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Imagination Now
In Conversation with Richard Kearney

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Transformation of our lives and the world we live in is imperative and inevitable, as well as unpredictable and unsettling. The pace of social and political changes we have faced in the last decade was unprecedented. The social media revolution, the migration crisis, and the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic have drastically altered our everyday existence. The new challenges call us to find new ways of navigating in the increasingly technological, globalized, and complex world. We need to rethink our place within it without succumbing to a nostalgic desire for the past. At this turning point (from Greek *krísis*), we have an excellent opportunity to imagine new modes of being for ourselves and our societies (Husserl 1970). Whether we seize the opportunity to become more thoughtful, caring, and just or become divided, isolated, and self-centered, depends largely on our imagination. However, today, the capacity of creative imagination is at risk: the crisis of the Humanities and the Liberal Arts seriously undermines creative imagination. Various media overflow us

with a heavily polarized vision of the world. We are not encouraged to imagine a given problem, let alone envisage another perspective on a given subject.

The freedom of the creative imagination is also undermined by "big tech." Sophisticated algorithms make choices for us, such as: what to watch, when to watch it, or whose opinions to confront. The growing digitalization of our social and professional lives is diminishing our capacity for embodied imagination. Contact via the screen reduces our embodied experiences of otherness and the capacity for intersubjective understanding. The COVID-19 pandemic has only accelerated the growth of "excarnation," adding an ethical component to it (by social distancing, I am protecting others from infection) (see Kearney 2021). Dealing with the rapid changes discloses the fundamental importance of imagination for our being in the world. Far from being a frivolous luxury in a time of crisis, imagination is a phenomenon that today urgently "calls for thinking" (Heidegger 1971).

Imagination Now: A Richard Kearney Reader, a collection of essays edited by M. E. Littlejohn, is an invaluable invitation to think seriously about imagination. Powerfully displaying the centrality of imagination in Richard Kearney's thinking, it stimulates us to consider imagination as vital for the opening of the new horizons of our being in the world and for the creative rethinking of the traditional oppositions: between reason and body, faith and atheism, word and touch, philosophy and literature, high and popular culture, cosmopolitanism and nationalism, and more. Kearney takes us on a fascinating journey through imagination's various meanings and potentialities across an impressive array of disciplines: philosophy, literature, theology, visual arts, and politics. Inspiring us to awaken the creative potential within each of us: to live fully, beautifully, and sensitively, he draws us into conversation on what it means to imagine now.

The imagining subject

Kearney places his reflections on imagination within the phenomenological and hermeneutic tradition. In his personal and philosophical path to the realm of the imaginary, the influences of Charles Taylor and Paul Ricoeur became grounds for his conviction on imagination's central role in human lives. They

inspired his project to challenge imagination's enduring undervaluation in the western philosophy. This unparalleled and ambitious endeavor requires extending Kant's reflections on the transcendental and creative power of the imagination while not losing sight of its negative potential (Kant 1998 and 2000).

Reflecting on contemporary art and philosophy, Kearney argues that postmodernist culture undermines the belief in the image as an authentic expression of the creative imagination of an individual subject. The deconstruction of anthropocentric humanism and its anthropology brings about the deconstruction of the notion of creative imagination. By challenging the legitimacy of narrative coherence and identity, radical postmodernism risks "abandoning the emancipatory practice of imagining alternative horizons of existence" (Kearney 2020m, 16). The pessimism and despair that the impossibility to think beyond the givenness of the situation could bring about is a threat to humanity itself. However, a nostalgic return to humanist ideals is not a solution. Bringing postmodern critique and humanist ideals into a genuine conversation requires us to envision a notion of imagination that incorporates postmodern thinking and discloses that the imagining subject is not self-sufficient and egocentric, but open to and oriented toward the other.

Advocating the narrative theorists' idea of the imagining subject, Kearney allows us to appreciate the narrative model of selfhood as a promising response to the need to overcome the essentialist notions of the person without doing away with subjectivity altogether. Upholding Ricoeur's narrative theory, he skillfully elucidates it with reference to the basic characteristics of narrativity—*mythos*, *mimesis*, *catharsis*, *phronesis*, *ethics* (Ricoeur 1984). *Mythos* (plot) designates a specifically human experiencing of time. We "humanize" circular cosmic time by transforming it into a plot of our lives that begin with birth and end with death, instead of seeing it as a mere passing of instants. This transformation, which makes each life "storied," conditions agency since human action "is always a dynamic synthesis of residual sedimentation and future-oriented goals" (Kearney 2020k, 57). Ricoeur's analysis of *mythos* also divulges that imagination is central to action by allowing us to transcend reality and envisage the future (see Ricoeur 1978). *Mimesis* reveals the importance of self-narration for self-understanding. Although there is a crucial "gap"

between the life lived and the life recounted, narrating opens up perspectives and possibilities of being that were not available at the moment of experience. They can be explored in storytelling. Temporarily inhabiting the story world may amplify our sensibility and expand our being in the real world. *Phronesis* refers to the crucial ability to relate our universal values to specific situations disclosed in stories. The *cathartic* power of stories refers to their ability to disclose experiences of others, otherwise not available. By allowing us to experience the world through other perspectives and to suffer and love with others, narrative inspires more profound and extensive modes of sympathy and empathy. As many narrative theorists claim, here lies the basic ethical and political function of the narrative (cf. Nussbaum 1995 and Benhabib 1992). In this regard, Kearney openly states that "[i]f we possess narrative sympathy—enabling us to see the world from the other's point of view—we cannot kill. If we do not, we cannot love." (Kearney 2020k, 61.) Moreover, since the narrative mode of selfhood presupposes a self that perdures over time between birth and death, it entails moral responsibility. Situating his reflections on imagination within the horizon of the narrative theory of subjectivity, Kearney anticipates an in-depth re-conceptualization of the ethical-poetical function of the imagination and its practical implications.

The ethical imagination

Imagination's crucial relation to freedom and responsibility is explored through the intriguing scrutiny of various notions of the imagination in Greek and Judeo-Christian mythical traditions, Greek and Latin philosophy, Modern philosophy, Romantic poetry, and contemporary phenomenology and hermeneutics—*yetser*, *phantasia*, *eikasia*, *imaginatio*, *Einbildungskraft*, *fantasy*, *imagination* (cf. Sheppard 2014). While all traditions share an understanding of imagination as a specifically human ability to convert "absence into presence," it is the phenomenological-hermeneutical tradition that, by focusing on imagination's creative (and not merely representational) potential, discloses with greatest force that freedom requires the ability to imagine—to surpass the givenness of a situation and envision and anticipate "the world as if" (cf. Ward 2006). Imagination's relation to responsibility is disclosed in

the context of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Kearney invites us to consider narrative imagination as a condition of subjectivity to the extent that it allows one to constitute oneself, despite one's fundamental mutability and openness, as "a perduring identity over time, capable of sustaining commitments and pledges to the other than self" (Kearney 2020m, 28). This self-constitution is not an autonomous act of an isolated self since it requires both creativity and receptivity to others' narratives. Imagination conditions intersubjectivity, insofar as its cathartic function allows us to imagine what it is to be someone else and see the world through their perspective. Imagining another as oneself and oneself as another is a crucial ethical ability.

Being in conversation with the book encourages further reflection on the possibility of rapprochement between ethics (understood as "responsibility of self toward other") and poetics (understood in the broad Aristotelian-existential sense as "creation") in light of the hermeneutic understanding of imagination. Ever since Aristotle, the sharp distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* has marked the way we understand poetics (Aristotle 1996). In his uncompromising analysis, Kearney invites us to overcome this dichotomous understanding and affirms that poetics serves ethics, since the poetic text "invites us to enter into its otherness and recognize ourselves in it, putting ourselves into question, losing ourselves in order to find ourselves" (Kearney 2020h, 42). Drawing on Hannah Arendt's observations that, in order to recognize something as an ethical action, we need to tell the story about it, Kearney deems *poiesis* indispensable to communicate and cultivate *praxis* effectively in a community (see Arendt 1998 and Wiercinski 2020). He goes further than Arendt, arguing that *praxis* is not only disclosed in *poiesis*: it also finds there its end. We move from action to text, and back to action.

Modifying the Aristotelian understanding of *poiesis*, Kearney puts forward an original suggestion: that the end-products of *poiesis* are not "things" (texts, songs, buildings), but our actions in the world. Since *poiesis* and *praxis* share a fundamentally non-theoretical and non-speculative character, *poiesis* can inform our understanding of the relation between virtue and happiness or misfortune. Due to its potential to concretize our understanding of the abstract ideals of good and evil, just and unjust, suffering and happiness, *poiesis* is pivotal to our capacity to set our motives, goals, and actions accordingly. By

acknowledging its end in the realm of action, *poiesis* can become a guarantor of responsibility. Being in dialogue with Kearney, we might ask whether such understanding of *poiesis* does not run the risk of limiting the possibility of free artistic creation. There remains more to be said in regard to Kant's worry that the freedom of imagination could be lost, if the aesthetic becomes too directly defined or constrained by the moral (see Guyer 1996). Kearney tackles this problematic in his considerations on the relation between universality and particularity in ethical judgments and concludes that the poetics of judgment comes very close to the hermeneutics of imagination. It might be beneficial to develop this topic further (cf. Arendt 1989 and Zerilli 2005).

Through Kearney's fascinating analysis of *Genesis*, we are led to consider the risks of imagination and its negative potential. In *Genesis*, the birth of imagination coincides with the birth of consciousness of good and evil, as well as temporal consciousness of past and future. Adam's and Eve's sin throws them into a historical time where "the spirit is no longer at one with itself" (Kearney 2020g, 69). The temporality of identity marks it as fundamentally torn—one no longer lives in the immediacy of a moment. But this is also what makes human beings fundamentally free to transcend themselves and become other than they are, to imagine and reach toward alternative scenarios of existence. Thus, "the freedom to choose between good and evil, and to construct one's story accordingly, is […] intimately related to the *yester* (imagination) as a passion for the possible: the human impulse to transcend what exists in the direction of what might exist" (Kearney 2020g, 72). This creative power is what makes human beings the rivals of God. *Genesis*, similarly to the myth of Prometheus, exposes that imagination bears within itself a threat of transgression. It is "a power that supplements the human experience of insufficiency and sets man up as an original creator in his own right" (Kearney 2020g, 78). In imagination, we create or destroy freely and unreservedly. For ancient philosophers, the feeling of unlimited power that imagination temporarily provides is the basis of human *hybris*. They deem imagination a mimetic capacity, reproductive rather than productive, an imitation that should ultimately remain subservient to reason. While opposing the ancient dismissal of imagination, Kearney recognizes that imagination prompts arrogance and dissociation from reality, when imagination becomes an end in itself. He agrees with Plato

that "imagination can never forget that its art is artifice, that its freedom is arbitrary, that its originality is a simulation, repetition, mimesis" (Kearney 2020g, 78). Conversing with Kearney on the negative power of the imagination, we might add that apart from its transgressive potential, it always runs the risk of becoming a destructive rather than constructive capacity. It can become a space of dwelling on our fears and anxieties, to the extent of limiting or paralyzing our actions and guiding us onto an undesired future. Anticipating Kearney's observation that imagination might lead us to project our fears onto other human beings by creating imaginary monsters, we might appreciate the complexity of the relationship between imagination and ethics and the need to ponder this challenging topic further.

The embodied imagination

Imagination has rarely been explored as an embodied capacity. Kearney's "carnal hermeneutics" is perhaps his most significant contribution to contemporary continental philosophy. While he had previously published an edited volume on carnal hermeneutics with Brian Treanor, placing the project in the context of his thinking of imagination widens its scope and extends its prospects (see Kearney and Treanor 2015). Kearney counsels us to stay in a productive conversation about the possibility of a "carnal turn" in hermeneutics and the significance of carnality for our being in the world. Developing the theme of carnal hermeneutics seems particularly urgent today, in what Kearney calls the "age of excarnation" (Kearney 2020b, 121). Delving on the potentialities of an incarnate philosophy, Kearney sees it as a genuine possibility to respond to today's crisis of embodiment. The importance of his project cannot be overemphasized, considering that philosophy, despite its many attempts, had great difficulties in restoring the body to its place alongside reason. After the Platonic divide between reason and the senses, the body has remained at the margins of the history of thought throughout the centuries. The disembodied subject became the center of inquiry. The revolutionary attempt to restore the body to philosophy arguably began with Husserl's phenomenological movement. Explicating the developments in the phenomenology of the body advanced by Husserl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty,

Levinas, and Irigray, Kearney regrets nevertheless that the hermeneutic turn of the 1960s has again brought about "an embrace of language at the expense of body […] replacing body with book, feeling with reading, sensing with writing—as if the two could be separated" (Kearney 2020b, 96). The ontological hermeneutics of the disembodied *Dasein*, whose destiny was language, has led to the triumph of temporality (of understanding) over spatiality (of flesh), not only in Heidegger, but also in Gadamer and Ricoeur. While embracing Ricoeur's narrative theory of identity, Kearney does not shy away from disputing his "regrettable" division between a hermeneutics of texts and a phenomenology of affectivity and his privileging of the former. The project of carnal hermeneutics constitutes Kearney's proposal of a return journey, reconnecting hermeneutics and phenomenology, sensation and interpretation, through which we are led to appreciate that, as human beings, we are "*reading* the flesh, *making sense* of sensibility, and *discerning* bodies in lived passion and place […]" (Kearney 2020b, 101).

We are invited to join Kearney in exploring carnal hermeneutics through a detailed account of an adjacent idea, that of diacritical hermeneutics. Diacritical hermeneutics comprises: a) a critical function in the double sense of deciphering "the conditions of possibility of meaning" as well as a critical exposure of injustice and power inequality in the name of liberation; b) a diacritical function of discernment between competing claims to meaning; c) a grammatological attention to inflections of linguistic marks, that is, a micro-reading between gaps and oppositions (this bears similarities to deconstruction); and d) a therapeutic function based on a diagnostic reading of the body and discernment between health and disease (Kearney 2020c, 90). These characteristics point to a fundamentally carnal aspect of diacritical hermeneutics understood as sensing the other. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's notion of "diacritical perception," which stresses that meaning is never given as an isolated item, but as part of a complex and flowing interaction of elements, Kearney assimilates diacritical understanding to incarnate understanding (see Merleau-Ponty 2012). As incarnate, such understanding is applied—it is an understanding that "responds to a life of suffering and action" and "has an application to human embodiment as its original and ultimate end" (Kearney 2020c, 96).

We are encouraged to reflect on the fundamental question: how do we discern? In his ample elaboration of the notion of carnal hermeneutics, Kearney follows Aristotle and Husserl in arguing that central to our capacity for discernment is the sense of *touch*. Aristotle describes touch as a discriminating sense or medium for understanding, disputing the Greek hierarchy of the senses, whereby the highest allows for the most distance (thus the primacy of sight, *opto-centrism*, and the dismissal of touch as the lowest of senses—unmediated). Touch is the most universal yet complex of the senses. It constitutes the basis of our openness to the world—it is through touch that "we have 'contact' with external sensibles, and that we 'transmit' these with 'tact' to our inner understanding" (Kearney 2020b, 105). It also constitutes our fundamental exposure to things, since to touch is to be touched simultaneously (unlike the other senses, where I am not necessarily heard by what I hear or seen by what I see). Tactility "is the ability to experience and negotiate the passion of existence, understood etymologically as *pathos/paschein*—suffering, receiving or undergoing exposure to others who come to us as this or that. To touch and be touched simultaneously is to be connected with others in a way that opens us up." (Kearney 2020b, 104.) The essential openness and exposure of flesh through touch is also a source of experiences of vulnerability, insecurity, and fear. However, precisely those experiences make us pay special attention to the world and take nothing for granted. We experience risk and adventure through flesh and thus become more perceptive, intelligent, and "savvy." Re-conceptualizing our beliefs about the very core of what we understand by touch, Kearney affirms that "our deepest knowing is sensing and touching" (he points out that *sapientia* comes from *sapere*—to taste), and that wisdom "is about taste and tact" (Kearney 2020b, 100). Since all senses involve touch (receiving something external to us), someone sensible is someone sensitive—one who has "the touch." Conversely, bad taste and bad touch indicate a lack of sensibility. The distinction between the two is crucial—touch without sensibility, unilateral rather than receptive, is a perversion of touch.

Aristotelian considerations on touch are complemented by Husserl's analysis of the primacy of touch in chapter three of *Ideas II*. Husserl managed to challenge the primacy of sight over touch and unveil the centrality of touch

as constituting us as both active and passive agents (drawing on the example of touching one's own body). However, his carnal phenomenology lacked carnal hermeneutics. Kearney proposes to fill this gap by analyzing flesh as a site of the most primordial experience of otherness—a way paved by Ricoeur in "Study Ten" of *Oneself as Another*. For Ricoeur, the experience of my flesh is the utmost guarantor of my experience. For this reason, touch gives us the greatest certainty that something exists as unquestionably as myself. It discloses the otherness of another to me.

Moreover, flesh also discloses my otherness to me—and allows me to see myself as a body among other bodies (as "another" in the eyes of the other). In this sense, "it is through the body that I realize that when I say, 'she thinks' I mean 'she says in her heart: I think'" (Kearney 2020b, 117). From this perspective, touch becomes the most crucial guarantor of intersubjectivity. Kearney's considerations on carnality and intersubjectivity are somewhat in line with Martha Nussbaum's reflections on imagination, particularly as developed in her more recent works in the context of embodied experiences of play (see Nussbaum 2016 and Winnicott 1991). In her writings on literature, education, and political theory, Nussbaum sustains that narrative imagination is vital to our capacity to acknowledge the unique subjectivity of another human being. In her later scholarship, she acknowledges the limits of narrative imagination in disclosing the otherness of another to me—and argues for the importance of supplementing such imagination with embodied experiences of otherness. However, in her account, she does not address the limits of intersubjective understanding. While touch is the most fundamental guarantor of intersubjectivity, Kearney's stress on the Aristotelian "gap" is a reminder that flesh is a medium between me and other that does not allow for fusion. By maintaining difference, flesh keeps open the task of transit between self and other, the task of interpretation. It discloses to me that "she thinks and feels in a way that I can never think or feel" (Kearney 2020b, 117). What is brought to the fore in Kearney's considerations on embodied imagination (touch) and narrative imagination, is that they do not prompt the fusion of subjects. In both, there is a crucial gap that "makes all the difference," insofar as the gap prevents the synthesis between consciousnesses and bodies, and thus preserves the basic individuality and uniqueness of subjects. "In touch,

we are both touching and touched at the same time, but we do not for all that collapse into sameness. Difference is preserved." (Kearney 2020b, 102.) Flesh is, therefore, a medium, which allows for transfer, but prevents fusion. This central characteristic of flesh seems worth stressing in the context of the evolving ethics of vulnerability, which at times risks overlooking the fundamental necessity of keeping open the task of interpretation between self and other. Kearney's exceptional sensitivity to the potentialities and limits of flesh allows us to appreciate the need for a critical carnal hermeneutics.

Thinking with Kearney about the centrality of carnality for the human condition encourages further reflection on its role in our increasingly virtual and technological world. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the progressive digitalization was making us more alienated from the flesh in almost all dimensions of human life: in dating, politics (war), medicine, to give just a few examples. The digital world, in which we are separated from one another by our screens, allows us to have contact without "tact." It enables a unilateral, excarnate communication, whereby we can see others without being seen, heard, or scented—that is, without being exposed in our basic vulnerability. While this unilateral experience might give us a temporary sense of comfort, or even power, it cannot substitute the incarnate contact with another human being, in which we uncover and give a part of ourselves. Already Heidegger warned that "abolition of all distances brings no nearness," and indeed, today, many studies confirm that the increasing online interconnectedness does not prevent loneliness, but can increase it (Heidegger 1971, 165). Our human mode of being and communicating *is* incarnate. The alarming rates of depression and anxiety among social media users confirm that alienation from touch causes great suffering. The pandemic has dramatically accelerated this growing alienation. Real-life encounters become limited to the necessary minimum, and many of us need to inhabit the virtual world to a greater extent than we could ever have predicted. In many cases, social distancing and self-isolation have become a mark of responsibility.

This presents us with new challenges related to corporeality. Kearney's reflections on touch invite us to ask: can we avoid excarnation in the new, post-pandemic reality? Or perhaps, paradoxically, the pandemic has made us more aware of the importance of touch? While the book was published before

the pandemic and did not directly tackle the challenges that arose with it, it is a remarkably resounding reminder of the importance of the return to the body and into the tactile world. Kearney accentuates: "Full humanity requires the ability to sense and to be sensed in turn: the power to 'feel what wretches feel' (Shakespeare), or what artists, cooks, musicians, and lovers feel. We need to find our way in a tactile world again. We need to return from head to foot, from brain to fingertip, from iCloud to earth… So that soul becomes flesh, where it belongs." (Kearney 2020i, 23.)

How can we find a way back into the tactile world and our bodies? Kearney's carnal hermeneutics offers a fruitful perspective to ponder this question. Rethinking the theme of healing, Kearney sees in the "twin therapy" of storytelling and touch the possibility of responding to today's crisis of carnality. His insights into the topic of trauma, substantiated with an original and emphatic analysis of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Homer's *Odyssey*, lead us to appreciate the significance of the twin therapy for "working through" at the symbolic level what remains unattainable or intimidating at the level of lived experience.

Kearney draws a distinction between two types of healing: the heroic-Hippocratic method, which only works when our interventions can manage pain and disease, and Chiron and Asclepios's healing through touch and song, through being with or near to the pain that cannot be cured, but can be healed. While the former is crucial and has come to define western medicine, it is the healing potential of compassionate being near the incurable pain that calls for our attention. The therapeutic role of narrative *catharsis* stems from myths' and stories' ability to express repressed feelings and events that could not be appropriately processed and registered. The cathartic character of storytelling is possible due to the "gap" that offers a broader perspective to view one's life. However, it is also dependent on the empathy, tact, and touch of the receiver of the story. Healing happens through the "subtle interplay of word and touch, narrativity and tactility, effect and affect" (Kearney 2020o, 134).

Having opened this exciting terrain, Kearney invites us to occupy it by discussing the relation between narrative catharsis and touch. While he stresses that the two are inseparable, the readers might still feel that the narrative is given more attention. However, from the therapeutic perspective,

it might be worth considering the role of embodied imagination developed through performing arts. Donald Winnicott's psychological research into the importance of play, developed by Nussbaum in the context of vulnerability, seems particularly helpful in disclosing the importance of performative arts for embodied therapy. When we are infants, play is fundamental to our identity formation. We first learn to experience otherness and vulnerability in a safe environment by playing. This way, they become a source of wonder rather than anxiety, and thus can be embraced rather than rejected. Art is a form of adult play. By engaging with art, adults sustain and develop their capacity for play after they have abandoned the realm of children's games. It allows us to experience and explore our shared vulnerability and embodiment in the imaginative space of "play." Performative arts, such as music or dance, seem crucial from the perspective of carnality and its ethical significance. Music is an art form that represents striving: desire, joy, effort, pain, and more. Unlike the arts based on images, which represent striving indirectly, music does so directly, through rhythm, accent, and dynamics (see Nussbaum 2001). Those forms of temporality and bodily movement have, in turn, a direct effect on the body of a listener, allowing him or her to explore the passions and the interplay between striving and constraint in the space of play. This incarnate aesthetic of music can also be a basis for solidarity. Singing with others, which includes great vulnerability to the extent that it requires blending one's breath (and, in this way, one's body) with someone else's, connects the singers in a truly incarnate encounter.

Similarly, dance constitutes an experience of shared vulnerability that invites the participants to transcend their individuality, and unite with other dancers through embodied exposure to others and the need to react to their movements and synchronize with them. Expanding access to artistic and other embodied activities could be an essential element in the therapy of carnality. Forms of artistic "play" that engage the body seem critical in restoring the "tact" in our contact. As such, they could be further explored in the context of Kearney's therapeutic approach. Other experiences of touch—such as direct contact with nature and animals or other forms of embodied practice—could also be highly therapeutic. This is not to say that they can substitute the narrative imagination. They should work in tandem. Dialoguing with Kearney

on the notion of "twin therapy" of storytelling and touch inspires us to be open to new ways of returning to ourselves and our bodies.

The imagination of God

Creative imagination is central to Kearney's thinking about God. His idea of anatheism entails a "returning to God after God" (Kearney 2020e, 161). It emerges from a crucial moment of a-theism—doubt—and constantly wrestles with it. The moment of "a-" is indispensable, because it strips us from cheap, comforting illusions and conditions the possibility of "opening oneself, once again, to the original and enduring promise of a sacred stranger […]" (Kearney 2020f, 159). Through his unique study, Kearney allows us to appreciate the indispensability of the dialectic between faith and the loss of faith, between theism and a-theism. Far from being mutually exclusive, a-theism thus becomes a crucial element of theism! Doubt becomes a precondition of faith. This negative capability of doubt, which, like *epoche* includes a suspension of one's received beliefs, becomes central to genuine faith.

Nonetheless, Kearney is not proposing a negative theology but an onto-eschatology, situated "between the poles of negative theology and onto-theology" (Kearney 2020f, 158). From this perspective, God is, above all, a possibility. His existence is neither certain nor unimaginable. It is to be found in "a place where stories, songs, parables, and prophecies resound as human imaginations try to say the unsayable and think the unthinkable" (Kearney 2020f, 158). Thus, we participate in the mystery of divine existence: it is the task of our imagination to think God as possible or impossible. This unveils an idea of a vulnerable God, a God that is dependent on us to exist (in the words of Etty Hillesum). We can imagine the divine only from the place of our vulnerability. Kearney strikingly suggests that by recognizing our vulnerability, we become "empowered to respond to God's own primordial powerlessness and to make the potential Word flesh" (Kearney 2020f, 151). The idea of such a God excludes predestination—and, thus, it also unveils our radical responsibility for the world. Since we are free to act in it, we are responsible for what we make of it. This fascinating proposal could be perhaps deepened by feminist theology, in order to further explore new perspectives of thinking about such a "God-who-may-be."

The relationship between art and spirituality becomes central for Kearney's further meditation on anatheism. The "making" of the possible god, *theopoiesis*, happens above all through art. A divine mind is a mind that makes, a poietic mind (here, Kearney evokes the notion of "Christ as the Lord of Dance and Supreme Artist"). By creating, we participate in the divine power to the extent that "God co-depends on us so that the promissory word of Genesis may be realized in embodied figures of time and space, image and flesh, art and action" (Kearney 2020j, 200). Through his in-depth analysis of three examples of theopoetic art: Andrei Rublev's *Trinity*, Antonello da Messina's *Annunziata*, and Sheila Gallagher's *Pneuma Hostis*, Kearney illustrates how creations of artistic imagination (*poiesis*) often have greater potential to express the complexity of meaning than *theoria* (the conceptual systems of metaphysics and theology). Images are more potent than abstractions, because they are more concrete and related to our embodied experience. Works of art are "the first bridge between word and flesh" (Kearney 2020j, 213). For this reason, we need art to recover "God after God." However, it is not only high art, but everyday cultural practices that can disclose the sacred in the secular.

To see the sacred in the secular, we need to return to the natural world of simple embodied life, of *sensus communis*, where we may confront one another face-to-face again. Such a return requires four reductions: the transcendental reduction of Husserl, the ontological reduction of Heidegger, the donological reduction of Marion, and finally—the eschatological (or microeschatological) reduction of Kearney. The latter entails a reconciliation of ethics with aesthetics, poetics with philosophy, and the sacred with the everyday. Kearney is convinced that the four reductions are necessary, because we need to break away from the everyday, from the lived experience, to learn to appreciate its meaning. Here is where the central place of philosophy is disclosed: drawing on Nussbaum's assertion that philosophy lets us "see things that have gone unnoticed in our daily lives," Kearney adds that it "gives us special pause to review things at a more considered remove than is afforded by our usual nights of the soul or exposures to estrangement" (Kearney 2020d, 197). The theory is inseparable from experience and enables us to experience more fully. We are led to grasp that we need to break away from the everyday to be able to return to the everyday. Those considerations

seem crucial in light of our growing passion for images at the expense of writing and abstract thinking. Separating images and art from theory limits our capacity to interpret the image. Our loss of the capacity to theorize changes not only the way we communicate (thus a suggestion that we are currently heading back to pictography), but also the very way our societies operate (see Dukaj 2019). Far from exalting philosophy, we are reminded of its inseparability from and its important place in the everyday.

Imagining the other

The theory is also crucial in our relationship with the other, with the *persona*. Kearney's phenomenology of the *persona* points to the significance of vulnerability in his eschatology. He considers *persona* as the eschatological aura of "possibility" that each person embodies and that "eludes but informs a person's actual presence here and now" (Kearney 2020p, 171). It is each person's condition of possibility, openness, and unpredictability. *Persona* entails that we can never "grasp" the other. By trying to do so, we disregard and objectify them. And yet, we seem to do just that on an everyday basis. Often, incapable of accepting our fundamental powerlessness to control the other, we project onto them phantasies of omnipotence. Kearney, similarly to Nussbaum, points to the incapability of accepting our vulnerability as a source of such phantasies. Like Martha Nussbaum and Gregory Vlastos, he notices the tendency to overlook the fundamental independence of the other—which reduces the other's unique singularity to a personification of an idea—in Plato's ideas of Eros and Republic. Even Husserl seems to fall short of genuinely appreciating this fundamental independence to the extent that he attempts to ground interpersonal relations in "an imaginative projection of one ego onto another" (Kearney 2020p, 175). However, the other always transcends my attempts to fully understand him/her or turn him/her into an alter ego. I can only grasp his/her trace (Lévinas's "*la trace d'autrui*"; see Lévinas 1974). Such an understanding mirrors Arendt's considerations on the "who" that constantly eludes us. Nonetheless, it is astonishing how often this fundamental independence of another is diminished. Kearney's phenomenology of the *persona* resonates powerfully against reductionist or deterministic accounts of

otherness. He prompts us to understand that acknowledging the *persona* is a difficult task, of which we should constantly be reminding ourselves.

It is mainly through imagination that this task can be achieved. We are led to appreciate the peace-making potential of the imagination and the relevance of the hermeneutics of imagination for practical peace initiatives. Central for such hermeneutics is the exploration of the paradigm of hospitality between affirmation and suspicion. Reflecting on the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Kearney follows Kant's analysis of the sublime terror (in which we experience freedom from nature), and suggests that watching the montages of terror gives us the possibility to face nature from a distance courageously. Such sublime experience of imagination is only possible, when we confront terror from an aesthetic distance, performing a particular negation in its face. We are drawn to imaginary monsters, because they offer the possibility to re-experience horror in the unreal world. In this context, works of art or philosophy offer more insightful ways to deal with terror than the media. They provide us with a greater "gap" from the events due to their style, language, and scope.

However, the sublime does not entail empathy. By re-experiencing horror in art or philosophy, we can continue to demonize the other. Kearney's hermeneutics of affirmation presents us with an ongoing task to imagine ourselves as others and empathize with them: "It is hard to be cruel once you permit yourself to enter the mind of your victim. Imagining what it is like to be someone other than oneself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality." (Kearney 2020l, 237). As Kearney leads us to understand, cruelty is, above all, a failure of imagination. Without negating imagination's violent potential (whereby we project our fears or anger onto another), empathic imagination can lead to transitions in the understanding of another. The Guestbook Project, a practical peace initiative founded by Kearney in 2009 that allows participants to confront their stories with those of their enemies or adversaries, is an impressive example of applied hermeneutics' role in transforming hostility into hospitality (see guestbookproject.org).

While embracing the need for openness and hospitality to the other, Kearney is careful not to follow Derrida's and Levinas's radicality on the matter. Contrary to Levinas's tendency to annihilate selfhood for the sake of the other,

Kearney stresses the centrality of narrative identity for his critical ethics of hospitality. Selfhood is a prerequisite of alterity. Complete fusion between subjects would erase the possibility of distinguishing between host and guest, and consequently, there would be no one home to welcome the newcomer in the first place. In the critical hermeneutic approach, on the other hand, "the other is neither too near nor too far to escape my attention" (Kearney 2020a, 266). Hospitality also entails the need to discern (legally as well as ethically) between guests and enemies (*hostis*). Such distinctions are to be found in what Kearney calls a diacritical hermeneutics of action—which includes critically informed judgments. Discernment is crucial for ethical relations, because "we need to compare, contrast, and adjudicate between different kinds of other if we are to properly care for others and for their good" (Kearney 2020a, 266). While we may argue that critical judgment is never the final ingredient of an ethical relation, it is important to stress its role in the face of some ethical tendencies that seem to negate its significance. Kearney's emphasis on the need to balance between affirmation and suspicion is an important reminder that *phronesis* requires both. What allows us to operate between them is poetry—due to its capacity to combine the powers of linguistic and carnal hermeneutics.

Imagining a new Europe

The question of hospitality leads Kearney onto a more political ground, as he reflects on the possibility of imagining an alternative for the paradigm of national sovereignty. After examining the development of the concepts of nationalism and sovereignty until their merging in the French constitution of 1791, he concludes that today we need post-nationalist thinking, both in the context of Britain and the European Union. However, it is unreasonable to dismiss all kinds of nationalism—which would, indeed, be a repetition of the errors of reductionist rationalism or totalitarian imperialism. In some forms, nationalism can be a legitimate expression of an acceptable need for identification (unlike regressive nationalism). Kearney not only differentiates between various kinds of nationalism—insurgent, ethnic, civic, exclusive—, but also argues that we cannot do without the concept of nations completely. We should not try to revoke the desire for regional-national identity—which

could paradoxically result in a revival of extremist nationalism—, but search for more creative forms for its expression. What Kearney sees as necessary is a "regional model of cultural and political democracy within an overall federal framework" (Kearney 2020n, 289). In what seems to be an attempt to reconcile cosmopolitanism in the Kantian spirit with the Greek ideal of the polis, he proposes the model of a "Europe of regions"—a federal association (at transnational level) and regional self-government (at subnational level). Kearney argues that such federalist regionalism would find support in many philosophies of contemporary European politics (liberal democratic, social-democratic, Christian democratic), and answer the current legitimate need for multiple layers of identification and the disclosure of various complex identities. While the details of this idea may find supporters as well as critics, it is yet another example of Kearney's moderation and care not to succumb to sectarian thinking. His capacity to enter into imaginative dialogue between various viewpoints makes his voice reverberate strongly today, in the turbulent age of political polarization and conflicts. The extensive and personal interview with Kearney that concludes the volume elucidates and concretizes many of the previously made points, and invites us to continue the dialogue on imagination's role in philosophy and our lives.

Far from being a purely theoretical notion, in Kearney's work, imagination becomes a practical response to the realities of our times. Considering the challenges brought to the forefront during the COVID-19 pandemic, and which arise in the new, post-pandemic reality, Kearney's project of overthrowing the prolonged undervaluation of imagination in philosophy and ethics appears particularly urgent. While many of the questions tackled by Kearney remain open and could be further developed by contributions from different fields, the main question is whether we are ready to embrace imagination and risk following its path. As Littlejohn, the editor of the book, asks: "Can we dare to reimagine that our world might be refigured, that there remain for us new possibilities yet untapped? Can you and I imagine now?" (Littlejohn 2020, xxii.)

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