

Narrative and recognition in the flesh: An interview with Richard Kearney

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Abstract

In this interview, conducted by Gonçalo Marcelo, Richard Kearney recaps his intellectual trajectory, commenting on his early works on imagination and his own narrative style of doing philosophy in order then to make explicit the deep connection between the more recent developments of *Carnal Hermeneutics*, *Reimagining the Sacred* and the work done with others in the context of the Guestbook Project. Drawing on some lesser-known aspects of his work, he emphasizes the carnal dimension of recognition and discusses the pitfalls of the Age of Excarnation. Finally, and as part of his ongoing role as a public intellectual, he also comments on Europe's social and political situation and the dangers it faces (exacerbated secularization, the threat of terrorism, Brexit) arguing for a pedagogy of narrative exchange as a means to foster hospitality and inclusion.

Keywords

carnal hermeneutics, the Guestbook Project, Richard Kearney, narrative, recognition

Richard Kearney's recent work has coalesced around three main areas of intervention. The first two are exemplified by his latest books, *Carnal Hermeneutics*,¹ edited with Brian Treanor, and *Reimagining the Sacred*,² a collection of Kearney's conversations on God with leading contemporary thinkers such as Charles Taylor, Julia Kristeva, Gianni Vattimo, Simon Critchley and Jean-Luc Marion, among others. The third area of intervention, taken up in his active role as a public intellectual, consists of his hermeneutic wager of exchanging stories as a means to intervene in conflicted and divided communities, fostering a transition from hostility to hospitality through an imaginative and narrative procedure.

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While one could argue that some of these developments are fairly recent (for instance, the heavy insistence on the ‘carnal’ aspect of hermeneutics) it cannot be denied how, in a way, they all stem from earlier developments. Thus *Reimagining the Sacred* not only builds on his early work on imagination (*The Wake of Imagination*³); it also serves as a dialogical exchange with many of the prominent voices that, one way or another, are interested in his intriguing atheistic proposal, presented in *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*,⁴ a volume that itself further extends some of the intuitions already present in his ‘Philosophy at the Limit’ trilogy – *The God Who May Be*,⁵ *On Stories*,⁶ *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*.⁷

However, what is sometimes not sufficiently grasped is the way in which all these different topics and areas of intervention are themselves part of a single (albeit complex and far-reaching) project. In the opening essay of the book *Carnal Hermeneutics*, titled the ‘Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics’, Kearney states that ‘Life is hermeneutic through and through. It goes all the way up and all the way down. From head to foot and back again.’⁸ And while the wager of this book is to contend that hermeneutics begins in the flesh and that evaluation is an integral part of our carnal orientation, for Kearney the far-reaching power of hermeneutics goes even further. Going ‘all the way down’ means that sensation and interpretation are thus deeply interwoven, to a level that we did not suspect before, and that is perhaps deeper than any properly conscious activity or linguistic structuration. But the inverse movement of going ‘all the way up’ also means creatively recovering the possibility of ‘the God that may be’, a possibility, so to speak, reborn from the ashes of the metaphysical God and that somehow tries to go beyond the atheist secularist version of what Charles Taylor calls the ‘immanent frame’.⁹ Ultimately, not only going all the way up and down in an hyperbolic vertical movement but also engaging in a complementary, horizontal movement of reciprocal exchange aiming towards the other – the hermeneutic process of narrative healing, such as can be found at work in the examples of stories retold and invented in the context of the Guestbook Project – is also a form of social change.

As such, it becomes apparent that these three domains of Richard Kearney’s work are not only deeply intertwined but can hardly be understood separately. Reading the flesh, interpreting the divine and re-engaging with history so as to re-envision a common future are so many wagers whose outcomes are never fully guaranteed but that become critical tasks that call for perpetual creative renewal. In this interview, Kearney reveals some fundamental aspects of these multifaceted areas of intervention, drawing our attention to some lesser-known aspects of what is at stake in this theoretical and practical endeavor, such as: the carnal aspect of recognition, the political and social stakes of a new ethos for Europe, drawing on the idea of the acknowledgment of wounds but also on the healing power of inclusive exchange of narratives, the risks and challenges of the Age of Excarnation, and the inclusive alternatives to the overemphasized secularization of the public sphere.

Gonçalo Marcelo
(Columbia University in New York City, November 2016)

I On stories and imagination: Recapping an intellectual trajectory

[Gonçalo Marcelo] *Carnal Hermeneutics*, the book you recently edited with Brian Treanor, presents us with a very ambitious project, which, if successfully undertaken, could lead to a radically different understanding of the relations between meaning, interpretation and the materiality of our bodies. What I would want you to do now is to look back at your already long and prolific career and tell me if you feel that there is a certain continuity or discontinuity between the topics you chose to emphasize. In your first books like *Poétique du possible*¹⁰ you explored the notions of possibility, and later conducted investigations in modern and postmodern imagination. And yet it was only recently that you came to very heavily insist on the carnal aspect of all of this, drawing from the phenomenologies of the body in Sartre, Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty, but also aiming at going beyond them. Would you say that there has been a shift in your focus, or not at all?

[Richard Kearney] I would say that the carnal emphasis was actually there from the beginning though it may not have been entirely explicit in, say, *Poétique du possible* and the works on imagination. But it was implicit because imagination as I understand it – but also as Aristotle and even Kant understood it (therefore both the classical and the modern interpretation of imagination) – is an indispensable bridge between the sensible (the body) and the intelligible (the mind). Thus, in effect, imagination is the refusal of the dualism of body and mind. And Aristotle acknowledged this already in the *Poetics*¹¹ when he said that *catharsis* is practical intelligence – what Ricoeur calls phronetic understanding. There is a *dianoia* (a thought) involved in the poetic imaginative process, the narrative process, and there is affect: i.e. *catharsis* by purging pity and fear. Narrative – *mythos-mimesis* (emplotted imitation of suffering in action) is already a way of combining affect, *pathos* (pity and fear), and *phobos* in a form of acknowledgment. So narrative acknowledgment combines knowledge (which the chorus of a tragedy teaches) with a deep affective response of pity and fear. Now, Aristotle thematizes this when he distinguishes two kinds of imagination: *phantasia logistike* (intellectual) and *phantasia aesthetica* (affective). The animal has affective imagination. But only humans have both. Now, coming to Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: when he affirms that imagination is ‘a hidden art in the depths of the human soul’,¹² he is stating that while we in the West have, since Plato, divided the world into the intelligible and the sensible, imagination is actually that productive schematizing force that precedes the division. It synthesizes by means of an unconscious activity ‘of which we are seldom even conscious’ [*Unbewusstsein*].¹³ It is the ‘common root’ of the intelligible and the sensible and operates at both levels *before* we ever make the distinction between the analytic and the aesthetic. So I would say that my earlier fascination with imagination was already an ambidextrous procedure of working through intellectual ideas while always recognizing its emotive, affective power. There is also a personal aspect to this. As I was writing philosophy I was also writing novels, and novels are usually meant to strike you, move you, affect you. Fictional narratives don’t just give you a theory, they touch you. That is why you keep reading them. So I see fictional understanding as a necessary complement to what we might call logical understanding. I would say *acknowledgment* is the realm of narrative imagination. It is a combination of knowledge and affect.

When reading your books and the topics you deal with we sometimes get the feeling that your intellectual investigations are also some sort of personal journey, and that translates into both the form and the content of what you write. Do you feel that there is this journey of narrative imagination, stemming from your own vital preoccupations, and that in some way it informs your practice of philosophy?

My students tell me that when I teach I tell stories. Thinking about it, I have always done that and partly because I am, so to speak, a failed actor. Joyce wanted to be a singer, an opera singer, and he failed so he became a novelist. I wanted to be an actor and join the Abbey Theater in Dublin because I did a lot of theater as a student. At the time, the director of the Abbey told me, *Look you can do theater any time. Go and get your degree first in philosophy and then come back.* I did philosophy and I never went back. But in a way perhaps I did go back by continuing to teach because teaching is often another form of theater. And it is true that I always try to teach through stories. I am a continental philosopher, but one of the things I like about analytic philosophy is that they give examples. Now, to be sure, some of these are very boring examples. But this is not always the case. Wittgenstein gave some excellent examples, and the same goes for Austin in his speech act theory. I like to think that philosophy should deal with theory but should also tell stories.

So there is this performative aspect of stories, this link between stories and good communication and also between stories and the way a certain theory can affect us. Could you elaborate on this further?

Let us begin with Aristotle. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*¹⁴ he states that if you want to teach students or anybody about the virtues you do not give propositional definitions about attributes and properties, constancy is x, y or z, fidelity is a, b or c. You tell a story. If you want to teach or to communicate to somebody what is courage just tell the story of Achilles; what is constancy, loyalty, fidelity, tell the story of Penelope; what is ruse and intelligence tell the story of Odysseus; what is wisdom, tell the story of Tiresias. As such, although Aristotle's style was very dry, what he was stating from the beginning was the following: true knowledge, as pedagogical knowledge, is *phronesis*. It is a practical, lived wisdom that works through testimonies and examples. And Plato, his teacher – though he railed against imagination and wanted to expel the artists from his ideal Republic¹⁵ – was entangled in a complete performative contradiction. Why? Because he was communicating his claim within a narrative dramatic dialogue between Socrates and his interlocutors. It was his imagination staging fictional exchanges. And the greatness of Plato was that he engaged in fictional drama at the same time as he communicated philosophical ideas. To me, that is a lesson that we learn in different ways with Aristotle and Plato. And I would say that one of the greatest shortcomings of traditional metaphysics was it forgot those noble lessons of 'narrative understanding' – as Ricoeur calls it¹⁶ – coming from Aristotle's *Poetics* and Plato's fictional dialogues. And then, looking at the history of philosophy, we get the big abstract systems, like Thomas's *Summa Theologica*,¹⁷ Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and Spinoza's *Ethics*.¹⁸ Others, like Augustine, are more complex. He wrote both the *Confessions*,¹⁹ which is narrative

philosophy, and then *City of God*,²⁰ which is already going into abstract speculative thought. Personally, I think that one of the great challenges in contemporary philosophy is bringing the two together again. Bringing speculative analytical philosophy back into communication with narrative testimonial philosophy, with philosophy as therapy. I believe Pascal, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were going in this direction, as were Camus, Sartre and the 20th-century existentialists. Even Derrida, in some of his later work like *Circumfession*.²¹ Or Wittgenstein with his insistence on philosophizing as healing. The best aim in philosophy, he said, is to ‘show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle’²² and cure our conceptual confusions and pathologies.

II Carnal recognition

This is a good description of the functions of narrative. But you also acknowledge that there is something beyond (or maybe below) narrative and language. In *Carnal Hermeneutics* you tell us that that hermeneutics has to go all the way down. And so one way of reading it would be to take it as telling us that there are ways of expression which are pre-linguistic or non-linguistic (I am thinking of the role you attribute to Odysseus’ dog Argos,²³ who is the only one possessing the ‘hermeneutic flair’ to recognize his master). You seem to admit certain limits to narrative. For instance, we can argue that in order to understand the relationships of recognition which structure our practical lives, we have to take into account their corporeal dimension. But if so, what are the theoretical and practical implications of this for a different kind of hermeneutics? Or, if we are to honor Odysseus’ dog, an ‘argoneutics’?

Let me pick up on your example and go back to Argos. I think it is very important that when Odysseus returns to Ithaca recognition comes initially not from human beings but from animals. Ultimately, the first person to recognize him is actually not a person but his dog, Argos. And this is accompanied by a number of scenes that are all examples of what I would call carnal hermeneutics. For instance, Eurycleia, his nurse, tells the story of his wounding but eventually reaches a limit, stops, and then goes on to touch his wound. So there is a limit to what narrative can do; but narrative is a response to the wound that she recognizes in Odysseus from his childhood. She is his nurse and she has touched him, bathed him, been close to him carnally in a way no one else has. So the narrative story is actually accompanied by a return to the body. The implication of this is, I would say, unraveling it diacritically, that you need *both*. This is not an either-or situation. You need narrativity *and* carnality; and I would say that the touch itself is already proto-linguistic, sensing is already sensibility. A kind of basic hermeneutic tact. As such I don’t see it as being anti-linguistic, extra-linguistic, or pre-linguistic unless we understand *pre* in the sense of *vor*, i.e. proto. We must realize that already in the touching of the scar there is a writing and a reading; the scar is itself the body experiencing pain and expressing itself through a writing on the body – as scar, trace, mark. Tactile and tactful savvy precedes and founds *savoir*. Eurycleia speaks *and* touches.

So you would say that there is a continuity between the two, that is, that language has to further elaborate something which is proto-conceived by the touch?

That is correct. Hence the importance of animals – dogs and swine – in Odysseus' homecoming story. When Odysseus finally meets his son Telemachus, the recognition scene takes place in a swineherd's hut. Swine were considered the lowest of the low and Odysseus is disguised as a beggar which suggests, once again, that hermeneutics goes all the way down. This episode also has parallels in narratives stemming from other traditions. In biblical Israel, where dogs and swine were also considered unclean, the Syrophoenician woman comes to Jesus and asks if he will cure her child.²⁴ There is a meal going on and when the disciples suggest she be sent away – she is a woman, a foreigner and unclean – she replies that 'even the dogs feed on the crumbs'. At that point Jesus recognizes the truth of the messianic stranger in the Phoenician woman, in the one who comes from outside the tribe, from the 'least of these' [*elachistos*]. He says 'It shall be done as you wish', and her child is cured. The meaning of this, as I read it, is that she identifies with the dogs by implying, *If you're giving to the dogs, give it me*. After this encounter, Jesus will go on to give the parable of Dives and Lazarus,²⁵ where Dives gives food to the dogs, the lowest of the low, but not to Lazarus, who was the forgotten stranger at the door. As you can see, Judeo-Christianity also has a version of a story in which not only animals but food plays an important role of healing and sharing. In both episodes – Homeric and biblical – we find healing coming from a mix of carnality (food, taste, touch) and narrative (epic poetry for Homer, parable for Jesus). We have Eurycleia's recognition through touch, accompanied by the narrative retrieval of Odysseus' forgotten childhood wound (Greek: *trauma*). We have recognition through taste in the earthly hut of Emmaus the swineherd, when they share food, father and son. And as we saw, recognition through scent in the case of Argos. Argos does not talk. But Odysseus talks to us and acknowledges, via Homer, that this was one of the saddest things he had ever experienced, i.e. that he could not go to his dying dog and touch him because if he did he would betray his own incognito disguise to his rivals and be slaughtered. So there is a limit to what he can say or do without being exposed. In this odyssey of the senses we find touch, taste, scent and, finally, sex. Because it is in returning to the nuptial scene – the sculpted bed where he consummated his first love for Penelope – that she finally recognizes him as Odysseus. In this climax of multiple recognition scenes, we have a carnal synesthesia of acknowledgment [*anagnorosis*]. A combination of taste, touch, scent and sight. But sight comes last and this is important in terms of the carnal senses because sight is the most theoretical of the senses as Plato and Aristotle said. Sight is the most distant, the most mediated of the senses, whereas we already have intimate mediation, *metaxu* (going on at the level of touch), which was the great insight of Aristotle in book 2 of *De Anima*.²⁶ Namely, to see that there was already interpretation-mediation operating at the level of sensibility, in touch and taste and scent before you get to the higher senses of sight and hearing. Aristotle claims that *flesh is a medium, not just an organ* and that *touch knows differences!* Sensation is *already* interpretation. The skin is hermeneutic from the word *go*. From birth to death. But don't get me wrong. It is not that carnal hermeneutics wishes to underestimate

sight and hearing. Of course not. It is just a question of restoring the balance between the senses, showing how taste, touch and smell are equiprimordial with sight and sound. It is important to undo the 'optocentric' prejudice of 2,500 years of western metaphysics, since Plato privileged seeing and vision as the royal road to speculative *theoria*.

III Carnality and excarnation

It seems you actually have a continuist approach because in a way everything is interpretation at different levels, within the body, in language, and there is always a surplus of meaning to be interpreted, in what could perhaps be a never-ending process. And you already mentioned the complementarity between the notions of imagination, embodiment, and so forth. So let me just problematize it a little by thinking about the notion of identity with which you are of course very well acquainted. One of the most important topics in contemporary philosophy is the notion of personal identity and you probably subscribe to the Ricoeurian notion of identity as ipseity; so what I would like to ask you is about the troubling cases of personal and bodily identity in the relation between the body and imagination. Let us assume that our body is finite whereas our imagination is infinite, which is perhaps a standpoint reminiscent of Ricoeur's early anthropology in a book like *Fallible Man*.²⁷ This means that people can feel many things (for instance, that they were born in the wrong body) and imagine many other things, including that their bodies are completely different from what they actually are or that they have multiple bodies. How do you assess these phenomena against the background of the rapport between the body and imagination? Do they show that there is a certain degree of positive plasticity in the formation of our own bodily identities or, on the contrary, that the very notion of bodily identity is threatened and could eventually lose its conceptual relevance?

Well, I'll come back to my first point about imagination actually being the bridge, the chiasmus between body and mind. The finite and the infinite . . . I do not see them as alternatives, but as chiasmic, as criss-crossing. The infinite is in the finite, through the finite; it is transcendence in and through immanence. That does not mean it is unidimensional or univocal; rather, it is two-dimensional, bifocal, but in a chiasmic way. Now, let me pick up on the puzzling cases. Ricoeur, I think, makes a very important point that you are well aware of in his chapter on 'The Self and Narrative Identity' in *Oneself as Another*.²⁸

The debate with Derek Parfit

Yes, in the debate with Parfit he basically talks about the possibility of having an identity that is purely imaginary. And virtual. In science fiction experiments. And Ricoeur, quoting Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities*,²⁹ says that if we reach a point where we divest ourselves of embodiment, and we become just minds or virtualized egos, pseudo-selves, then we are no longer humans. We are no longer *humus*. We are no longer from the earth that returns to the earth. I remember having a conversation with Marvin Minsky, who was one of the founders of Artificial Intelligence at MIT, and saying to him *What would you think about inventing a cyber human clone that would*

be purely virtual, completely disembodied, with no flesh?, is this something you would like? And his reply was *Sure, why would we want to hold on to suffering and death? I mean if flesh is just pathology and putrefaction ultimately, why wouldn't we want to be disincarnate, immortal?* Technology seems to allow it, at least in theory. And Daniel Dennett says something not unsimilar.³⁰ Why would you want *Angst* and dread? It is a fair point. But then you are no longer human. Because you don't have humus, you are not from the earth; and if you don't have humus, you don't have humor, you don't live in paradox and contradiction and complexity. Personally I would prefer to be human than to be inhumanly everlasting as a 'man without qualities'. Interestingly, Ricoeur claims that in his great novel Musil contemplates the nihilism at the heart of a decadent western civilization which is destroying itself through war and through a culture of self-visceration, self-obsession and solipsism. We lose our carnality, and as that happens in the novel, as the central protagonist becomes disembodied, forfeiting all qualities of a corporeal, terrestrial nature, the narrative itself collapses and becomes what Musil himself called an 'essay'. Because, in a way, it is the erosion of narrative time as an embodied, finite, mortal existence. I believe that all our myths, all our great cultural narratives, are ultimately attempts to answer the following question: Where do we come from and where do we end up? Lévi-Strauss says as much in *Structural Anthropology*,³¹ and Frank Kermode, in more literary vein, in *The Sense of an Ending*,³² so dear to Ricoeur. Temporality is what makes us human for better or for worse. If we lose our mortal bodies we lose temporality and if we lose temporality we lose human identity.

The mere fact that someone could conceive the possibility of being without a body, of being infinite in that sense and therefore losing his or her humanity could probably be interpreted as a sign of what you call our Age of Excarnation. Could you please elaborate more on this notion, and also explain how your use of a carnal hermeneutics is perhaps well suited, in your view, to tackle that Age of Excarnation you think we are living in?

I have borrowed this term, 'excarnation', from my mentor Charles Taylor, with whom I did graduate studies at McGill University. He mentions it in *A Secular Age*³³ and I think he is right, given our virtual communication culture where even sexuality is more and more virtualized, digitalized, 'media mediated', vicarious, by proxy. The whole embodied process of flirtation, seduction and communication, the rituals, the interpersonal approaches are so mediated by the WWW and social media that when there is 'contact' it is largely instantaneous, it is not part of a lived narrative. Allow me to give you an example. In my own university, and in universities throughout North America now, sexuality is increasingly a hook-up culture where you send messages such as *DTF* ('down to f...'), do you want to have sex? And the person replies yes or no without 'public display of affection' (PDA). The communication is impersonal, then you meet and have sex. That's it. One of the consequences of this tendency is that we risk forfeiting both narrative identity and hermeneutic carnality. And I think, paradoxically, that this brings its own kind of suffering though it is meant to obviate suffering. You control so finely in terms of what will happen, there is no rejection involved in the instantaneous messaging in terms of data... but does it really prevent pain or anxiety? And what is gained or lost? Walter Benjamin says in the *Storyteller*³⁴ that the end of the

story will be when lived 'experience' [*Erfahrung*] is replaced by data. Texting as sexting. Instagram as instaorgasm. Incarnation becomes excarnation. Ritual foreplay as quick porn. The cult of the 'depthless moment' of 'irreferance'³⁵ rather than existential ekstasis over time. Accumulated historical experience thus gives way to virtual instantaneity. We lose narrative identity, memory and culture in sexuality. The genuine carnal pleasures of cultivated fantasy, ceremony, affection, play are eroded. And if and when the actual contact of two bodies occurs it is in an 'immediate' moment produced or reproduced by hypermedia. Ironically, the Age of Excarnation is one where we seem to have contact with everything but in fact no longer have contact with anything in depth or detail. And certainly we are touched by less and less. Though seemingly immediately present to everything we remain increasingly alone. The screen is our world. The carnal becomes digital. I think these kinds of paradoxes need to be addressed and worked through. It is not that one should be anti-technology or anti-sexting and texting – of course not – it is just that something is going on that has real repercussions.

Would you extend your critique of the cult of excarnation to other aspects of our contemporary digital society?

Yes, I believe it runs right through our culture. Even in medicine, today, imaging replaces the diagnostics of hand on hand. There is a difference between people being treated as patients in a process involving a real 'bedside manner' (somebody listening to your story, touching your arm, attending to you) and simply being diagnosed by X-rays and imaging technology that can tell you exactly what is going on in your nerves, cells and tissues but is not actually attending to your narrative carnal identity. So I think in medicine there is also a crisis, with the 'quick fix' time crunch of insurance companies being part of the problem, akin to the instant messaging of texts. Sometimes you do not even see or shake hands with your clinician. It is more and more a fast track from computerized inscription to pharmaceutical prescription. They get you in, they get you out-and something is lost in the process. Insurance wastes no time. Take psychoanalysis in the true psychotherapeutic sense: insurance companies resist covering any kind of long 'working through'. They want quick cures to replace the complex labor of healing. As a result we have less and less actual human contact with our healers, who risk becoming increasingly out of touch. But this quick cure model is being challenged by some. In recent trauma studies we find therapists challenging this model. People like Cathy Carruth, Judith Harmon, Dori Laub and Françoise Davoine, to name but a few. They realize that trauma speaks to trauma. Somebody cannot really help another person go through their trauma, unless they acknowledge their own trauma, unless they are themselves 'wounded healers'. It is a question of reciprocal healing and very often does involve touch, you know, the shake of a hand, the hand on the shoulder, whatever . . . when someone breaks down crying in front of the therapist because of trauma, you do not just sit back like a *sujet supposé savoir*, and say: I resist counter-transference, I will not be moved by this. I am not going to intervene. In the Age of Excarnation even money is ceasing to be material and becoming more and more immaterialized, online banking and e-commerce, credit cards which soon will be implanted in our brains, Bitcoins and so on. This hyper-virtualization colludes with Wall Street 'Speculation' – the cult of credit,

credibility, credulity. We find it at all levels, economics, psychotherapy, medicine, even education. Take long-distance education, video-conferences (I do them all the time, I am not against them) but if you completely remove the presence of teachers to students in a live class, if you remove the incarnate voice and presence of living beings, then the Age of Excarnation can become an age of inhumanization. So I am all for technology, I just recommend a reintegration of flesh and word. A rehabilitation of hermeneutic tact through the recovery of our primary sensibilities of touch, taste and scent.

IV The Guestbook Project – from hostility to hospitality

What you just did was actually an excellent diagnostic of a contemporary social situation, or a social pathology that in a way you are addressing in the good tradition of critical theory. Let me now transition to a perhaps more political question, taking into account your interventions as a public intellectual. You have been directing the Guestbook Project for some years now. Your goal is to encourage the exchange of stories between members of war-torn, divided or otherwise conflicted communities, hoping to foster hospitality and reconciliation through a use of creative imagination. How do you assess, at this point in time, the goals and results of this international project?

The first thing I would say is that hospitality – whence the name Guestbook – comes from the idea of host and guest, which in most Indo-European languages were designated by the same term: in Greek, *Xenos*; in old Germanic, *Gast*; in Latin, *Hostis*. *Hostis* has the double sense of enemy and friend. Hospitality comes from the same root as hostility, which means that if hospitality exists it is because of a wager, a challenge, a difficult perhaps even ‘impossible’ task. It is not a *fait accompli*. Hospitality is like love. Who’s against hospitality? Who’s against love? But it means nothing unless you see it as difficult adventure and a struggle. And so that is part of the effort of Guestbook. It is to acknowledge that hospitality is always a wrestle with hostility. The handshake is the first gesture of civilization; it entails offering an open hand to an open hand rather than reaching for a sword. It is the moment in the *Iliad*,³⁶ when the two warriors, Glaucus and Diomedes, come together and instead of killing each other decide to throw down their weapons and make peace. What we encourage young people to do in Guestbook is to acknowledge their transgenerational traumas and see how they impact upon present conflicts. We work in places like Serbia, Jerusalem, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, where there have been historic struggles, and we encourage youths in those divided communities to begin by telling their stories of enmity, listening to each other as enemies in a mutual exchange of stories. Then they are encouraged, and this is the important thing, to weave together, from their exchanged stories, a new story. To transform enmity into empathy. So that the old stories that informed their history of violence and war, can give birth to alternative possible histories. In fact, in many languages the same word is used for both story and history – *histoire*, *Geschichte*, and so on. But this effort to keep peace would not work if one were to come along with a purely aspirational call for universal brotherhood and peace, without acknowledging the hidden traumas of division. You have to address the repressed wounds (Greek: *traumata*) and allow them to be spoken,

reclaimed and revoiced for the exchange to occur. So the two protagonists in each case candidly acknowledge each other as *hostes*, enemies, before they can become guests and hosts for each other in a reverse reciprocal process. This second crucial move towards a shared, co-created narrative involves a leap of imagination. A radical belief in the impossible. Without revisiting the transgenerational cycles of repeated acting out of compulsive repetition, of unworked wounds and wrongs, there cannot be a second movement towards a writing and rewriting of scars. This move from the impossible to the possible is the inaugural gesture of all civilizations.

Could you give some concrete examples of how this might actually work?

Yes, and I will try to connect them with what we were saying above about carnal hermeneutics. For instance, look at the biblical tradition, which several of our experiments work with – Jerusalem and Northern Ireland are cases in point; there is the old Abrahamic narrative³⁷ of three strangers coming out of nowhere, and Abraham deciding whether he is going to kill them or welcome them into his tent. They are strangers, *hostes*. He decides, with Sarah, to welcome them, to give them food. And in the sharing of food with the enemy the enemy-*hostis* becomes a guest-*hostis*, and the three strangers become one divinity. They are revealed as God. So, God happens, comes to be in the impossible event of hospitality that replaces hostility. And it is that leap that issues in the impossible future of the child, Isaac, becoming possible. Isaac, in Hebrew, means ‘laughter’. Why? Because Sarah knew it was impossible for her barren womb to conceive a child and so she laughed. In Christianity we have Mary also welcoming a potentially hostile stranger, Gabriel, in Nazareth and seeing the *hostis* as a possibility of love and birth.³⁸ That is another example of carnal hermeneutics. It is a double act. As she looks at the stranger she is also reinscribing herself in the tradition of other hosts and guests – Rachel’s meeting Jacob at the well,³⁹ Sarah’s meeting the strangers at Mamre, Samson’s mother’s meeting the terrifying angel⁴⁰ and so forth. Consider the depiction of Mary and the annunciation. In all the representations of religious art (Raphael, Botticelli, Fra Angelico) Mary is always depicted as scenting a lily. Like Argos, she is sensing and scenting the stranger at the same time as she is reading the book (seeking a hermeneutic ‘discernment of spirits’, so to speak, from the stories of her tradition). There is a complex hermeneutic process going on, of waging between hostility and hospitality. And in these various inaugural events of Judaism and Christianity – we could go into Buddhism or Hinduism or other religions too – we witness this impossible transition between hostility and hospitality. Now to return to the Guestbook Project: in the stories these young people are exchanging and inventing together, it is the second leap of imagination that makes the difference, that makes the impossible possible for a moment. For example, in the Northern Ireland story, titled ‘In Peace, Apart’,⁴¹ two girls, one from a Catholic and the other from a Protestant school, get together. They start by recalling the generations of hostility between both of their tribes, Nationalist and Unionist, going right back to the founding of the Walls of Derry 300 years ago. For Catholics that event means the expulsion of their civilization, language, religion and culture, but for the Protestant British loyalists it means the beginning of their civilization: William of Orange, the Protestant king, and the Bill of Rights. So, the two students tell the story

of hostility and of why their communities have been killing each other for hundreds of years and then they change uniforms. The Catholic girl wears the Protestant uniform and goes into the Protestant school and the Protestant girl wears the Catholic uniform and goes into the Catholic school . . . That kind of act of mutual exchange enabled them to experience their lives differently. It worked. The ‘In Peace, Apart’ video went viral. It had 50 thousand hits in one week and the *Guardian* newspaper did a big piece on it.⁴² We are working similarly with people in Mitrovica, in Jerusalem, in Ankara, in São Paulo, etc., and each time, people – Palestinians and Israelis, Serbs and Kosovars, Turks and Armenians, Greeks and Syrian refugees – retell some embattled, besieged narrative . . . and then open up to a new story. It is a wager of imagination. The idea being: if you can do it in imagination you can do it in reality. If you can imagine exchanging identities then you can imagine doing that in real life. And certainly in Northern Ireland the work done by poets and writers in exchanging stories with each other at the very height of the ‘Troubles’ in the 1970s and 1980s was fundamental in preparing for the Good Friday Belfast Agreement in Easter week, 1998. The agreement was signed by both the British and Irish parliaments and allowed citizens of Northern Ireland to identify, for the first time in 500 years, as ‘British or Irish or both’. The poets and storytellers did as much work as the politicians. That is an integral part of what Guestbook is about: you cannot have a political, constitutional, legal or economic solution unless you also have a poetic one. You need imagination as well as law, narrative as well as a constitution. Or, as some people would put it, faith in the impossible.

V A new ethos for Europe: Mutual exchange of recognized narratives

Let me come to my last question, by picking up that thread of the cycles of hostility and violence and the difficult or maybe even impossible task of hospitality, of moving from one situation to the other. One of your other concerns as a public intellectual has been the task of ‘thinking after terror’ as one of your essays put it.⁴³ Living in the USA you have witnessed first-hand the post-traumatic consequences of 9/11. Before that, you had of course contributed intellectually to reshaping our understanding not only of Ireland, but also, indirectly, of Europe. Well, it seems we are now, once again, going through difficult times in Europe. Not only has terror struck again at the very heart of Europe, with the attacks at Charlie Hebdo, the Bataclan nightclub, the Nice promenade and others; in addition, we are still feeling the consequences of the economic crisis and the risk of a possible unraveling of the EU amid growing populism and the threat of an ascent of the extreme right in France, Hungary and other places. Brexit is also an example of secessionist nationalism. It thus seems as if we are between the Scylla of so-called Islamic terrorism and the Charybdis of a revival of the extreme right. Amid all of this, what hope is there for the poetic envisioning of an inclusive, solidary Europe, able to fulfill the ideals of the founders of the European Union, and not give up on the hopes and dreams of its citizens?

Allow me to suggest, without any hubris or presumption, that perhaps we could follow the same thread and try to apply the Guestbook idea to Europe itself. Let me say,

following Ricoeur,⁴⁴ that a new ethos for Europe requires an exchange of narratives. And that means two things, two tasks. The first is that we need an exchange of narratives of the woundedness that we have suffered. We have carried the suffering of multiple European wars – religious, national, military – through centuries and decades and this transgenerational trauma is something we need to acknowledge. If we do not we just repeatedly act out aggression in all kinds of other ways. Many of us like to think we live in a cosmopolitan, civilized, *laïque* society but in fact we continue to live with all kinds of repressed and compulsive reflex actions. The wounds have not gone away.

Secondly we must remember the therapeutic power of stories, the narratives of healing. We should recall that again and again Europe has been through brutal violent conflicts going back to Troy, the sacking of Rome and Byzantium. Not to mention the Crusades. And still each time there was a new beginning. A handshake. Take, in recent memory, the handshake of Saddam and Begin in Jerusalem, of John Hume and Gerry Adams in Northern Ireland, of Willy Brandt and Havel in Prague. We would not have had peace without these gestures. And I do not mean just presidents and politicians. They are the ones you see, who get the Nobel prizes. But there are countless people on the ground too. Hand-to-hand peacemaking cannot occur, in my view, on its own, without narrative exchange. So just as we talked about Eurycleia touching the wound of Odysseus, we also need to tell the story of Odysseus' wounding and healing. Remember, he survives. He comes back to Penelope. So we need the stories of success as well as the stories of failure. We need the stories of breakthrough, in the handshake, as well as the stories of trauma and war. Now, take the contemporary situation, say in France – you mentioned Charlie Hebdo. I would say this. France has to acknowledge that if it is indeed a secular enlightened *république*, its culture of *laïcité* must not dissolve into a *langue de bois*, mere lip service to fraternity and equality for all. *Les droits de l'homme et du citoyen* proclaimed by the French Revolution acknowledged the universal (*l'homme*) and the particular (*citoyen*) in rhetoric – but it has not yet been translated into reality. This is very important. If you espouse a purely rhetorical universalism, you are saying that when people go to school they cannot bring their inherited wounds or identities with them. So you are closing off the possibility of owning and acknowledging such *differends* in an exchange of narratives – which can issue in genuine hermeneutic dialogue (inter-cultural, inter-ethnic, inter-religious). By forbidding this, you risk having Muslims going to Muslim schools, Catholics going to Catholic schools, Protestants going to Protestant schools, atheists going to atheist schools and so forth. This means an absence, a failure, of exchanged narratives. Ricoeur was correct, I think, when he spoke of the right of young Muslim girls to wear the veil when they went to republican state schools. And the same goes for the particular insignia of Jews, Christians or Sikhs, each with their specific symbols. In the UK and Ireland they can do that by the way, or in Canada, or in America. So why not France? Ricoeur's argument was, if they come to the public space with their differences, they will look at each other, sit beside each other and ideally share the stories of their different religions and cultures, which is not permitted in the *laïque* culture at the moment. To me, this is a problem. In the exchange of narratives, youth of different religious, ethnic and cultural identities would acknowledge that the person beside them is just as human as they are. If you exclude them from the beginning you are ensuring, alas, that the only people who are 'really French' are those who are *laïque* in the sense of not

carrying any cultural presuppositions with them. But everybody brings presuppositions, including the *laïque*. Let me clarify that *laïcité* is perfectly legitimate in my view, in its secularity. But secularism, as Charles Taylor⁴⁵ says, should be inclusive of the multiple voices that come to the table. If you say: the table is open but you can only come if you leave your shoes and your hat and your veil behind, then the conversation cannot even really begin. And Ricoeur's point was very practical too. If young kids come together wearing their different signs and symbols of identity, they can then decide afterwards if they want to continue wearing those symbols or not. They might like to exchange hats or decide they want to be a secular atheist or agnostic. At least they will have a choice. Otherwise you are allowing their parents to ultimately decide – and their parents are usually the ones who send young kids to schools with veils and hats in the first place. Permitting a space of open conversation – a genuinely creative ‘conflict of interpretations’ in Ricoeur's sense – is crucial.

Europe today needs a pedagogy of narrative exchange. That is the future of Europe at the level of heart, narrative, affect, *phronesis*. At another level of course you need constitutional and legal reform. You need what Habermas aptly calls ‘Constitutional Patriotism’.⁴⁶ I'm all for that: transnationalism as an overcoming of absolute national sovereignty, a kind of post-national constellation. In my book *Postnationalist Ireland*,⁴⁷ this is what I am talking about. A post-nationalist, post-unionist Ireland overcoming the neurosis of sovereignty. The idea of the nation as ‘one indivisible people’ is nonsense nowadays. It does not make sense. There is no pure, homogenous people in France or any other nation-state in Europe or elsewhere. There has to be recognition of a plurality of voices in our culture. This is more urgent than ever in the wake of Brexit, the triumph of Trump and the increasing rise of tribal extremism in our world.

There can be no reconciliation without recognition of difference.

Yes. Without recognition of genuine difference and the overcoming of divisive difference in open narrative exchange.

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