Christian tradition, MacKendrick reminds us that there is an “eternity to corporeality” if we read the corporeal “not as dead matter but as flesh already in complex relation with the word” (23). This is the basic hypothesis that underlies what I would call her “carnal hermeneutics of Christianity” throughout the rest of the book. 28

One of MacKendrick’s most audacious insights, in my view, is the idea of a radical opening up of ourselves through flesh. But careful—not just any flesh but the flesh of bodies broken open by something (or some time) bigger than ourselves. In this carnal rupturing there is a twisting and disrupting of linear time, exposing us to “another time” outside yet within time: what she terms the eternity of the flesh. This leads directly and logically to what I consider to be one of MacKendrick’s most important notions: the eternal time of resurrection as repetition and return—what we might call ana-time, that is, a time after time that comes back to the beginning before time, but time nonetheless. (The Oxford English Dictionary definition of ana is a movement “back, up, again, anew, in space or time.”) 29

The promise of the resurrected body is a reminder that corporeal afterlife is in fact ana-life. It is more-life, again-life: the after returning back to this life anew, but this time at another degree of intensity and depth. This is a time of ceaseless birthing, again and again, re-natally. Otherwise put, the time of ana-theism is the overabundance of life in this life, just as the invisible is in the visible (Merleau-Ponty) or the infinite in the finite (Levinas). MacKendrick would add, no doubt, as the incorporeal (spirit) is in the corporeal (body)—which is another way of saying incarnation: word in flesh. So we are talking here about an eternal surplus within temporal passing that refuses to pass away but keeps bubbling up again and again like Eckhart’s ebulltio or Hildegaarde de Bingen’s irrepressible verditas. MacKendrick does not cite the latter mystic (a feminist sister soul avant la lettre), but she does cite Lou Andreas-Salomé to good effect: “The afterlife (survivance) no longer means death and the return of the specter, but the surviving of an excess of life which resists annihilation” (112).

This is no reductive materialism (eliminative or positivist). It is, rather, a mysticism of matter that inscribes itself in a long Christian countertradition stretching from Gregory of Nyssa through the medieval mystics to Teilhard de Chardin. At the beginning of Fragmentation and Memory, MacKendrick approvingly invokes Nyssa’s claim that because the immaterial soul is already incarnate in all the multiple atoms of our bodies, bodily

Let me begin with Karmen MacKendrick on eternal flesh. Already in the opening chapter of Fragmentation and Memory (2008) entitled “The One and the Many,” MacKendrick makes a strong case for what she calls the “decidedly corporeal foundations” of Christianity. 1 Over and against the Gnostic strains that came to dominate so much of the mainstream

Karmen Mackendrick

Carnal Eternity
Richard Kearney
Boston College
The concept of eternal life is a profound and complex idea that transcends the limitations of physical existence. The notion of an afterlife, a realm beyond this earthly existence, has been explored by cultures and philosophies around the world. The idea of eternal consciousness, where the soul or consciousness continues in some form after death, is a common theme in many spiritual traditions.

In this context, the concept of "eternal flesh" refers to the continuation of consciousness and awareness beyond the physical body. This concept is illustrated in the diagram and text on the page, suggesting a visual representation of the transition from physical to non-physical existence. The text on the page discusses various aspects of this transition, including the role of memory and the persistence of consciousness.

The page contains a diagram that seems to be related to the discussion of eternal life, possibly illustrating the transition from physical to non-physical states. The text elaborates on the different aspects of this transition, emphasizing the importance of memory and consciousness in maintaining an ongoing existence.

In conclusion, the page delves into the philosophical and spiritual implications of eternal life, exploring the nature of consciousness and the possibility of existence beyond physical death.

Scholar Session
Mackendrick concludes that it is not easy to comprehend this notion of 'modern man's inhumaneness in the heat of the moment.' The minds of the...
thanatos—that is, between carnal acts that enable or disable, emancipate or incarcerate, heal or maim. In short, is there a real place for ethics in MacKendrick’s poetics? Justice regarding singular persons and acts as well as all-embracing glorifications? In this scenario, who is responsible for what and for whom?

4

This brings me back to the central theme of brokenness. Carnal fracturing seems the privileged means to open the self to the eternal. But how is this compatible with the idea that healing is the answer to fragmentation? I suspect that MacKendrick is challenging the received wisdom in most psychotherapeutic theories—and in a long Christian tradition—that reintegration is the answer to disintegration (i.e., dissociation, dysfunction, destruction, and despair). This is surely what she intends when she invokes the experience of “abyssal . . . brokenness” as a refusal of “catharsis” (77). Most recent trauma studies, from Judith Harmon to Dori Laub, suggest that the best way to healing is by retrieving the frozen fragments of traumatic experience so as to restore them to some kind of cathartic memory: a narrative of mourning that restores and reconciles one with one’s past. This therapeutic method is supported by two main approaches: (1) the Aristotelian view of catharsis as purgation by pity and fear (in a mythos-mimesis carried out in a unity of time, place, action, and character) and (2) the psychoanalytic notion of the “talking cure” deeply informed by Freud’s own treatment of World War I trauma victims in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Most cases of trauma analyzed in contemporary literature concern extreme incidents of torture, rape, incest, or genocide. MacKendrick is clearly not dealing with such dramatic breakings; her analysis does suggest a certain isomorphism between such instances and the more everyday experiences of kaiological breakage—the irritation of eternity in time. In both cases, the power of human agency, initiative, and freedom appear contested. But what are the implications of such a move for theology, psychology, and ethics?

In chapter 4, entitled “Poppies and Rosemary: Love,” MacKendrick speaks of a love that has already happened before I choose it to happen. I can only give the gift of love if the gift is already given to me; I can only keep a promise if I already find myself promised. Or as she puts it, “Love’s promise is given as something remembered.” The “stranger already” precedes any notion of “subjective intentionality.” Promises are made before I know it; love is a commandment obeyed before I say, “I love”—as if I have to remember that I have already forgotten myself.

MacKendrick speaks here of “obsessive memory.” And she might well have added something on Proust’s involuntary memory. For love seems involuntary to the extent that it is, in MacKendrick’s terms, “strange,” “anarchic,” and “greedy.” In other words, obsessive eros precedes and exceeds the ethics of law. And MacKendrick celebrats eros accordingly as “disordering” and “profoundly disruptive of selfhood” (86), “excessive and exhausting” (courtesy of Roland Barthes). Sacred eros is radically transgressive in that it “possesses us” to the point of rupturing the moral self. “I am not there . . .” she explains, “as the one to whom the law, or the commandment, might apply” (87). Love is thus revealed as a kind of suprapersonal excess that divests the self of itself and breaks it open to the other within and without.

Now let me admit straightway that MacKendrick’s analysis is more complex than my account suggests. She is touching on a deep mystical enigma that goes back to Paul’s prioritizing of love over law; and she is right, in my view, to challenge a long tradition of rationalist moralism and voluntarism in favor of what Pascal calls “la logique du coeur”—le coeur a ses raison que la raison ne connait pas.” She is contesting the idea of rational control over the senses going from Platonism and scholasticism right up to modern thinkers like Kant and Sartre: namely, the view that desire is a passion to be subjugated lest it subvert the autonomy of conscious will. (Think here of Kant’s moral reason versus inclination or Sartre’s utilitarian view of desire as an ordered pattern of means directed toward an end.) In this, MacKendrick echoes the general posthumanist critique of the sovereign ego from Nietzsche and Heidegger to a host of postmodern thinkers such as Foucault, Barthes, Derrida, and Irigaray.

And we might add Levinas to this list. I am thinking especially of his later work where, in a passage in Otherwise than Being, for example, he glosses the phrase “je suis malade d’amour” (Song of Songs) with the claim that the self is obsessed, violated, invaded, and persecuted by the other—hostaged before the self was ever free to think, act, or respond. Levinas’s discourse of the hostage self has connotations at times of theological masochism; but he confesses deploying a “language of hyperbole.” Would MacKendrick admit as much? And how would she address the Levinasian
dilemma of reconciling the hostaged-self with the host-self (the host being morally enjoined to open the door to the invasive Other with the phrase: “Here I am”)?

The ethical question becomes even more problematic, I think, when MacKendrick compares the temporal structures of evil and trauma. Clearly she intends no moral equivalence here, but by declining to tackle the moral difference between these two human experiences there is room for misunderstanding. The damned, no less than the traumatized, are closed up in their split, separated selves; they are unable (or unwilling) to speak or listen to others: “The damned, living in the time of trauma, . . . refuse the double openness of time and word.” MacKendrick explains the connection between trauma and the banality of evil as follows: “The shared characteristic is exactly that of not (quite) being experienced—in the case of trauma, an event is not experienced because the ability of consciousness to register the ‘experience’ is exceeded; in the case of banal evil, a regret or sorrow that would seem appropriate to the rest of us is not experienced because the capacity of otherness, of humanity outside oneself, to register in one’s consciousness is absent. In both cases the offense—the symptom or the evil, the restriction on possibility and on response—is likely to go on repeating” (78).

In short, trauma and evil both epitomize the absence of memory, the “eternal dullness of repetition” from which forgiveness seeks to free us. How? Precisely by releasing a “future from the sameness of the past” (79). The structure of confessional forgiveness and of therapeutic speaking would thus appear to function isomorphically. By recounting the story in a new way, by “remembering and then transforming memory, [forgiveness] breaks open the future.” MacKendrick opposes accordingly the transfigurative “time of revelation” to the “same-again repetition” of both trauma and damnation. The time of such “new narrative” is, she writes, “the time of the promise, the revelation of the future in its openness instead of the traumatic, damming closure of repetition” (83). But my question is this: Are “traumatic” closure and “damning” closure as similar as the juxtaposition in this sentence suggests? For even if they are both forms of “self-separation” (dissociation for trauma, isolation for sin), are they not fundamentally

different? Surely there is more separating trauma and damnation than a comma?

Let me clarify. When a therapist helps the traumatized victim (of rape/torture/genocide) to break the paralyzing spell of repetition in order to live a new future, is she forgiving him? And if so, for what? I am sure that MacKendrick does not wish to equate the experience of trauma with evil. But by establishing such an intimate connection between the two it is hard to resist suspecting that such close comparison betrays an implied theodicy (Augustinian or Leibnizian). Otherwise put: if we are all subject to the temporal structure of trauma in some manner (even if it is what MacKendrick calls “lesser” trauma, similar perhaps to Levinas’s notion of a traumatisme origine that all humans experience), if we are all thus temporally traumatized with a small “t,” is it not because each of us is subject to the deadly repetitiveness of falleness (or what theologians call “original sin”)? And if this is so, are we not all in need of forgiveness and revelation to save us from ourselves? And if this in turn is so, does it not imply that Trauma victims with a capital “T” are even more condemned to the repetitive nontime of damnation than the rest of us lesser-traumatized beings? Again, I am sure that MacKendrick would not endorse such a view; but by juxtaposing “traumatic” and “damning” as she does, is she not lending herself to such possibilities of confusion?

Let me conclude with some remarks on MacKendrick’s poetics of the sacred. In raising my above reservations I feel that I am not taking sufficient account of the liturgical flow of her writing, nit-picking rather than delicately tracing the unfolding fleece of this beautiful text. For this is prose that pulses to its own “delirious beat,” sounding an utterly unique rhythm precisely because it “listens” to a rhythm beyond itself. So doing, it bids its readers to listen in turn, to attend—sacramentally, somatically, acutely—to its inner music, its intensively lived tempo: adagio, andante, allegretto. The prose moves poetically, like the repetition of the rosary, to “something outside of the self” (142). And the author does not shirk from calling this “the shared beating of the sacred heart” (142). But such shared cardiac percussion is not exclusively Christocentric. For MacKendrick the score for this song of the eternal body is as easily found in Deleuze’s “other
repetition,” or Merleau-Ponty’s sonata of flesh, or Nietzsche’s chorus of recurrence as in the incantation of Christian liturgy. What MacKendrick terms “the sacred body of all bodies” pulses with the ease of sleep, a temporal phrasing of which we are scarcely aware. It approximates to the beating of breath and blood, respiring and expiring, expanding and contracting, enfolding and refolding, spiraling around and looping back through the flesh of time (142).

One cannot read MacKendrick’s prose—not because it is unreadable but because it is doubly readable. One rereads it, as one does poetry. And in rereading one listens and listens again.

So we are back to the ana-time of the beginning, the time that goes back by going forward and upward: the double “a” of a-dieu—both away from (ab) and toward (ad) the Infinite. This is what MacKendrick calls the “seductive power of rhythms, drawing us out of self and into beauty” (143). It is a double tempo, which draws human and divine bodies to each other in an intensification—not extension—of time that is the time of resurrected flesh. Here epiphanic (extraordinary) time solicits profane (ordinary) time. It is irresistible. “We find it difficult to walk or otherwise move against a strong beat,” says MacKendrick. And this applies to her own writing. “What draws us to beauty, what draws language into memory, into poetry, and draws our bodies into participation,” she concludes, “is what we have created to seduce the gods” (143); whence what she calls “the fabled seductiveness of musicians generally” (142), and we might add, of certain philosophers—MacKendrick being one of them.

NOTES


6. MacKendrick does, in fairness, insert a parenthesis later in her analysis admitting the need to address the ethical question; and I take her sentence to be both an acknowledgment of elision and a promissory note: “Although my own religious emphasis has always been rather more aesthetic than ethical, I do think there are real ethical and political implications here regarding the care of bodies” (150). I wholeheartedly agree and look forward to learning from her insights into such an ethics of somatic care.