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PROFESSOR RICHARD KEARNEY HOLDS THE CARDINAL MERCIER CHAIR

Professor Richard Kearney held the Cardinal Mercier Chair for the academic year of 2004-2005, visiting the Institute of Philosophy from the 1st until the 31st of March. (Details of his lectures can be found in the section of "Institute News, 2004-2005" at the end of this Newsletter.) Professor André Van de Putte, Dean of the Institute of Philosophy, introduced Professor Kearney's lecture with the following address. The Dean would like to express his thanks to Professor William Desmond for helping in the preparation of this introduction. An interview with Professor Kearney, held while he visited the Institute, follows this address.

Colleagues, Students, Ladies and Gentlemen:
It is my pleasure to introduce Richard Kearney as the holder of the Mercier Chair for 2005. Professor Kearney comes to us from Boston College, but his attachments are as much to this side of the Atlantic as to the other. He is as much a citizen of Dublin and Paris as he is of Boston. His education was in Ireland, and in Paris where he worked on his doctorate with Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas, and his intimacy with contemporary French thought has not diminished since his student days. Much of his academic life to date was in Ireland, where he was involved in many aspects of its cultural life - literary, artistic, and also cinematic. In recent years he has made a move to Boston College, where he is now the Charles B. Seelig Chair of philosophy.

He is a person of many accomplishments, and this is reflected in the many-sidedness of his work which, in a broad sense, could be described as operating at the point of intersection of culture and philosophy. He is a writer of many parts, and not all of them are confined to the philosophical, understood in a more narrow professorial definition. Of course, he has written many works of philosophical commentary bearing on themes and thinkers in contemporary continental philosophy. These include, for instance, Modern Movements in European Philosophy (1987). In more recent years he has tried to speak philosophically more in his own voice, the fruits of which we see in his most recent trilogy entitled Philosophy at the Limit. The books comprising this trilogy are: On Stories (2001), Strangers, Gods and Monsters (2002), and The God Who May Be (2002).

Over the years also he has tried to engage living philosophers in real dialogue, and some of his work on this score was instrumental in introducing many readers in the English-speaking world to some of the major figures in contemporary continental thought. I refer to Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers (1984), where among his interlocutors were figures like Derrida, Marcuse, Ricoeur, and Levinas, someone who was then much less well-known in the English speaking philosophical world. This dialogical engagement continues, and a volume will shortly appear, gathering up many of these early dialogues, in addition to many that have been conducted since then. In these dialogues, Kearney is direct and energetic in his questioning. He also draws out answers that often exceed and freshly illuminate the written work of his partners in conversation.
One might say that a strong desire to communicate distinguishes his work. Thus, in addition to these scholarly and philosophical works, he has had a long engagement as a cultural commentator and critic, often in relation to Irish issues, but often too with concerns with a more cosmopolitan accent. For many years he edited an influential cultural journal in Ireland, called The Crane Bag and in it one can find contributions from some of the most significant names in contemporary Irish culture. But he is more than a commentator or critic or editor, for he has published a volume of poetry, and to date two novels, and I believe a third novel is in the works.

And last but not least, relative to his cultural engagements, he has had an abiding fascination with film. He has been very much involved with film in Ireland, both in fostering the study of film, and playing an active role in supporting its creation. More recently, he has dedicated work to the pedagogic use of video as a means of bringing thinkers into dialogue across continents. He has produced video dialogues with important contemporary thinkers from many places around the world. His work in this direction was recently rewarded with a significant grant awarded by the European Union.

As a writer working on the intersection of philosophy and culture, the central importance of imagination has always been evident in his work, and especially in its narrative form. This is indeed reflected in the overall guiding concerns of his lectures and seminars with us here, where narrative constitutes the overall organizing frame of his presentations. His concern with imagination is bound up with his reflections on possibility — and indeed his doctoral work was published as Politique du Possible — a concern with possibility that continues to this day.

It would take too long to enumerate the many books he has written or edited, but an important book for defining his concerns was The Wake of Imagination (1988), in which he explores different understandings of imagination from archaic times to postmodern times, and in different traditions, both religious and philosophical. Other significant contributions developing these themes further are to be found in subsequent books, such as Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Postmodern (1991, and 1998), and Poetics of Modernity: Toward a Hermeneutic Imagination (1995).

One might speak of his concerns in these works as engaged with hermeneutic imagination and narrative in many different forms: in the aesthetic, in the political, in the ethical, and finally in the religious. In his earlier writings, the aesthetic and the political were perhaps more often to the fore, though it is not that the ethical and the religious were not present. But in time the latter have also tended to become more explicit. We see, for instance, something of a shift from poetics to ethics in these books just mentioned, the Poetics of Imagining and the Poetics of Modernity. The ethical is not easy to make seamlessly coherent with the poetic, yet Kearney wants an understanding of the hermeneutic
imagination which embraces both the poetic and the ethical. While poetic imagination might seem non-controversial, the ethical power of the image is often more complex and controversial. And yet there is no escaping the ethical power of the poetic image. The uses of the imagination are themselves, overtly or covertly, modes of being ethical. The narrative imagination has to be understood as embracing both the poetic and the ethical.

Thus, for instance, in his epilogue to his Poetics of Imagining Kearney returns to a theme that also was developed in a chapter in Poetics of Modernity (1995), entitled “The Narrative Imagination: Between Poetics and Ethics.” As he puts it: “When the story is over we re-enter our life worlds transformed, however imperceptibly. The crucial ethical import of this return journey from narrative to action is the central theme of ‘Narrative Imagination’.” This statement, one might say, could be taken as a central clue for much of Richard Kearney’s work. Sometimes the voice of Kearney is marked by an unmistakably Ricoeurian ring, but more and more he is speaking in his own voice.

What then, in sum, is the ethical potential of the narrative imagination? Kearney here offers three main suggestions: first, the testimonial capacity to bear witness to a forgotten past; second, the empathic capacity to identify with those different to us (victims and exemplars alike); third, the critical-utopian capacity to challenge official stories with unofficial or dissenting stories that open up alternative ways of being. But as he also wisely reminds us, narrative imagination is not always on the side of the angels. His most recently trilogy once more reflects and amplifies these central considerations. His engaging essay On Stories (translated into Dutch, by the way) takes up the argument for the indispensability of the narrative and the story, even in an age of the postmodern where the book seems to have ceded pre-eminence to the video image. Many of the chapters of Strangers, Gods and Monsters are written on the interface of philosophy and culture, and the book includes reflections on film (for example, the trilogy of films on “The Alien”), terrorism, the sublime and evil, terror and the significance of 9/11.

While aesthetic and ethical-political considerations continue to figure in his work, the role of the religious has become more accentuated. This is not new, in that, going as far back as the time of his doctoral dissertation, there is a discussion in Politique du Possible which tries to address what Kearney calls the “God of the possible.” His book The God Who May Be is a thought-provoking and engaging effort to articulate more fully what might be meant by such a “God of the possible.” This book has received considerable attention since its appearance, both for its inherent excellences, and for its illuminating engagement with themes that have become newly of importance in the turn to religion of some recent continental philosophy.

We look forward to the opening Mercier lecture tonight, and the lecture and seminars to follow in the coming days, for these presentations concentrate Kearney’s overall pre-occupations very intensively. The guiding thread throughout will be the theme of narrative. Tomorrow at 6 p.m. his second lecture will be entitled “Narrating Terror: Philosophy after 9/11.” On Thursday and Friday he will offer two seminars entitled respectively, “Narrating Pain: Trauma and Catharsis,” and “Narrating the Sacred: A Poetics of Epiphany?” But tonight his inaugural lecture is entitled “Narrative Desire: From Plato’s Symposium to The Song of Songs.”

Please join me in warmly welcoming to Leuven Professor Richard Kearney.
PHILOSOPHY AT THE LIMITS OF REASON ALONE:
A Group Interview With Professor Richard Kearney

While visiting the Institute of Philosophy, Professor Kearney kindly took the time to give an interview for the Newsletter. The interview took the form of a conversation between Professor Kearney and several of our doctoral students, Niall Keane, Francisco Lombo de Leon, Michael Funk Deckard and Sonja Zuba. One of our alumni, Dr. James McGuirk, also participated.

JAMES MCGUIRK: First of all, Professor Kearney, I’d like to start by welcoming you to Leuven. By way of getting the ball rolling, perhaps you could tell us a little bit about your own current philosophical project.

Well, my current project is an attempt to articulate a “philosophy at the limit”, which is the overall title of my recent trilogy. The three books are attempts to say the unsayable, think the unthinkable, and imagine the unimaginable. In the case of The God Who May Be (2001) it is the question of God, in the case of On Stories (2002), it is the question of the narrated trauma, which is something so painful and intolerable that it is blocked from memory, and hence we deploy stories in order to try to unlock and unblock those repressed memories and to find some healing. Basically I deal with how repressed narratives need to be retrieved and retold, be it in relation to stories of empire, i.e., conquerer stories, and then on to various other case histories of the survivors of trauma. I also talk about literature as a form of narrativity that deals with some secret, gap or enigma in an author’s life which needs to be worked out through fiction. In The God Who May Be I am trying to zoom in on one limit experience of the unsayable, namely, what is called the divine. In Strangers, Gods and Monsters (2002), there is a more pluralist approach to the unsayable in terms of the question of the limit experience of good and evil. I deal specifically with the question of good and evil in relation to strangers and monsters. This book attempts to amplify the phenomenology of the sacred so as to cover non-monotheistic religions, something I believe is vitally important for the hermeneutics of dialogue and which I call “diacritical hermeneutics”. With this diacritical hermeneutics I am trying to chart a middle course between
apophatic and kataphatic extremes: between, on the one hand, the cult of silence — sublime speechlessness, for example — which can lead to paralysis, and, on the other, the standard metaphysical definitions of God which often say too much. This latter temptation is what William Desmond calls “excessive speech,” in which everything must be immediately converted into talk, categories, substances and so on. So, if the latter kataphatic tradition leads to excessive speech — Marion’s “conceptual idolatry” — the other apophatic tendency leads to aphasia and, all too often, to inaction. Basically I’m trying to find a middle way through the two poles.

FRANCISCO LOMBO DE LEON: Could you say a little bit more about your own formation and how you may have moved beyond your earlier position?

Curiously enough, when I was working with Ricoeur in Paris in the seventies, he thought that I was much too influenced by Levinas, Derrida, and of course, Heidegger. So we used to have great dialogues on these grounds. Ricoeur was very much an Aristotelian: he was always defending metaphysics against the charges of Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida, who said that metaphysics was totalizing and onto-theological. Hence, my thesis under Ricoeur, entitled \textit{Poétique du Possible}, was actually a work which Ricoeur felt was not very loyal to his own hermeneutic path. He respected it very much and we had good conversations about it, but it was a conversation between two voices coming from very different perspectives in that I worked as much with Levinas and Derrida as I did with Ricoeur.

Nowadays, in fact, I would say that I am closer to Ricoeur than to any other philosopher that I know. But I’m not a “disciple” of Ricoeur’s, so to speak. One of the reasons for this is that his whole hermeneutic philosophy is about a fecond conflict of interpretations and he has a huge suspicion of a hermeneutics of closure. Hermeneutics, as Ricoeur kept reminding us, is itself the impossibility of closure, an infinite openness to new textual readings. Thus, because of Ricoeur’s own hermeneutics it was impossible for him ever to have a school as such, and because of this there are no “Ricoeurians” around. He taught his students to think for themselves. In addition, I was always more interdisciplinary than Ricoeur; I would introduce literature, politics, and theology into philosophy more readily than he would. For him Derrida was always too literary and Levinas was always too religious. Unlike Ricoeur, I never minded crossing borders and transgressing boundaries.

However, my inspiration for diacritical hermeneutics, as I try to develop it in \textit{Strangers, Gods and Monsters} and \textit{The God Who May Be}, did come largely from Ricoeur, and also from Gadamer’s hermeneutic tradition, and by implication from the Socratic practice of \textit{dialogein}. They were my mentors in that they emphasized the Platonic dialogue as a model for philosophy, as that space where different points of view work their way towards a new point of view. Therefore, there is always a surplus of meaning (\textit{un surcroît du sens}) which points towards something still to come in the text. But I would also say that my experience of growing up in Ireland between two cultures, two religions and two languages, two poles of North and South, was also very formative for me. I realized that if I am without dialogue, then I am somehow forced to align oneself with one side against another. So for reasons of personal history too, I was trying to open up a third way.

MICHAEL FUNK DECKARD: You have tried in your work to bring together Irish philosophy, literature, and ethics.
One particular passage that you have used is taken from the work of James Joyce, which you quoted to us in your lecture the other night. It is taken from the very long hallucinogenic Circe chapter in Ulysses when Stephen's cap speaks to him. The cap says, "Woman's Reason, Jewgreek is Greekjew. Extremes meet. Death is the highest form of life. Bah!" In taking your impetus from Levinas and Derrida, is Joyce's passage here just a humorous tool as found in its original context or can it be used as the basis for a deconstructive ethics? If you support the latter, what is the content of such an ethics?

Neither Derrida who cites that line in his essay on Levinas (Violence and Metaphysics), nor Levinas himself, would adhere to the sentiment expressed in that phrase. I don't think Levinas even knew about Joyce's phrase until he read it in Derrida, but the substance of it, the content of it, is very operative in Derrida and also in my own work, at a much more modest level of course. Levinas is one of the main contemporary thinkers to put forward the idea that there is an Abrahamic path of exodus, a path traversing the desert and moving towards the infinite, in contrast to the Odyssean path of circumnavigation which leaves from itself and returns to itself, which he identifies as Greek ontology and totality. Thus, Levinas sets up a pretty neat opposition, and yet as Derrida points out, the very process of writing Totality and Infinity, as a working through of Western metaphysics, means that he cannot avoid ontology and phenomenology, which is the Greek language of presence and totality.

I wanted to restore the robustness of the two voices of Jew and Greek instead of separating them out as Levinas tried to do. I was trying to find a way between Derrida's complete mixing and collapsing of the two by using the language of mutual contamination, and Levinas's attempt to keep the two separate. The result of this is a diacritical hermeneutics where there is a mutual openness of Jew to Greek and Greek to Jew. I like that about Joyce. Yet I think it's not just to be found in Stephen's cap, but also in Molly who takes up where Stephen's cap leaves off, in that she represents woman's reason where Greekjew and Jewgreek come together, the Jew being Bloom and the Greek being Stephen. Hence, there is a coming together of both, but not in such a way that there is a co-mingling or collapsing of the two into each other. It is more a question (as the Calcedonian formula goes) of a crossing-over or community without total separation or without total confusion. One consequence of this is, I think, an openness to inter-religious dialogue with non-western discourses and wisdom traditions. In recent years, I have found it personally and academically fruitful to try to expose myself to the narratives of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, and to Buddhism and Taoism. I know all too little about these wisdom traditions, but I am interested in exploring possibilities of "other voices", apart from the Jew and the Greek, of opening further the space between.

Sonja Zuba: You used the term "between" just now. Do you have any specific philosophers in mind when you use it? Do you perhaps have William Desmond in mind? If so, where do you differ from William Desmond?

Well, I am very indebted to my friend and compatriot, William Desmond, for his intriguing notions of metaphor and metaphorology. But I have also borrowed this idea of a middle or medial way from Plato, Aristotle and Ricoeur, and from the Buddha, and from Martin Buber. It has a long and noble lineage. The "diacritical method" I outline in Strangers, Gods and Monsters also plays on the diagnostic connotations of the term, diairein, which means to distinguish, discriminate, discern the juste milieu between
extremes. Hence the more technical usage today in grammar of diacritical signs or marks that distinguish different sounds or values of the same letter — for example, diaeresis, cedilla or accents like circumflex or acute etc (è é è ü à). These tiny and almost imperceptible inflections of sound or sight, of hearing or reading, can make a significant difference in sense. French captures this well when it uses the same verb, entendre, for both acts of reception (to hear and to understand). But the term diacriein also has a rarer and older sense of medical diagnosis. And this diagnostic and therapeutic sense is one which interests me greatly, as I agree with Wittgenstein that critical philosophy — as a practice of attentive, vigilant, careful discernment — can also be a form of healing.

While William Desmond and I agree fundamentally on the metaxological role of the “between”, there is one point, perhaps, at which I felt William was more Hegelian than I would have been; though in his recent publications he has most definitely moved beyond the Hegelian model, just as Ricoeur at one point moved beyond Hegel as well.

And it is here that we realize that “the middle” is not just a synthesis of opposites which leads to closure or totalisation. Here the middle actually opens out onto a new path by reintroducing the metaxu of Socrates and Plato. Now if we understand this to be a diacritical method, a way of accenting differences, of placing a stress or inflection upon this or that, then we can see that discernment is what is called for. Hegel to me is not a genuine call for discernment. The mediating middle of Hegel leads to a final synthesis that ends in absolute consciousness, whereas diacritical hermeneutics would want to keep that constantly open to the further discernment of Spirit such that you never actually reach the end, so that you are always coming back and asking new questions and every concept becomes a sign which calls for a new concept. There is a hermeneutical way of rereading Plato’s  metaxu, as Desmond suggests, which rescues him from the charge of onto-theology and totalizing presence. I owe a lot to William on this score. But whereas I tend to draw more from contemporary continental philosophy — phenomenology and hermeneutics in particular — William seems to me to be more indebted to great classic thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, and Hegel. In other words, he would be more a defender of “metaphysics”, while I have always been more an iconoclast of metaphysics. However, I feel William’s work of late is moving more and more beyond metaphysics, whilst I, on the other hand, am moving more and more back to metaphysics. So perhaps we’ll meet somewhere in the middle!

Niall Keane: You have been clearly inspired by Heidegger’s well-known critique of onto-theology in the Western philosophical tradition, and you seem to follow his lead, to some extent at least, by addressing the issue of a possible God in a post-metaphysical sense. However, doesn’t one run the risk, as Heidegger most certainly did, of ignoring the complexity and profundity already to be found in traditional or standard metaphysics, by calling for a diacritical or hermeneutical metaphysics?

Onto-theology is a caricature or summary selection of these reified conceptual moments which have forgotten the fundamental dimension of things — Being, God, Eschaton, etc. What one means by a hermeneutic retrieval that comes after metaphysics — that is, post-Platonism, post-Aristotelianism, post-Cartesianism, post-Hegelianism — does not amount to saying one is post-Plato, post-Aristotle, post-Descartes,

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1 See the chapter, “Should We Renounce Hegel?” in Time and Narrative, vol. 3.
or post-Hegel. It is a question of trying to retrieve what has very often been occluded in the texts themselves. When Heidegger actually reads Aristotle — the source of his hermeneutics of facticity being the *Rhetoric*, the *Ethics*, and the *Poetics* of Aristotle — he is more interested in opening up new dimensions of Aristotle, the originary questions, which were very often covered over for those of us schooled in Scholasticism. That is how I would qualify what I mean by the “God after metaphysics”, or what I prefer to call an eschatological God. This God is already inscribed in the great metaphysical thinkers and texts, but there has been a tendency to privilege certain concepts at the expense of others, for instance actuality over possibility, speech over writing, perhaps being over becoming or non-being. We could go through a series of examples. The one that I was concerned with retrieving in *The God Who May Be*, and perhaps to some extent reversing, was the priority of the actual over the possible. The point was not to deny that there are aspects of actuality within the divine but to ask whether there are aspects of *dunamis* also within the divine. It is simply a question of de-reifying concepts and re-imagining concepts, not of inventing something absolutely new, for everything has always already been said. There is ultimately a necessary iconoclastic, self-transfiguring motivation within philosophical and religious thought, and this is clearly evident in that all the great thinkers are perpetually starting all over again. That is all I am attempting to identify and explore.

Niall Keane: Whilst I agree with the perpetual necessity to start all over again, what is also essential, however, is the carefulness and exactitude with which we start all over again. For example, Heidegger is definitely a more arresting thinker than Gadamer, yet Gadamer is clearly more careful with the philosophical tradition. How important, in your opinion, is it to be philosophically careful?

Well everyone who starts all over again, at the beginning at least, is not very careful because they usually start by saying “let’s imagine that nothing has been thought”! Here, there is a necessary methodological bracketing out of the conversation that has been going on for thousands of years, and this gives people a certain sense of simplicity. Yet Gadamer, like Ricoeur, begins quite humbly in the middle of a conversation by quoting other people. We also need this approach, so as to be interpreters who mediate the tradition, working like Himalayan Sherpas who know the way up and down the mountain and who are constantly serving others. But this is not to take from those more “original” thinkers who set out to discover new continents: the pioneers. The guys who actually made it to the top of Everest. I think Husserl and Heidegger did this when they called for phenomenology to be a rigorous science. That kind of instinct for originality, the striking out for something new, is always required if philosophy is to continue on its course. Whereas the Gadames and the Ricoeurs of this world are hermeneutic mediators who are always modestly helping us to unravel things, they really do not have the same impact as those who come out with revolution-ary-sounding statements.

James Mcguirk: Regarding this question of the complexity of the tradition, I wanted to ask about your employment of Heidegger’s notion of onto-theology as a way of characterising the tradition in *The God Who May Be*. You say, “If the tradition of onto-theology granted priority to being over the good, this counter-tradition of eschatology challenges that priority.”² I find it interesting that inasmuch as the notion of onto-theology is accepted uncritically, it

² Page 19.
also seems to mean whatever we want it to mean. For here, the point is distinctly Levinasian/Derridean and so Heidegger is a part of, and as guilty as, the dominant tradition of Western thought. Do we not risk, then, making the term onto-theology dangerously imprecise or inaccurate?

Well yes, I could see that as a danger. But it can be avoided if we recognize that this is a methodological move, if we acknowledge that onto-theology is a caricature, a schema, or a paradigm which is representative of a decline of thought from its original moments. It’s a way of telling a good story! Heidegger located what he calls the “originary moment” of thinking in the pre-Socratics, after which followed two thousand years of forgetfulness that was ultimately broken by phenomenology and the phenomenological revolution. Now that is a very exciting story, as if some philosophical Rip Van Winkle had gone to sleep for two thousand years and now he’s back! It is more interesting and arresting than saying that the question had never been forgotten. However, when Heidegger starts doing the phenomenological Destraktion, the retrieval of metaphysics, that is exactly what he finds: the question had never been forgotten, and every time someone experiences Angst they are simultaneously experiencing the question of Being and non-Being. I see the notion of onto-theology mainly as a methodological ploy which Heidegger himself eventually moves beyond. This is how I like to read both Heidegger and Derrida.

Niall Keane: The eschatological dimension of your project is quite evident in your work and along with that you appropriate many Heideggerian categories along the way, for example, Gemeinlichkeit and Entwurf to name but two; however, I’m interested to know, following a recent comment by Joan Greisch on your work, where exactly Heidegger’s notion of Geworfenheit or “thrownness” fits into your project? Do you run the risk, as Greisch has indicated, of “forgetting or shading out what Heidegger calls Geworfenheit”?

I think that’s a very relevant point and actually Ricoeur makes a very similar observation in his review of my work in Philosophy Today, where he says that the narratives I deploy and promote are basically very enabling, eschatological narratives. Yet he asks, “what about tragedy?”, which is another name for the shade, that which resists translation or transfiguration into the eschatological. Here he is pointing to the intractable nature of Geworfenheit, that which cannot be transformed by narrative imagination or by any form of working through. It is that which is irredeemable, that which we must be silent about in living with the pain. So yes, I take your point and I take the point from my interlocuters, Ricoeur and Greisch, on that one too.

Yet my response would be something like this: one of the things that worried me about traditional metaphysics, at least as I imbibed it in a very Scholastic manner at University College Dublin in the seventies, is that philosophy was realism and realism was truth. What disturbed me about that was that everything was already acquired; truth was always a systematic given and it was there to be learned from Creation onwards; it was spoken by Jesus Christ and then published by St. Thomas Aquinas: the system as perfect synthesis. Hence, my philosophy grew out of a hunger for the “possible” and it was definitely a reaction to my own philosophical formation. Yet that wasn’t my only reaction. I was also reacting to what I considered to be the deep pessimism, and even at times “nihilism” of the postmodern turn.

What interests me most in the whole postmodern debate about metaphysics is to see if we can still return from text to action. I am interested in the possibility of an eschatology of action, and that is what fascinates me about the "possible". My philosophical position is a reaction to both Scholasticism and postmodernism. But like every reaction it tends to go to the other extreme, in that one forgets the shadow or shade and the limits that are always already set. That is why my trilogy is called "Philosophy at the Limit", where even though I'm attempting to say the unsayable, I'm still trying to deal with those "limit experiences", as Jaspers called them. By contrast, in early works like Poétique du Possible or Poetics of Imagining, I wasn't really dealing with limit experiences. It seemed the world was wide open. Imagination was there to blaze new paths of discovery. From that point of view, I think Ricoeur and Greisch were right to suggest I redress the balance. The poetics of the possible always needs to acknowledge the ethics of the real.

SONJA ZUBA: In your work you speak about God as "possible". Yet God is usually defined as eternal, so can we, in fact, talk adequately about God in terms of time and in terms of possibility?

Absolutely not. I believe we are compelled to speak and simultaneously to acknowledge the limits of our speaking. Now this means that when we talk about the futurity or the possibility of God — as I do in The God Who May Be and Strangers, Gods and Monsters — we are always talking in terms of human phenomenological categories, that is, hermeneutic constructs. We are not talking about the ontological substance of God, the “in itself” of God. And, curiously enough, in the wisdom traditions the very un-nameability of God, the fact that the eternal cannot be reduced to time, itself allows for, and in fact calls for, a multiplicity of names, figures, tropes, and metaphors. For if you confine the divine to a few terms and sacralize those few, and turn them into doctrines and dogmas, then you are really reducing God to our terms, which you claim are the only true terms. That for me is the true danger of idolatry. The danger does not reside in having a hundred different names for God, but in presuming to have only one! Hinduism and Buddhism have much to teach us here. The more images, figures and faces of the divine you have, the more you are respecting the inability of any one of them to adequately represent the divine. Thus I would concur with Stanislas Breton when he suggests that the truth of monotheism, in any of the wisdom traditions, is polytheism. Now, in The God Who May Be, I do speak of the futurity of God, but I would not want to do so at the expense of the presentness or pastness of God. These three temporal aspects have to be maintained. Eschatological futurity is only one of these, but the one in my view that has been most occluded in the official history of Western metaphysics.

JAMES MCGUIRK: When you speak of moving “from text to action”, do you intend this in a Marxist sense (i.e., the mission to change rather than interpret the world)? And secondly, given your sense of the openness of diacritical hermeneutics, do we not risk descending into a “pure openness” that becomes unable to discern between good actions and bad?

Well, I have never had an explicit reckoning with Marxism, but Marx would have had a greater influence on me as a student than Hegel did — not doctrinally of course, as I was never drawn by any Marxist movement, but I was very taken by philosophers who were influenced by Marx, namely, Marcuse, Bloch, Horkheimer
Augustine and Pascal and then leading to the nineteenth and twentieth century existentialists. My difficulty with Marx's work was that it always had the tendency to become Marxism. The problem I kept encountering was Marx's closure to the question of transcendence and poetics, which for me were necessary critical chaperones for politics. Without the questions of God and imagination, political economy risked losing the run of itself and taking itself for the only game in town.

Now to come back to your second interesting question about a pure openness to the possible: firstly, the eschatological model that I propose is an emphatic acknowledgment that the divine is not reducible to the human. In other words, eschatologically and in the order of eternity, God remains unconditionally a call, a solicitation, and a summons. But in the order of history and phenomenology, where human beings reside, God – unless we endorse the God of theodicy, which I do not – has created the seventh day where we give flesh, or do not give flesh, to the divine call. It is actually the incarnational call, the summons of perpetual embodiment (ensarkosis). Here I approve the Scotist idea that creation is going on in every moment and working its way towards the eschaton. But the eschaton may never happen in history. There is a promise that it will, and there is an invitation and a desire, both human and divine, that it should. But we can also pull the trigger. We have the liberty to destroy the world of history as we know it, in which case there will be no Second Coming for this world since we will no longer be here. If we are not free to say no to God, then the incarnation is a rape, it is a violation, and so is every form of good and evil. According to such a model (theodicy) – which I utterly reject – God wills what is good or evil and ethics has
really nothing to do with us. This is where I remain a steadfast existentialist! I believe that human freedom is indispensable and I resist any divinity that threatens that.

This brings me to the other part of your question: whether or not we run the risk of becoming so open that we become indiscriminate. In *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, my main scruple, recurring throughout, is an ethical and hermeneutical scruple about discrimination. This was my main difference with Derrida at the three Villanova conferences and in various written texts – namely, that deconstruction was so open in that “every other could be every other”. I just want to suggest that we need some guide-rails as we traverse the abyss. Now Derrida does say that we have to act against evil, we have to act for justice. But where do we find the criteria for good and evil, for justice and injustice? That is the problem for Derrida. Of course, Derrida’s always been on the side of the good and the just. I’ve never known Derrida to support a malign cause. He has always defended the oppressed of the world. But for Derrida there are no hermeneutical criteria for reading the signs. I would like to keep those criteria pretty variable. I like the idea, in diacritical hermeneutics, of a plurality of narratives. Diacritical hermeneutics strives to preserve a balance between unity and difference, between dogmatism and relativism.

*Niall Keane:* But isn’t Gadamer’s application or appropriation of Aristotelian *phronēsis* essentially the deliberative and discriminating tool which you are calling for?

Well it is, and you’re right in a way. But my quarrel with Gadamer, the other face of hermeneutics, is that for him *phronēsis* is fundamentally grounded in ontology; it is a practical understanding grounded in the voice of Being, an interior ontological voice that is primarily found in the Greeks. Gadamer certainly took a step beyond Heidegger in opening a debate with plurality, but I don’t think he went far enough. For even when he admits to a certain alienation or slippage of the text, to the necessity of estrangement and the play of to and fro, he does so always with a view (shared by Heidegger) to finally arriving at some kind of *Aneignung* or reappropriation, some sort of “fusion of horizons”. By contrast, diacritical hermeneutics does not aim to return from the other to the same. It works towards an overlapping of concentric circles, where the overlap will always be very small vis-à-vis the space of difference. Here it is a question of emphasis, if you will. Gadamer’s hermeneutics – and I am deeply indebted to it – inclines more towards convergence, consensus, unity, oneness and, to some degree, sameness. That is not what I’m doing. With diacritical hermeneutics I’m trying to find a middle way between ontological fusion and ethical difference. Diacritical hermeneutics aims at this “way between” the one and the many. A very age-old project indeed!