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A CONVERSATION WITH RICHARD KEARNEY

The following interview was conducted during the fall of 2004.

Victor E. Taylor: *Poétique du Possible, Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers, Modern Movements in European Philosophy*, and, the most widely read perhaps, *The Wake of Imagination* all approach philosophy from a trans-disciplinary perspective. The more recent *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* continues this tradition but in a more pronounced fashion, with references to Sci-Fi film and Shakespeare. How has your earlier “turn to transdisciplinarity” evolved over the past two decades? And, how do you see the future of this form of scholarship in an era that seems to be still quarrelling about theoretical inquiry?

Richard Kearney: From the beginning, I have been fascinated by the role of imagination in our lives and in our minds. When translated into philosophy, this inevitably calls for a transdisciplinary approach. If you think of it, there is a whole domain of experience which has been systematically excluded from traditional metaphysical analysis. For 2000 years and more there was little thought given to such crucial functions in our social and personal lives as myths, dreams, symbols, metaphors or social imaginaries like “ideology” and “utopia.” This began to change somewhat with the arrival of thinkers like Freud and Nietzsche in the later part of the 19th century. But it was really with the emergence of continental thought in the twentieth century—and especially such currents as phenomenology, existentialism, critical theory and post-structuralism—that philosophy was invited to actively retrieve these repressed or neglected realms. There were of course some exceptions to this “forgetfulness of imagination” in the history of western thought. Plato, at the very outset, was deeply ambiguous. This is obvious from a text like the Republic which deploys such imaginary means as myth, simile, allegory, fictional dialogue, drama, metaphor etc while banishing, in book 10, the poet and artist from the Ideal Republic! This great Platonic paradox resurfaces at several key junctures in the history of metaphysics—for example, in Augustine's Confessions or Kant's first

and third Critiques (where he both celebrates and curbs the primary role of transcendental imagination as a synthesizing, schematizing, productive power). But it is really only with existential authors like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Sartre, for instance, that the strict dividing line between philosophy and literature, reason and imagination, is challenged both theoretically and performatively. And then hermeneutics—as it develops with Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur—shows how philosophy itself is less a science than an “art” of deciphering indirect and layered meanings. So these were some of the main figures of the intellectual itinerary I followed in coming to my own modest attempts—starting with *Poétique du Possible* in 1984 (a work dedicated to my doctoral director in Paris, Paul Ricoeur)—to sketch out a poetics of transdisciplinary inquiry into the workings of the imaginary. And it is a furrow I have been ploughing and sowing and (to the best of my limited ability) harvesting right down to the publication of *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* in 2003. The fact that I have also published novels and poetry and been involved in the teaching of film, as Chair of the Irish Film School at University College Dublin for many years, added another motivation to my commitment to traverse the traditional academic disciplines. I have always been raiding and foraging across frontiers! This is an old conundrum, and a productive one at times. The paradoxical tension between intellect and fantasy has been there from the very outset of western thinking, from the time Plato the poet set out to dialogue with Plato the philosopher! My own texts on the subject are no more than epilogues to this ancient and abiding quarrel.

VET: I imagine that it has not been without some difficulty moving into and across these disciplinary fields, especially with the poetry and fiction projects. The academy, even in our postmodern age, is resistant to transdisciplinarity—perhaps not at the level of Plato, but resistant nonetheless. Would you say that the “ancient and abiding quarrel,” as you describe it, includes the politics of a “difference-in-thinking”? I ask this in the context of authority or in the context of the “crisis” of authority and all its attending crises. *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, for instance, moves from an analysis of difference constructed externally to difference constructed internally. One can see a similar crisis in thinking as one compares and contrasts other/different objects of study and the postmodern process of critiquing an otherness/difference within objects of study. More clearly stated, perhaps, it is one thing to talk about myth or poetry AND Plato and quite another to talk about myth and poetry IN Plato. The latter, as you suggest, becomes a dangerous prospect—a crisis in the authority of thinking itself. To borrow and alter a question that you asked Paul Ricoeur in April 2001 (“On the Crisis of Authority”), “How do you think “thinking,” with all of its internal differences, might best respond to this climate of crisis in the future?”

RK: Thinking is often dangerous for power in that it introduces difference into the political citadel of sameness, conformity, uniformity. The very practice of philosophy inaugurated by Socrates—dialectical dialogue—meant just that: DIA-LEGEIN—welcoming difference. And it proved to be dangerous not just for the

state of Athens which condemned Socrates to death, but of course for Socrates himself! It is no secret how dissident intellectuals were treated in authoritarian regimes: one thinks of Mandelstam and Solzhenitsyn in the USSR, Thomas Mann and the Frankfurt School philosophers in Nazi Germany, Patockka and Tomin under the Czech dictatorship, and so on. Not to mention the students in Tiananmen Square. What is more surprising, however, is to see how dissident thinking is now becoming “dangerous” in certain democratic states also. Dissenting thinkers like Chomsky and Said have made much of how critical and alternative thought is being increasingly silenced by the dominant opinion in the US (especially under Bush) which amounts to what they call a “manufacture of consent.” But even if one considers that view too extreme, it is certainly worrying to observe how minimal is the critical response to the Iraq war on most US university campuses, compared to the Vietnam war for example. Not that there aren't many, perhaps a great majority of students and faculty, who are very unhappy about the situation. But there seems little organized resistance at public level. It gives pause for thought.

At another level, we can also witness an internal resistance to differential thinking WITHIN the academies themselves. This expresses itself as a hostility to interdisciplinary work across traditional academic boundaries. Such work seems to jeopardize or subvert the security and authority of canonical divisions. It threatens to contaminate and confuse the purity of distinct disciplines. This fear is rarely publicly acknowledged. It expresses itself instead in indirect decisions regarding hiring, funding or the revision of the curriculum. And then think of the passionate antipathy to someone like Jacques Derrida who certainly challenged traditional academic divisions (e.g. between philosophy, politics, linguistics, theology, literature, languages etc). The prejudicial reaction of certain Anglo-Saxon academic bastions—including those who so vehemently opposed Derrida receiving an honorary doctorate at Cambridge—speaks for itself.

VET: If we could continue with a few themes from *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, I think it would be helpful. Dialogue or *dia-legein*, the welcoming of difference, doesn't necessarily provide the condition of “welcoming” or “difference.” For instance, we see from across the political and academic spectra the welcoming of the “sacrificial stranger.” Or, the welcoming of the opportunity to affirm an identity by constructing a normative sameness and thereby defining a differing “perversity.” Theory, itself, has been the “sacrificial stranger” in the academy and Jacques Derrida the scapegoat for many who defend the “purity of disciplinarity.” The Cambridge incident was only a symptom of wider hostility to difference as I see it. While certainly not as significant as the events around Derrida's honorary doctorate, I, as an untenured assistant professor, was once years ago invited to an in-house political science “discussion” of postmodernism. At the end, and throughout, the conclusion was, “Michel Foucault, a postmodernist and a homosexual, intentionally infected people with the AIDS virus and his writings and postmodernism ought not be taught.” So, while I shared an intellectual interest with Foucault, I quickly found myself inscribed in

other ways—in particular as the subject of a “rite of expiation.” You’ve already commented on this, but how far does this extend? For instance, Is there an ideological relationship here between the New York Times’ obituary of Jacques Derrida and the “anti-gay marriage amendments” on the ballot in eleven states during Tuesday’s election? Both make use of the rhetoric of difference and passion of vilification.

RK: I think the ideological connection between the NYT obituary on Derrida and the 'anti-gay marriage amendments' in the recent Nov 2 election is disturbing. Both condemnations—of deconstruction and of gay marriage—are carried out in the name, explicitly or implicitly, of morality. And a specifically puritanical morality at that. What is unusual is that this new Puritanism is coming not just from the right, where we can identify it with the evangelical Christian Coalition movement, but also from certain left-wing academic quarters hung up on political correctness and scientific positivism (both remnants of a certain Anglo-Saxon rationalism hostile to continental thinking). But let me take each in turn. The “moral” hostility to gay marriage is a fear that strange and alien modes of sexual relations will contaminate the body politic. It is the Salem witch trials and New England Puritanism all over again. And the frightening thing about it is that it hijacks the name of “morality” in its campaigns against gay marriage and abortion, seemingly oblivious to the political morality of poverty in the US itself (not to mention globally) and of the war in Iraq. What is equally disturbing is the concomitant hijacking of religion by this same constituency, so beloved of Carl Rove. As if the values of religion and Christianity are the prerogatives of Bush and his right-wing followers. This is a huge challenge to the left today I believe: to reclaim the ground of political morality and emancipatory religious protest formerly championed by people like Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King. Religion and morality are too powerful—and meaningful—to be hostaged to the Burning Bush of Texas and Company Ltd.

Here we rejoin Derrida, for whom ethical and religious questions were at the very heart of his later philosophy. People like Jack Caputo, Kevin Hart and James Olthuis are part of a new movement in North American thinking determined to develop this radical aspect of deconstruction. It is telling, moreover, to note how the most virulent critiques of postmodern thinkers from the Continent—who are “different” to mainstream Anglo-American thought—are couched in terms of sexual perversion. Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, Deleuze and so on are denounced as some kind of intellectually transmitted disease that rots the mind and corrupts the youth. Idioms such as AIDS, syphilis, anthrax and vampirism have been invoked. One might expect that from the outback of the Bible Belt. But when one finds it echoed by a certain “right-thinking” left in North American Academia (as witnessed in certain responses to Derrida’s death) it is really disquieting. We are back with the old scapegoating of the “sacrificial stranger,” but in very sophisticated disguise. Most of the American intelligentsia who vilify Derrida have not read his work and blithely ignore the fact that he was a persecuted Jew from Algeria (thrown out of school by the Vichy/Nazi laws) and a champion of

progressive political and educational causes throughout his career. I personally had my differences with Derrida (mainly on the relation between critical hermeneutics and deconstruction) and we had several occasions to express these in dialogues, conversations and colloquia over the years. He was always most generous and modest in his response to my criticism and I can honestly say that he was one of the most ethically conscientious and politically committed philosophers I have ever met.

VET: I do wish to take up Derrida more specifically later and your relationship to his more recent writings, particularly regarding the *khora*. On the topic of “sameness” and “difference,” however, as a philosophical and a political matter, do you see here the power of stories (in reference to Paul Ricoeur) to affirm a self-enclosed identity (*idem*) over an identity in relation to an other as self (*ipseity*)? For instance, all of the ideological positions that coalesce around “Derrida,” “Gay Marriage,” “Otherness” are attended by stories—perhaps variation of a “purity myth.” *On Stories*, especially the ninth chapter entitled “America and its ‘Others’: Frontier Stories is the best articulation of this phenomenon in the following sense; that reading it in the context of 2004 the “extra-terrestrial other” now seems less terrifying to the American consciousness than “Jacques Derrida” or the “gay couple” living next door.

RK: Yes, there are many stories of US versus Them, the pure versus the impure, the elect versus the damned. This “strategic lie,” as philosophers from Machievellis to Karl Schmidt have called it, is practiced by the Bush administration today—like so many imperial administrations before it—to propagate an ideology of sacrificial purgation and power. To simply appeal to “facts” in the face of such narrative fantasies of the Enemy is to miss the point. Kerry and the democrats learned this to their cost. The role of narrative imagination—or the “social imaginary” as Taylor and Ricoeur refer to it—cannot be underestimated in the construction and administration of power politics. But the battle here is not just between narratives and facts, but between unjust narratives and just ones, disabling imaginaries and enabling ones. To come back to Ricoeur: if it is indeed true that narratives of self-enclosed identity (*idem*) are what bolster up ideologies of the imperial nation, the best antidote is not some appeal to neutral facts or to some disinterested transcendental spectator—that is the naivety of enlightenment rationalism and positivism. The claim to dispense with all myth, as Gadamer rightly reminds us, is itself a myth. No, the best response to destructive stories (which reduce otherness to sameness) is to counteract them with deconstructive stories—ones which undermine the illusory lure of fixated identity and open us to a process of narrative alternation and mutation (the self-as-another or *ipse*). The hair of the dog that bit you, if you like. The homeopathic remedy of curing the disease with more of the same (albeit with different dosage and intent). Stories can undo stories. Narratives that emancipate can respond to narratives that paralyze and incarcerate. History is full of such conflicting stories, as is psychoanalysis and religion. So why should politics be exempt from this complex play of narrative imaginaries? It is not.

You are, of course, absolutely correct, I think, to point to the fact that the “extra-terrestrial other,” which I identified as the emerging fantasy of the enemy threatening the American nation in *On Stories*, is now being replaced with more home-grown demons—that is, the gay next door who claims to be normal (marriageable) or the deconstructionist in your local school who claims, like Derrida, to be on the side of democracy and justice. After the ‘grounding’ of the monster in the wake of 9/11, the fantasy of the otherworldly Other came home to roost again: first as the Al Qaeda neighbors who fly planes into your cities; and then, by extension, the next door gays, postmoderns, liberals—who claim to be just like anyone else but are in fact threatening to undermine, pollute and contaminate the moral purity of the body politic. Highjacked American Airlines, anthrax, Aids and aporias (the stock and trade of deconstruction) are in a curious and perverse way all of a kind—as far as the fantasy of the Enemy is concerned. They all threaten—according to the fear factor—to infiltrate and infect our minds and bodies, from the INSIDE. The outsider as insider: this is becoming the dominant phantasmagoria of our post 9/11 times. Hence the desperate rush to externalize and territorialize the adversary in some far flung battle field in Afghanistan or Iraq. Hence also the need to deprive gays of their rights to legality and normalcy. And to treat a thinker like Derrida as some kind of “vampire” or “virus” (these images have actually been used!) who slips past our borders at night and corrupts our youth with his dark and venomous charms. It's scary stuff, this scapegoating of the other—even in obituaries like that of the NY Times written within a week of Derrida's death.

VET: Would stories of “hospitality,” as you discuss in *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, provide a response to the vilification of the other? If you see a possibility here, Where is “hospitality” located? For instance, I always felt that Derrida's “city of refuge” reproduced the dominance of “normality” within the political, even though he viewed it as a temporary extension of hospitality.

RK: I do think hospitality is one of our best modes of response here. But one cannot be naive. Derrida is right, I think, when he alerts us to the double meaning of “hostis”—as both host and enemy. The fact that “hospitality” and “hostility” have the same etymological root (captured by Derrida in his somewhat overly-clever neologism, “hostipitality”) is telling. But while recognizing the double nature of hospitality, deconstructionists lack, in my view, an adequately critical means of judging between just and unjust “others.” There is no real room or rationale, in their books, for “discernment of spirits.” Derrida says that when someone knocks on your door you cannot know in advance if it is a mass murderer or a messiah who is about to enter. The arrival of the other is always a complete surprise which shatters and confounds any of our efforts to question or differentiate one kind of other from another kind of other. But I think it is important to be able to discriminate. As I said in *Strangers Gods and Monsters*, we need to tell the difference between true and false prophets, between Siddhartha and a strangler, between Jesus and Judas, between Etty Hillesum and Himmler. I am taking these dramatic examples here, following a logic of

hyperbole to make my point. For of course there is just and unjust, good and evil, in different degrees in all human beings. So, yes, these are complex issues indeed and nothing is ever a simple matter of black and white verdicts. That kind of apocalyptic dogmatism leads to war, as we know only too well. But the opposite extreme of saying we can never know or anticipate anything at all when it comes to the advent of the stranger: this to my mind is TOO impossible to be lived or practiced. Deconstruction is an ethic for gods not mortals. Indeed, Jesus seems to admit as much when he asks his Father to forgive those who are crucifying him. As Ricoeur pointed out to me once, Jesus says : “*Father forgive them for they know not what they do.*” He doesn’t say that he forgives them. Because maybe there are some acts of hospitality and pardon which are virtually impossible for humans (and in this case for the humanity of Jesus—he had to appeal to the paternal divinity in himself, for such unconditional openness to the enemy). This is, I think, an interesting limit-case. Hospitality is really difficult and complex at times. But that is not a reason to give up on the task of hermeneutic understanding, however provisional and tentative it may be. Basically what I am saying here, departing from the deconstructive account of hospitality, is that when we open the door to the Other, it does not always have to be in the dark. Sometimes we need to shed a little light on these matters. If we do not accept such a minimal need for critical interpretation, hospitality becomes utterly impractical and we become too paralyzed to act at all. For in that case, every attempt to discern is immediately a form of betrayal. That’s too hard. We need bridges between ourselves and others; even if they are only simple, makeshift ropeladders—even tightropes for that matter! Any port in a storm.

VET: Like in the case of Lyotardian differends, there is a paralytic inevitability with “pure” Derridean deconstruction. The issue of “judgment,” however, is nevertheless critical here. While Ricoeur, as you mentioned, sees forgiveness as an act of God—that is something beyond the human—Derrida, too, it can be argued takes forgiveness away from the space of human judgment. For instance, his question, Do we forgive “someone” or forgive someone for “something”? resonates here. Locating judgment and forgiveness becomes a problem both philosophically and practically. The novelist José Saramago offers a slightly different problem and one I’d like you to respond to. In *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* it is the dying Jesus who asks humankind to forgive God! “. . . Men, forgive Him, for He knows not what He has done.” For Saramago, “forgiveness” and “judgment,” it would seem are wholly human problems.

RK: Yes the question of judgment is crucial here, whether we are concerned with Lyotard’s “differend” or Derrida’s “undecidability.” I think this is where postmodern theories of value and justice need to be supplemented by some notion of hermeneutic understanding. We might usefully invoke here the role of “phronetic understanding” as developed by thinkers like Gadamer and Ricoeur. Ricoeur’s reading of Christ’s invocation of the Father to forgive his enemies is really a hyperbolic insistence on the difficulties and limits of the human capacity for judgment and pardon. It is not an abandonment of them. Elsewhere, for

example in *Time and Narrative* and in *Memory, History, and Forgetting*, Ricoeur makes it clear that forgiveness is very much a human task and responsibility. In contrast with Derrida, Ricoeur talks of “*le pardon difficile*” rather than “*le pardon impossible*.” This nuance is crucial. However imponderable and impractical pardon may seem, it is something we should strive for; acknowledging that at times a logic of “surplus” charity needs to supplement—if never supplant—the logic of legal justice. Phronetic understanding comes into play here drawing from the Aristotelian model of “phronesis” as a way of responding to both the claims of universal justice and of the singular particulars of unique persons, places and times involved in any specific judgment. It is a judgment of double fidelity if you will, appealing to reason and praxis at one and the same time. Phronesis offers an alternative to the classical model of “theoria” which is concerned with purely abstract ideas or axioms, as in mathematics or science—a mode of formal reasoning which would be quite inappropriate to the demands of a complex and contingent ethical situation. In Kantian terms, phronetic understanding would be a version of “aesthetic reflective judgment” rather than “determinate judgment” (as outlined in the “Third Critique”). It is really a question of trying to navigate a course between formal rationalism and relativist irrationalism. Not always easy. And it allows, also, that our ethical judgments have frequent recourse a) to phenomenological experiences of suffering and action (for example, Levinas’ appeal to the “face of the other” before me here and now as source of the commandment not to kill); and b) to the empathic and felt examples of narrative (if we want to know the virtue of constancy we tell the story of Penelope, of courage the story of Achilles, of loving-kindness the story of Siddhartha or Jesus or Etty Hillesum etc). Abstract “categorical imperatives” are clearly not enough here. Such a disembodied approach risks degenerating into a kind of cheerless moralism. But on the other hand, the abandonment of all criteria and coordinates of understanding risks pushing us towards the other extreme—the cult of the “hysterical sublime” where all notions of just and unjust, good and evil, right and wrong, simply disappear. So the hermeneutic trick is to remain vigilant to the demands of the singular ethical event which calls out for empathy and action and the more transcendental requirement of universal justice. In such instances, judgment and pardon become matters of difficult and delicate discernment. And I think that hermeneutic philosophy has a crucial role to play here in helping to sift through the various available and often competing criteria of evaluation.

Regarding Saramago’s quote about humanity forgiving God for He knows not what He does: I share his desire to emphasize the human responsibility for forgiveness but I would dispute the implications of theodicy here. Namely, that somehow God the Father is willing the suffering of his Son on the Cross—and by implication of all those other ‘sons of man’ who have suffered over the centuries from torture, genocide, slaughter etc. If one were to accept such a view—as many of the churches have done over the centuries—then evil is part of God’s inscrutable design and all responsibility for human judgment regarding matters of good and evil goes out the window. I think theodicies, of whatever religious

hue, are amongst the most pernicious doctrines of our history and are directly responsible for most of our wars. And needless to say humanist versions of theodicy—Stalinism, Hitlerism, Big-Brotherism—are just as destructive in their promotion of the view that all kinds of evil and injustice are a necessary “negative” part in the ineluctable march towards a secular Reich or Kingdom. This is very dangerous stuff and philosophy needs to be on the critical look-out for new and recurring versions of such thinking, even in our post-ideological, post-modern era.

VET: We have discussed a number of issues and many have touched upon current events. I supposed that I have erred here insofar as the interview now is indexed to a time and place. So much of your work is about crossing disciplinary fields and establishing conversations where none had existed before. As someone invested in the “humanities,” I deeply appreciate your efforts. Considering your scholarly works, your creative works, and your wide-ranging interests, how would describe the future of this critical “look out.” It is an impossible question since we cannot know the future, but I wonder what you think we should be watching for, looking for, or being open to?

RK: As you say, it is hard to predict these things, but I do believe the future of the humanities lies in interdisciplinarity and that the crossing of academic boundaries will not just be within the arts but across the faculties. The dialogue with science is, I think, crucial here, even though I personally have had little involvement in this somewhat neglected conversation. Analytic philosophy has often been more open to this—especially in recent developments in the cognitive sciences—but I feel that continental philosophy has a huge amount to offer here also. The whole Sokal fiasco didn't help of course. Nor did Heidegger when he made simplistic declarations like 'science doesn't think' (though I believe he was pointing to something more profound than the slogan suggests). The separation between *Erklären* and *Verstehen* has passed its due date and we need to overcome this dichotomy. It is really a hangover from the old schism between enlightenment rationalism and romanticism. We need to move on. Pressing contemporary questions of ethics, politics, epistemology and the environment require answers from both the arts and sciences. And if the blurring of disciplinary boundaries sometimes causes confusion, I think it is a potentially creative confusion that is worth risking. Without taking the risk there is no leap forward. I myself have become increasingly interested in the debate between philosophy, theology, psychoanalysis and politics, particularly as it touches on the urgent question of interreligious imagination. I say 'urgent' because I believe that most of the conflicts in the world today—including the “War of Terror”—stem from a perversion of the religious imaginary (Bush and Bin Laden being two obvious cases). And I would wager that a re-appropriation of what is progressive, enabling and enlightening in the spirituality of the great wisdom traditions may have something to offer us by way of a response. Gandhi, The Dalai Lama, Martin Luther King, Jr., Havel, Mandela, John Hume, and Aung San

Suu Kyi all thought so. And I think they are right. But that is perhaps a topic for another interview.

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