

Anatheistic excarnation

Richard Kearney talks to **Maggie Armstrong** about philosophy, the end of God, the US and depression

Professor Richard Kearney holds the Chair of Philosophy in Boston College (BC). Born in Cork in 1954 to a prominent medical family, he is one of Ireland's best-known academics internationally. A professor at 34, he has been Chair of Philosophy in UCED, a member of the Arts Council and the Higher Education Authority, and involved in drafting proposals for peace in Northern Ireland. He played an important role in setting up the first Irish Film Centre, presented three TV series for RTÉ and from 1977-1982 edited *The Crane Bag*, a journal of ideas. President Mary Robinson borrowed plenty of Kearney's editorial in her inauguration speech. The very sanguine, hyperproductive author of over 20 books of Continental philosophy, poetry and fiction spends his summers travelling the world with his French wife Anne and their daughters and, in his house in West Cork, mackerel-fishing. His most recent book is the elusively-titled *Anatheism* (2009).

What made you leave for America in 1999?

At the time I was over-extended and exhausted. I got so involved in semi-state and public things I needed to take time out and go on a bit of an intellectual retreat, to write my books again, to write my trilogy *The Philosophy of the Other*. I'm not sure I could have written that if I'd stayed in Dublin. I enjoyed the anonymity of Boston where nobody knew me and nobody asked me to do anything. I think it's good for anybody to leave their island sometime and go on what the mediaeval monks used to call the *circumnavigatzia*. There was the white *navigatzia* and there was the green. If it was white they never came back, and if it was green they hit land.

Does philosophy require isolation from public issues or should you try to straddle both worlds?

I do believe in the idea of the public intellectual, very much. In combining what Hannah Arendt calls – it's a traditional distinction – the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*. BC was the centre for Continental philosophy. It was the right place for

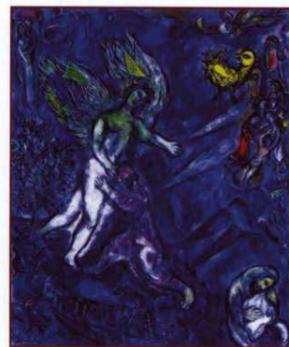
me to go. I love teaching. Even the sabbaticals I have over the years, I don't always take them, because I love teaching. I find it gives me a structure you know.

Is America the best place to teach?

There's America and America. There's political America which I have difficulties with, not

ANATHEISM

{ RETURNING TO GOD AFTER GOD }



RICHARD KEARNEY

so much with Obama as with Bush or the ruthless Romney – if he were, Lord forbid, elected. There's academic America and particularly academic Boston which has 20 universities within a 10-mile radius. There's a fantastic cross-section of students who come from all over the world. There's unparalleled funding for those students and for research. One thing that's negative for me is the fees, \$50,000 for example. Each course is

costing students \$5,000, so that makes them very hungry and driven and demanding, understandably. There are a lot of scholarships for minority students – but there's still the idea of education as a business in the private colleges. It's more relaxed in Europe, but above all it's more egalitarian.

You have authored and edited over 30 books but who reads them?

Well there's kind of concentric circles. There's the immediate group which would be academic. The novels reached a non-academic audience. I'm hoping to get back to fiction. That's a way of translating/transliterating philosophical ideas into stories. I like being a non-specialist, where possible, without being a populist.

Your Guestbook Project gathers stories about hospitality and hostility in divided communities. What about the deep divides in American society?

Well America is hospitable traditionally in that it's hosted countless refugees and immigrants, but at the expense of the Indian genocide and past slavery. The indigenous Americans and the blacks have never recovered from that stigma and that oppression, and many have never been able to fully integrate into mainstream American society. There are huge problems: mental illness and alcoholism and violence. The prison population is another scandalous indictment of how certain classes and communities have not been able to become guests of the nation, so to speak.

Has Obama's presidency not transformed blacks' perception of themselves?

It transformed the perception but it hasn't always been able to transform the facts. Facts have to catch up with perception and

I'm not at all diminishing or belittling the importance of Obama – I'm a total supporter of him. Perception changed but he's absolutely hamstrung by Congress. It's been an impossible presidency.

What about unfulfilled promises like the closing of Guantanamo Bay?

Yes. And promissory notes that he can't deliver on...but I think a second presidency could change

that. But you're absolutely right that America in practice is not a very hospitable place, institutionally. Money still is largely the passport in and out of America. I shouldn't say that freedom and democracy have nothing to do with it but still it's essentially run by financial concerns. If you're poor it's not a good place to be. Yet.

And if Romney gets elected?

It will accentuate the inequalities. He's a war-monger, an exceptionalist and an opportunist, and he's a man who is where he is because of money. He's a business success. Unfortunately a lot of people across classes identify with somebody who has come up from underneath.

In Anatheism you have written about the end of God. What of the Irish God?

I'm delighted to see the Catholic church tumbling in Ireland and crumbling. I agree with Nietzsche that when something is leaning, give it a push, and I feel that about the Catholic church, because I believe that all the goodness of Catholicism will remain and will revive and that's what anatheism is – *ana* meaning 'again' – it's about something dying, the death of God and then you return to something sacred that has always been there but you can separate it from the rubble and retrieve what's good about the blueprint, and sometimes things have to collapse.

We've been betrayed by the church. Why not leave God under the rubble?

There's belief in an institution and there's faith in God and the two are not the same thing. If the belief structure in terms of an institution starts fracturing and fissuring and crumbling that makes people think. And that God, which is an idol anyway, dies in order that the God of faith may survive and live on. There's a God after God. And there's a Catholic God after God. If they want, it's there to be found. They can also go elsewhere and find a Buddhist God or a Protestant God or a pantheist God.

Should ordinary people look to philosophy?

I think that philosophy should be taught in Irish schools; religion should be taught in philosophy classes rather than religious doctrine classes. At school we would read all the atheist philosophers – de Beauvoir, Sartre, Marx, Nietzsche. Fr Andrew Nugent and Fr Patrick Hederan in Glenstal Abbey used to say to us now you've learned all the best arguments against the existence of God; is there anybody who still believes or is interested in believing? And then you can have a real conversation. Because then it's a questioning and it's a searching. But if you're given answers you don't even know what the question is, and that's not what education is – learning by rote.

What is stopping people from learning for themselves?

I think of so many people living virtually in the whole Facebook/Internet/Virtual world. At one level we're interconnected globally and galactically and intersubjectively but in fact there's a deep isolation behind the apparent virtual collective – it's a paradox. We're connected to lots of other places but we're not present where we are, not capable of talking to a person face to face. So we don't see or hear or live or touch or taste their embodied experience because we're disembodied, or as Charles Taylor put it, we're excarnated.

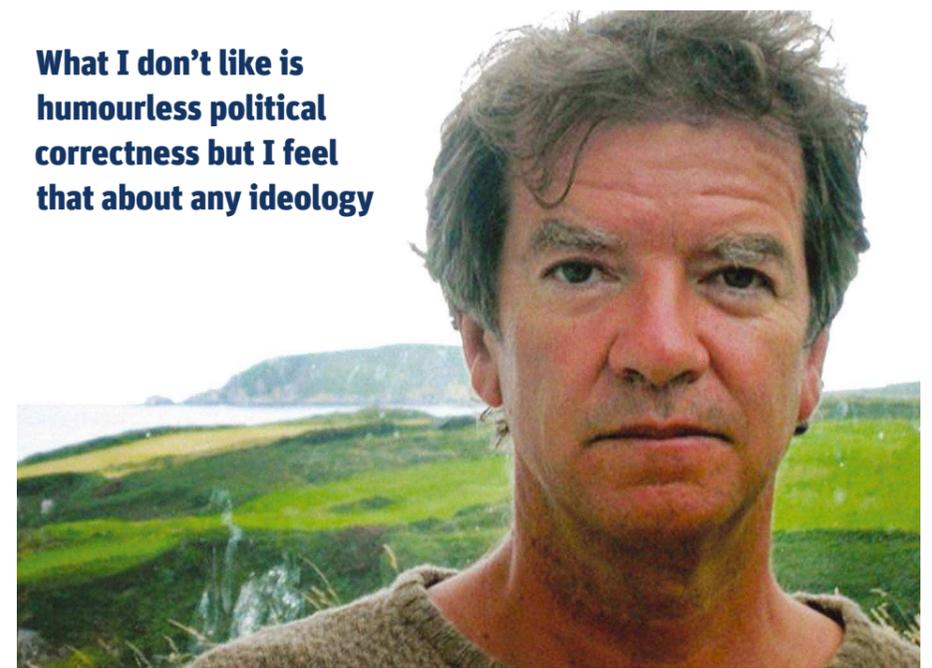
What would Sartre think about the digital age?

He would fully agree with me. Sartre is an existentialist. Very much for beginning with the *situation*, doing philosophy, thinking, living from where you are, what's called a *vécu*, your pre-reflective lived experience. Your concrete situation in the world. Any kind of escape from that into a vicarious living where you're not living your own life in your own world incarnately, but you're living dis-incarnately in a world where you're apparently interested in everybody else, that's a deep, deep contradiction.

And what would Simone de Beauvoir think about women today?

She had this view that Woman was always seen as the Other, and never as a subject or a self, always the exotic mysterious eternal feminine, basically a male fantasy. With that point of view it could be argued that the virtual world can accentuate that sense, the fantasy woman. When the French psychoanalyst Lacan says, "la femme n'existe pas", what he means is that the fantasy of the woman doesn't exist.

What I don't like is humourless political correctness but I feel that about any ideology



Are you a feminist?

Oh yes. Totally. But there can be excesses here too. I prefer second-wave feminism to first-wave feminism – I'd be closer to Julia Kristeva than to Betty Frieden who burnt her bra. What I don't like is humourless politically-correct feminism but I feel that about any ideology. One has to be able to laugh. And if one can't look at Father Ted because Mrs Doyle is being treated as a servant, well then forget about it.

You seem irrepressibly positive, and yet you suffer from depression

I talk pretty openly about it, particularly if I'm in a dark mood. My family has a history of darkness, like most families, and most of the people around us here in West Cork. It's in the genes, and for centuries and generations it was never talked about, there was no name for it, it was called 'the nerves'. It was a cause of shame and embarrassment and guilt and recrimination and fear. So that's really changing. Our two last Irish presidents have been great at bringing those issues to the fore. Our writers are doing it and philosophy should be doing it more and more.

I'm a great believer in the proper balance of medication and therapy, and meditation and talking – and learning from it, from experience. Whenever I'm down I connect with people more and I need people more so I understand dependency better, interdependency. 12-step programmes are amazing. I think everybody in the country should go through them at some point. One of the great strengths of it is the power of story. Talk about an egalitarian society, everybody's there because everybody is speaking from their pain. ■