of faith and hypothesis—a world of eschatological possibility (*posse*) underlying both consciousness and the world. In terms of this third mode of the possible, art could be said to serve as a portal to the sacred. But that is, as I say, an option rather than a given, a wager rather than a fact. I am thinking here of what Kierkegaard calls the “passion for the possible” which opens us to the desire of the infinite, which sets us on the trail of transcendence. It provokes a desire which may be answered or not, which may be absurd (atheism) or meaningful in spite of the absurd (Kierkegaard's own move from the aesthetic to the religious). In art itself, however, all such questions about the religious, ethical, or political interpretation of this new horizon of possibilities are suspended. At least, for as long as the aesthetic experience lasts. When the aesthetic experience terminates we return to the real world—expanded and enlarged, hopefully, by the imagination's adventures in the free realm of possibility—and renew or resume our commitments and convictions. Sometimes these convictions may be the same, other times different. But I think that the hermeneutic detour through art usually leaves some mark on our everyday manner of being-in-the-world. We cannot remain in the aesthetic world forever, unless we want to live the pathological existence described by Sartre so brilliantly in his depiction of the alienated heroes of his fiction and drama. We have to return “from text to action,” as Ricoeur puts it. And this return generally involves some kind of alteration in our awareness of things. It is hard not to be touched by our traversal of the imaginary. As Rilke rightly says, the work of art addresses our existence and says, “You must change your life!” It is true that a poem never stopped a bomb or a bullet, but it can change our attitude to the world in other, less imposing and more subtle, ways.

Ó MURCHADHA: How do you reconcile your emphasis on possibility with the

overwhelming desire of a Cézanne—remarked on in their different ways by Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur—to be true to nature, to the real?

KEARNEY: I just don't see the possible and the real as diametrically or dualistically opposed. The basic argument in *Poétique du Possible* and my later works is that the old dualistic opposition between possibility and reality, right up to Kant's modal logic, is one that phenomenology seeks to surpass. Husserl is trying to point to this when he posits the possible and the real as equiprimordial modes of evidence after the phenomenological reduction. And Heidegger radicalizes this insight, I believe, when he declares in his Introduction to *Being and Time* that for phenomenology "possibility stands higher than actuality." And he further radicalizes this claim in a startling passage in *Letter on Humanism* where he describes the truth of Being in terms of the "loving possible." This means that instead of seeing the possible as some kind of deficiency or cavity in being, as some kind of lack or absence, we see it instead as what Ricoeur calls a "surplus of sense" (*un surcroît du sens*), an excess or superabundance of meaning which precedes and exceeds being and gives rise to being in the first and last instance. This is what Heidegger calls the *es gibt* and what I call *eschaton* or *posse*. But either way, it challenges and ultimately overcomes the old metaphysical antithesis between possibility and reality. Art, or poetics generally, awakens us to this world of reality-as-possibility and vice versa. Cézanne's painting is an excellent example of this redescription of the real as possible, as Merleau-Ponty observes in *Eye and Mind* and elsewhere.

Ó MURCHADHA: In a political context possibility refers to power, and arguably power involves hierarchies. What is the place of art in terms of hierarchies of power?

KEARNEY: As portal to the possible, art represents a challenge to the hierarchies of power. For power is the arresting of the possible, its reduction to the condition of the status quo. Ironically, the Greek term for both "possibility" and "power" is the same: *dunamis*. But the difficulty with power—and the reason that it is so easily susceptible to corruption—is that it often forgets its own origin in and as *dunamis*. Then it fetishes itself and becomes, ironically, the suppressor of alternative possibilities par excellence. Power is simply possibility framed in a certain moment of history. It is always provisional, on loan. Art is there to remind the powers that be of this, as the long tradition of dissident or dissenting artists attests. But the temptation of hierarchies and institutions and empires is to conveniently forget this, to mistake itself for some absolute given in its own right. At best, art is the potency of perpetual revolt.

Ó MURCHADHA: Returning to the question of imagination, thinking of the temporality of the imagination, issues that have been of central importance to you arise here—namely, issues of memory and desire. Does the imagination play the role of mediating or even synthesizing past and future, memory and desire?

KEARNEY: Yes, I would agree here with Kant's analysis of the schematizing productive imagination in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and again in the *Critique of Judgment*. The synthetic power of aesthetic imagination to bring together the different horizons of past, present, and future has radical implications not only for our understanding of the world—bringing about what Ricoeur calls a "synthesis of the heterogeneous"—but also for our understanding of ourselves. Without this schematizing-synthesizing-temporalizing power of imagination—what Heidegger calls *Dasein*—there would be no coming together of our disparate temporal horizons. There would be no convergence of the actual (present) with the possible (past and future), no self-identity. This is what Arendt means when she says that if someone asks you who you are, you tell your story! You put yourself together, so to speak. You narrate your present self through the horizon of your past memories and future anticipations. You compose and configure yourself. (This is what Dilthey calls the "*Zusammenhang des Lebens*," anticipating Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity as outlined in *Time and Narrative* and *Oneself as Another*).

Ó MURCHADHA: You have just mentioned life (*Leben*) in the context of Dilthey. Although "life" is not necessarily a concept that is central to your concerns, it struck me in an article of yours, "Narrative and the Ethics of Remembrance," that twice you appealed to life as that which is *not* literature and stated that what is good for literature may not be good for life. The free play of literature is constrained in the case of life by issues of truth which are particularly relevant in the sphere of remembrance. What is the relation as you see it between art and life?

KEARNEY: I think it is crucial to maintain at least a minimal distinction between literature and life. There is a tendency in certain poststructuralist theories to blur the difference between the world of the text and the world of reality, i.e., of action and suffering, and I think this is a mistake. It is crucial to appreciate how our life—our everyday, lived experience—is deeply informed and permeated by the operations of imagination, symbol, metaphor, myth, and narrative. All experience is formed or "figured" in some way, be it prefigured, configured, refigured, transfigured, or disfigured. But that

does not mean that our actual experience is just another version of fictional experience. Nobody was raped by a book, as the New York judge observed in the court case concerning Joyce's *Ulysses*. But lots of people have been raped in reality. There is a difference between fictional and real claims to truth. The former tells things "as if" they happened, the latter "as" they actually happened. And it matters to the teller and to the hearer of historical accounts of reality that this distinction be respected. The whole controversy around negationism and "holocaust denial" revolved around this: does it matter whether it really happened or not? It does to the victims and survivors, and it should matter to everyone. There are referential truth claims in our accounts of real suffering and action that speak through our historical narratives and that belong to a different genre, I would argue, to that of fantasy and fiction. Which is not to say that fantasy and reality do not often overlap and intertwine. It is simply to say that no matter how interwoven they may be—as, for instance, in narrativized and stylized accounts of genocide, torture, trauma, child abuse—one has a right, and indeed a responsibility, to disentangle and separate out these different threads so as to let the truth claim become evident, or at least as evident as possible, because all evidence, even historical and empirical evidence, is provisional and incomplete; it is never absolute. But if someone goes to a therapist, for example, and is told that their trauma as a holocaust survivor, or a sexual abuse survivor, makes for a very good short story and that they really should take up a career in fiction writing, that person would have every right to feel aggrieved. Likewise, if someone reads a novel—say *Ulysses* or *The Satanic Verses*—literally and wishes to litigate and condemn on the basis of these fictional accounts, they are, I would suggest, committing a serious "category mistake," that is, confusing the real with the imaginary. The real and the imaginary are not identical (as certain extreme versions of both postmodernism and fundamentalism argue), nor are they entirely separate. There is a kind of chiasm or interlacing between both—to a greater extent in fiction, of course, than in history—and it is the business of diacritical hermeneutics to discern between them. Not always easy. But no less necessary for all that. Joyce's memories of Dublin described in *Ulysses* and Etty Hillesum's memories of her last days in a concentration camp are of a very different order, with a different set of truth claims, narrative genres, and reader-response criteria. One is fantasy, the other testimony. The line between the two may be very thin at times, but there is a line. And the cavalier crossing over of that line can have serious consequences. I think Yeats is right here when he makes a distinction between "perfection of the life" and "perfection of the art."

Ó MURCHADHA: The problem of memory is particularly important in the case of traumatic and horrific events. In these cases truth and the mode of representation coincide. You have defended Spielberg over Lanzmann in respect of their respective filmatic "representations" of the holocaust in your critique of Lyotard on this issue. On what basis do you defend Spielberg?

KEARNEY: The reason I defend Spielberg over Lanzmann in *On Stories* is that I feel that in narrativizing and dramatizing the story of Schindler's survivors, he went to great pains to acknowledge the fact that this was a fictional account of *real historical people*, even to the extent of sacrificing the aesthetic finesse of the film by appending a final "documentary" epilogue (in color rather than black and white) referring to the real persons who actually died or survived. The historical drama is thus limited and framed and circumscribed by an historical testimony. The blending and segregation of narrative genres is, of course, a very difficult task of "representation," but I think Spielberg does his best to pull it off. He is sensitive to the ethical limits of aesthetic imagination in the case of historical remembrance. By ostensibly excluding any possibility of narrative imagination or dramatization in his documentary film, *Shoah*, Lanzmann has produced an unambiguously pure testimony, from an ethical point of view, but he takes fewer risks and ends up with a seven-hour documentary that very few people actually see (outside of certain film festivals, art house cinemas, and late night TV specials on Arte or PBS or Channel 4, etc.). If Primo Levi's exhortation to "tell the tale so that it never happen again" is to be taken seriously, then I think that Spielberg does a better job, all things considered, than Lanzmann. Lanzmann in a sense is preaching to the converted, talking to the purists, confining the story to an elite of viewers. Spielberg is going out to the wider world, getting his hands dirty, taking risks, trying to ensure that the memory is actually "remembered" and "relived" by as many viewers as possible.

Ó MURCHADHA: While you emphasize remembrance, you also allow that it is sometimes right to forget. Is forgetting an act of imagination? Is imagining otherwise also and essentially learning to forget?

KEARNEY: The right to forget is, at times, as important as the right to remember. But in most cases the forgetting comes after the remembering, and is freely and wisely chosen. This is an "active forgetting," to use Nietzsche's term, but with this difference: the healing that comes from such willed or consented forgetting is one that is not blind, whimsical, or capricious. It is a responsible forgetting that acknowledges what it is forgetting—because it has recalled and remembered it before letting it go

back again into the oblivion of the past. Amnesty is not based on amnesia. This is something to which all the truth tribunals, war crime tribunals, and trauma tribunals testify: people can only properly and positively let go of the past when they have first revisited the past and "acknowledged" it. To forget your story you must first tell your story. Otherwise, forgetfulness serves as a form of repression or denial which, as Freud rightly noted, almost invariably leads to obsessional repetition and compulsive acting-out, melancholy rather than mourning. To let go of the past we must first mourn it, work through it, re-experience what is still unexperienced in our memories. Only then can we overcome what Joyce calls the maiming guilt of the past ("agenbite of inwit") and awaken finally from the "nightmare of history."

Ó MURCHADHA: Your work on the imagination has probed deeply into the paradox of the imaginary, the way in which the dominance of the image spells the death of the imagination. Some may argue, however, that our concept of the imagination is tied to that of the modern subject and once the latter has been deconstructed there is no place left for the imagination. Is there imagination after the subject?

KEARNEY: The identification of imagination with subjectivity is actually a relatively modern phenomenon, at least if we take subjectivity in the common philosophical sense of a cogito, transcendental ego, or intentional consciousness. For the Greeks, and even for the ancient Hebrews, imagination—*phantasia*, *eikasia*, *yetser*—could refer either to the human act of producing an image or to the product of imaging itself. It thus carried a dialectical sense of relation spanning the divide, as it were, between subject and object, cogito and the world, which later came to dominate Western philosophy, especially after Descartes. I think the postmodern critique of the romantic and idealist imagination can go too far, however, in its tendency to jettison the subjective dimension of imagining altogether. But it can also, in certain circumstances, serve a salutary role in reminding us that the realm of the *imaginary*, be it the unconscious imaginary of psychoanalysis or the social imaginary of hermeneutics, is a field of imaginative operation which surpasses the limits of the autonomous ego and reminds us that we are all bound and connected to a whole network of semiotic, symbolic, and cultural significations which precede and transcend us. This is an important antidote to the extremes of romantic hubris and humanist idealism. It is a humbling message. But if taken too far it can lead to a deterministic subjection of the subject to the System; it can issue in the denial of human creativity and agency altogether. This can happen with certain excessive forms of structuralism and poststructuralism—Althusser, Lacan, Baudrillard, etc. But there is a delicate balance between the polar extremes of humanist

subjectivism and antihumanist nihilism. I think the hermeneutic notion of imagination as a "narrative identity" respects the reality of human agency (poetically and ethically) while fully recognizing that there is no isolated transcendental self unaffected by a trans-subjective web of stories heard and told. This narrative imagination, as I understand it, is located beyond both romanticism and poststructuralism.

Ó MURCHADHA: In criticizing what you see as an excessive forms of structuralism and poststructuralism, you have often turned to Levinas. This turn to Levinas is striking and ambivalent, it seems to me. On the one hand, it is the face of the other which stops the mirror play of images, on the other, the power of the imagination suspends the ethical relation which for Levinas is irreducible. As you put it: "Levinas does not fully appreciate that if the ultimate origin and end of art is ethics, the rest belongs to poetics" ("The Crisis of the Image"). How important do you see Levinas for your thought, and how do you see the relation of ethics and poetics?

KEARNEY: Levinas was crucial for me as a counterpart to Heidegger, who was probably the single most influential figure in my philosophical formation. Levinas provided me with a necessary counterbalancing of the poetical with the ethical. My basic argument in *The Wake of Imagination* and elsewhere is that the "face" (*prosopon*) and the "image" (*phantasia*) are not necessarily diametrically opposed. The image can serve the face and vice versa. The power of imagining—in art, cinema, television, the internet—can be used or abused: it can be deployed in the service of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, or as a means to eliminate and exploit them. The image is not *per se* condemned to idolatry and manipulation for me, as it is for Levinas. In my book, imagining is neither good nor bad but thinking makes it so. And by "thinking" I mean interpretation, conscious or otherwise. It is our ethical and poetical responsibility to make of images what we will. To interpret them in different ways, enlisting them for good or ill, justice or injustice, art or pornography, testimony or propaganda, illumination or distortion. And once we acknowledge that the ethical and poetical powers of imagination can actually convene and cooperate for the good, we can renounce the Platonic temptation to exile the artist from the ideal republic. If imagination without ethics can lead to irresponsible illusion, imagination without poetics can degenerate into cheerless moralism. Imagination is certainly not always on the side of the angels. But it is not in the service of demons either. We have a choice regarding our approach to imagining and we are responsible for this choice.

Ó MURCHADHA: How do you see the relation between your work in herm-

eneutics and phenomenology, one of opposition or complementarity?

KEARNEY: I don't see the two as opposed. Phenomenology needs hermeneutics to return from the realm of possibility and neutrality (opened up by the epoche and free variation of imagination) to the lived world of commitment and conviction, that is, of interpretation. In fact, I have always argued, *pace* Husserl, that there is no phenomenological description or intuition that is not always already in some sense an interpretation. So I concur with Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur that phenomenology *is* hermeneutics, and vice versa. For if hermeneutics becomes divorced from its grounding in a phenomenological attention to the things themselves, to the everyday lived experience of the *Lebenswelt*, it becomes a relativistic free-for-all, a purely formal play of signs and signifiers without reference to reality. This is what Baudrillard calls the option of "sublime irrelevance," and I think it can be injurious to the sense of the world we live in. In short, hermeneutics needs to be grafted back onto its phenomenological base lest it lose the run of itself. Or to put it in Ricoeur's terms, if we need to move from action to text we equally need to return from text to action.

Ó MURCHADHA: As well as being a philosopher, you are also a novelist with two novels to your credit, *Sam's Fall* and *Walking at Sea Level*. In fact, in a recent interview you referred to yourself in a delicious phrase as an "impure philosopher." What is it like as a philosopher (albeit an impure one) to write fiction? Do you experience it as a liberation from the rigors of philosophy or as a submission to another discipline?

KEARNEY: My two published novels to date—*Sam's Fall* and *Walking at Sea Level*—were in many respects philosophical novels. Which perhaps explains why they did much better in their German, French, and Czech translations than they did in their original, English-language editions. It made a lot of sense for me to move from a philosophy of poetics to a poetics of philosophy. Almost all of my philosophical and critical works have dealt with imagination in one form or another—narrative, myth, ideology, religious symbolism, representation, metaphor, dream, etc. So it was logical to stop talking the talk, at some point, and walk the walk. Hence my sorties into fiction and poetry (*Angel of Patrick's Hill*). I have also experimented with film, video, television, and DVD, and see these modes of expression as other attempts to explore the world of image and imagination. That is not to say I see all these genres as the same. Not at all. I realize that they all have their own particular character and style. Poetry and novels, for example, enabled me to find a much more personal and affective voice than that of my philosophical works, whereas the forays into more popular media of

expression enabled me to communicate with a much larger audience and in a more "effective" way (to come back to the point I was making above about Spielberg). But I would say that philosophy is still my preferred genre of writing, thinking, and imagining. I believe that my philosophical work has been influenced and informed in subtle ways by my experiments with these nonphilosophical media of expression. But philosophy remains philosophy (I do not agree with Rorty that it is just a form of literature or rhetoric), even if it learns from poetry, fiction, and film in all kinds of ways.

Ó MURCHADHA: Where do you see the main connections between your work on the imagination and your more recent writings in the philosophy of religion?

KEARNEY: I see religion as yet another expression of imagination. It is not, of course, only imagination—that is, myth, rite, symbol, parable, narrative, metaphor, dream, representation—but it is mediated by these imaginary means of expression in large measure. And this is so, even if religion's ultimate goal is to make a truth claim about some absolute reality beyond the imaginary mediations through which the truth claim is made. One of the biggest problems with religion, it seems to me, is its tendency to forget the role of poetic imagination, and therefore to take itself literally, to degenerate into dogmatism, fundamentalism, intolerance. Of course, to speak of the religious imagination is not to espouse relativism, an attitude of anything goes and everything is the same as everything else. But it is to acknowledge the necessity of a religious pluralism or interconfessional hospitality which precludes the danger of any claims to the absolute. The absolute can only be safeguarded by a plurality of approaches. The One which is transcendent and infinite, as faith claims, calls for many interpretations. And these interpretations are a way of keeping faith authentic, modest, attentive, and alive. They prevent faith from falling into the temptation of fact. For the truth claims of faith are not the same as the truth claims of history. Sometimes they converge, but often they diverge. Learning to tell the difference is one of the most important roles of hermeneutic imagination.