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PHILOSOPHY TODAY

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EROS, DIACRITICAL HERMENEUTICS, AND THE MAYBE

Richard Kearney

Let me begin by saying how grateful I am to my two interlocutors. I have known both Pat Burke and Jack Caputo now for over two decades and count them amongst my favorite intellectual sparring partners. I first met Pat at a meeting of the Collegium Phenomenologicum in Perugia in the early nineties as he enthralled his students with rich readings of Merleau-Ponty. I first met Jack at a conference in Warwick in the eighties when he was showing some belligerent British academics what a Philadelphian street fighter can be when it comes to big questions. If thinking is thanking, this response is a modest attempt at both.

I

First, a response to Pat on the question of eros.

I am grateful to Pat for picking up on the central role of eros in my work. Focusing on my readings of the Shulammitte in “Eros Ascending and Descending” (2006), Molly Bloom in *Anatheism* (2010), and of Raphaele in my novels *Sam’s Fall* (1995) and *Walking at Sea Level* (1997), Pat touches on something central to my project: the notion of “carnal hermeneutics” as a work of embodied imagination. Though I would love to be able to respond to Pat on each of these examples, limits of space oblige me to confine myself to just two main questions: (1) the role of desire as erotic and sacramental; and (2) the role of the “dark God.”

Pat broaches both questions under the rubric of Carpocratianism. This is a heresy invoked in my novel, *Walking at Sea Level*, by an ex-novice called Klaus who espouses the Gnostic belief that God is both good and evil and that evil is inextricably linked with sexual perversion. This raises the specter of the “shadow God” running from Gnosticism to Schelling and Jung. As a corollary, Pat asks if the good Stranger invoked in *Anatheism* is really possible without some re-

course to an omnipotent God of Creation as found in the Thomistic metaphysics of *actus purus* (retrieved by Gilson from the Suarezian scholasticism of mere “essence”).

Let me respond to each question in turn.

First, eros. Pat opens his presentation with the suggestion that I myself might be a Carpocratian! This is Pat as *agent provocateur*; and I will endeavor to rise to the occasion. Pat points to a number of links between my fictional and philosophical writings on eros.¹ He identifies this crossover as a continuing feature of my work on poetics—from *Poétique du possible* (1984), *The Wake of Imagination* (1988) and *Poetics of Imagining* (1991) down to *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003).² I agree that this double fidelity to fiction and philosophy accounts for the central role of “narrative imagination” throughout my writing. So let me begin with a few words on fiction before moving onto philosophy (though it is often difficult to separate them).

Klaus is indeed a Carpocratian, but he is not a literary spokesman for my thinking! For me, Klaus represents a deviation of eros from the sacred to the perverse (his crimes put the Marquis de Sade to shame). And yet both forms of eros share something: they are each transgressive in a particular way. On the one hand, we have the Raphaele-Sam-Jack triangle; on the other, the Klaus-Gnostic intrigue. But while the former eros is sacramentally transgressive, the second is sacrificially so. (I acknowledge the common root, *sacer*). Klaus, the corrupt ex-monk, believes that the seduction and sacrifice of innocents is a privileged experience of the dark God—in keeping with the teachings of Carpocrates. Desire must be evil to be good; and for Klaus eros is evil (and all the more divine because of it). By contrast, Raphaele—echoing the Shulammitte—lives eros as sacred passion, at once libidinal and mystical. This libidinal mysti-

cism is something Jack too comes to assume after a long journey through the night. But not Sam, his rival twin. For Sam, the monk who seeks perfection in chastity, poverty, and obedience, eros is neither good nor evil but something to be surpassed. Otherwise he will steal his brother's lover (Raphaëlle). Eros must be kept in the shadows, embodying Sam's own shadow self. The novels play out the conflicts, tensions, and entanglements between the two senses of eros—sacramental and sacrificial. The twin brothers, Jack and Sam, oscillate at this crossroads of desire.

Fiction enjoys "poetic license" and knows no censorship. In the realm of literature all is permitted. But this does not prevent a certain ethical persuasion crossing the text as we move from action (the prefiguring mind of the author) to text (the configuring body of the text) back to action again (the refiguring life of the reader). Seen in this dynamic hermeneutic arc of "someone saying something to someone about something," literature is never neutral. Here I agree with Ricoeur. When we read the stories of Achilles or Jane Ayer we are moved by their deeply emotional and ethical dilemmas. The "effects" of the text are never blank. So while noting Barthes' "death of the author," one may equally note (as readers) that while Raphaëlle's eroticism brings life, Klaus's brings death. Raphaëlle echoes the Shulammitite's cry that "love is as strong as death," as she does Freud's wager on eros over thanatos (in the final paragraph of *Civilisation and its Discontents*). Klaus, by contrast, hands victory to thanatos over eros. The two novels are the battle between them.

Pat, or any other reader, might be forgiven for reading *Walking at Sea Level* in a Carpocratian light given that in many literary works the devil gets the best lines. (Think of *Paradise Lost* where, as William Blake observed, Milton is of the Devil's party and writes in chains when he deals with angels.) So I would say there are two kinds of "shadow" (to pick up Pat's central comment)—one which brings life and one which brings death. These two shadows correspond to two kinds of stranger: hostile or hospitable (from the same root, *hostis*). The Toland twins—Jack and Sam—find themselves in the middle of a

drama where the two shaded faces of eros play themselves out. As such they inhabit a space of unknowingness, of uncanny strangeness (*l'étrangeté inquiétante*) where the unfamiliar and hidden haunt their most secret desires. Mysterious repetitions of time and space, of name and taste. The unfathomable nature of Raphaëlle who remains a stranger to both brothers throughout. *Mysterion* in Greek means blindfold or unseeing, and is translated into Latin as *Sacer*. Eros, in these novels, is this medial space where the familiar and unfamiliar, the visible and invisible, interanimate. It is a place of unconscious hauntings best approached in the poetic attitude of Keats' "negative capability": the ability to be "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."

Now while there is no clear resolution in *Walking at Sea Level*—lest one compromise fictional liberty—there is, I think, a valid case for discernment when it comes to philosophical interpretation. Philosophy provides a conceptual space where poetics can critically engage with ethics. This, at least, is a hermeneutic hypothesis I have been pursuing from *The Wake of Imagination* to *On Stories* (2002). Philosophical hermeneutics opens a forum for mutual interrogations between the claims of imagination and practical wisdom.

So let me now try to respond to Pat more precisely. Just as there are two kinds of shadow, there are two kinds of eros: (1) a passion which affirms life in the face of death, and (2) pathology which succumbs to death in the face of life. Using the terms applied to Raphaëlle and Klaus above, we could say that erotic pathos may be sacramental or sacrificial. And the philosophical choice between them involves some element of critical discrimination. When Pat speaks of Merleau-Ponty's "ontological promiscuity" in relation to the chiasmus of flesh and word he is, in my books, speaking primarily of the former: sacramental passion. In this regard, Pat mentions the passage in *Anatheism* where I take up Merleau-Ponty's notion of "sacramental sensation" (the mutual conversion of sensing and sensed in everyday perception). For Merleau-Ponty sacramentality goes all the way down. He compares

the ontological promiscuity of invisible word and visible flesh to the Eucharistic transubstantiation of bread and wine into body and blood. This was a pivotal metaphor for the process of poetic transfiguration in the writings of both Joyce and Proust (see chapter 5, *Anatheism*). But it is not just a poetic metaphor. It also involves, I would say, an ethics of the gift: namely, the chiasmic crossing of guest and host. The one who receives as host becomes convertible with the one who gives as guest, and vice versa. This is what I call the sacred hospitality of the stranger. And taking up Merleau-Ponty's chosen idioms we might also call it "eucharistic promiscuity."

In his book *On Translation*, Ricoeur actually uses the term "eucharistic hospitality" to connote a double conversion of (a) bread and wine into body and blood and (b) of body and blood (the suffering servant) into bread and wine (the joy of nourishment). Ricoeur relates this, in turn, to the "linguistic hospitality" of translation where authors and readers become inter-convertible as hosts and guests. So we might say that an ontological promiscuity of eros becomes the basis for three other kinds: (1) a textual promiscuity of translation (between authors and readers through the traversable body of the text), (2) a theological promiscuity of transubstantiation (between word and flesh through the body of love); and (3) an ethical promiscuity of hospitality (between host and guest through the body of action: the giving and receiving of food). In all three cases we are dealing with a "carnal hermeneutics" of eros that goes all the way down.

It is this journey of eros descending and ascending which I have tried to describe in *Anatheism* (2010) and my related readings of mystical desire from the Song of Songs to Joyce and Proust: readings which follow not only the chiasmic model of Merleau-Ponty but also the feminist theo-poetics of thinkers like Catherine Keller and Julia Kristeva.

* * * *

Speaking of the work of hidden eros—tacit, wild, shadowed—Pat points to the phrase: "the double traversing of sensuality by transcendence and of transcendence by sensuality." That's right.

He astutely identifies, I think, just where human erotics and theo-erotics meet. And he goes on to link this with a "Franciscan impulse" in the work of Merleau-Ponty and Kristeva on sacramental eros. The impulse that recognizes that there is nothing so ostensibly "low," material, embodied, carnal, obtuse that cannot be redeemed as sacred. This corresponds to the hallowing of the everyday. It signals the mystical God of Claudel, cited approvingly by Merleau-Ponty as the "god not beyond us, but beneath us": a deity who "inhabits and authenticates our darkness." This is the *anatheos* that was lost and may be found again re-embodied in the cry of the street, the yes of Molly, the promiscuous passion of the Shulammite for her elusive, multi-named lover (Solomon, shepherd, bride groom).

This is where Pat poses the big question: how do transcendence and immanence consort? How do the sacred and profane negotiate their *liaison dangereuse*? Pat cites my statement that the sacred is "in" the secular but not "of" the secular and asks if this is compatible with Merleau-Ponty's *esprit sauvage*, his "hidden god" of "brute Being". Or to put it in another way, Pat wonders how my notion of sacramental eros relates to Merleau-Ponty's idea of "sacramental copulation with all the others who are in and of the world." And he asks, finally, how it might correspond, to Schelling's "dark god of indifference".

These are excellent questions and I have no easy answers. But Pat is right to conclude that my claim that the sacred is in the secular does not amount to saying that "god is in *all* things—good and evil." The anatheist God is not complicit with evil. It is not reducible to a Gnostic dialectic of god "struggling internally with the obscurity of his own abyssal ground." On the contrary, sacramental eros is the yes to life epitomized by Molly and the Shulammite in the face of the perverse eros of violence and abuse. Child rape or torture (to use Dostoyevsky's classic examples in *The Devils* and *The Brothers Karamazov*) are not part of Divine Providence; and if they were, we would be back with Gnostic theories of God's evil double or theodicies of Providence (e.g., Leibniz's apologist account of the Lisbon earthquake).

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What I call “sacred secularity” is a far cry from such apologetics. On the contrary, atheism argues that the sacred is in all things good, but absent in all things evil (understood as *privatio boni*). If God is good then goodness may be found in the midst of evil without being evil—in the sense that Etty Hillesum was in the Nazi holocaust but not of it: she embodied the good in giving cups of cold water to thirsting victims, thus “helping God to be God.”

The God of pathos—of suffering and passion, of allure and eros—stands in contrast to abstract ontotheologies of omnipotence. Which is why I place my atheist wager on an eros which invites us to let God be God. For *ana-theos* is a shadow god hidden in the folds of the world which cannot speak its name or enter human flesh unless we respond with the yes of eros. We are constantly choosing between life and death drives—eros and thanatos; though the choice of the former often involves a bold and subtle engagement with the latter. (Like Simone Weil conversing with George Bataille in a Paris café into the late hours.) Eros and thanatos are opposed but not split into separate worlds. They are not reducible to Chiliastic dualism. These are deep and complex matters casting both light and shadow. Freud and Nietzsche (and Bataille!) cannot be ignored.

So how tell the difference between enabling or disabling shadows? Unlike the dark deity of Gnosticism, the shadow of the divine stranger—in everyone—seeks the light of everyday epiphany without betraying the secret. It yearns to make the invisible visible in a superabundance of eros, infinitely alluring and always still to come. Without this “surplus” which breaches being there would be no insatiable desire for the Other. The Stranger remains in search of me as I am in search of the Stranger. Like the Shulammitte and her shepherd lover, sacred eros transfigures host into guest and guest into host, choosing hospitality over hostility. This is the wager of eros—desiring the *hostis*-friend beneath and beyond the *hostis*-enemy. It is the wager of love over fear which, as Pat concludes, means “bringing Christ back to the streets after his long sojourn at the right hand of the Father.”

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II

My response to Jack Caputo follows naturally from the above, especially on the question of hermeneutic discernment.

One of Jack’s main concerns is the difference between (a) my method of dia-critical hermeneutics, (b) Hegel’s dialectical method, and (c) his own method of radical hermeneutics.

In *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* I first outlined a model of dia-critical hermeneutics which I have been trying to develop since. This work, as Jack rightly notes, has to date been more performed than theorized, so I am grateful for this opportunity to clarify things further. I understand dia-critical in four main ways:

In the most basic sense, it involves a “critical” function of interrogation as this term has been understood from Kant’s three Critiques and Enlightenment inquiry down to the more contemporary movements of Critical Theory from Horkheimer and Benjamin to Habermas and Foucault. In this broad sweep, I would obviously include critiques of race, class, gender, power, and the unconscious: critical philosophies which carry on the legacy of the “three masters of suspicion” (Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche). In short, I understand critique as both an inquiry into the conditions of possibility of meaning as well as the critical exposure of “masked” truth and power in the name of liberation and justice. This aspect of dia-critical inquiry is one I find lacking in most previous hermeneutic methods (Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer) before Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion and Derrida’s deconstruction (where Jack and I overlap).

Second, dia-critical involves the “criteriological” function of discerning between competing and often conflicting claims to meaning (Jack is correct to note my departure from Derrida here). This involves hermeneutic retrievals of previous memories and testimonies as well as future oriented projects—utopian, messianic, eschatological. “Emancipation is itself a tradition,” as Ricoeur says; it is a form of “anticipatory memory.” The idea of emancipation does not erupt *ex nihilo*. It does not start *ex nihilo* with modern revolutions and the Enlightenment;

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rather it draws from a whole palimpsest of prior narratives of liberation going back to Biblical stories of exodus and the Socratic awakening. Aristotle addresses the question of ethical criteria already in the Rhetoric when he remarks that if you wish to communicate the meaning of a virtue you recount the story of someone who embodies it—e.g., Achilles for courage, Penelope for constancy, Tiresius for wisdom. Such narratives—ancient or modern—provide *phronēsis* with exemplary paradigms and patterns by which to measure, judge, and act. Otherwise how could one tell the difference between just and unjust actions? These differences require careful criteriological discriminations. In short, I am not against criteria as long as they involve vigilant discernments and distinctions.

Third, in keeping with the more precise dictionary definition of “dia-critical,” my hermeneutic method refers to a *grammatological* attention to inflections of linguistic marks. In this technical sense, dia-critics provides rules for differentiating between minute units of language (signifiers, graphemes, accents). Think, for example, of the difference which the following accents—grave, acute, circumflex, and diaeresis—make on the same letter in the French language: é, è, ê, ë. Or think of how *où* with an accent (“where”) differs from *ou* without accent (“or”). These silent, discreet signs distinguish between values of the same character. Small graphic demarcations thus serve to avoid confusion between otherwise identical letters, helping us differentiate between distinct meanings. In this sense, diacritics is all about *micro-reading*.³ And here, I think, I share common ground with Jack’s radical hermeneutics and Derrida’s deconstruction.

But in addition to this technical usage in linguistic and semiotic practice, dia-critics also has the older meaning of reading the body. The Greek terms, *dia-krinein* and *dia-krisis*, referred to the medical or therapeutic practice of diagnosing symptoms of bodily fervors, colorations, and secretions. In this respect, the word designated the hermeneutic art of telling the difference between health and disease. Such an art of reading between the lines of skin and flesh—in order to sound the movements of the soul (homeopathic

or allopathic) —was often a matter of life and death. Needless to say, this model of micro-logical reading of somatic and psycho-somatic symptoms has deep implications for the practice of philosophical reading in its own right. (I agree with Wittgenstein that philosophy is therapy.) In sum, diacritical hermeneutics should do you good!

These four characteristics comprise the basis of what I call “carnal hermeneutics.” We are concerned here with a hermeneutics that goes all the way down. It covers diacritical readings of different kinds of Others—human, animal or divine. Such a carnal hermeneutics has a crucial bearing, for example, on how we “sense” subtle distinctions between hostile and hospitable strangers (the same term, *hostis*, as noted above, can refer to guest or enemy). I would thus say that diacritical hermeneutics has two patron saints—the god Hermes and the dog Argos. For if Hermes brings us hermetic messages from above, Argos brings us animal meanings from below. The former guides our deciphering of cryptic messages and codes. The latter imparts a canine flair for recognizing the friend or enemy in the visitor (e.g., Odysseus returned to Ithaca). Diacritical hermeneutics may thus be defined as both sacred and terrestrial as it ranges up and down, from the highest voices of the absolute to the lowest scents of the abyss. While hands reach up, feet reach down. But no matter how high or low hermeneutic “sense” goes, it never leaves us totally in the dark. It is not blind but half-seeing and half-believing. It is a sort of incarnate *phronēsis* which sounds, probes, scents, and filters. Something like Wittgenstein’s seeing-as or Heidegger’s pre-understanding of mood (radicalized in Merleau-Ponty’s body-subject, or Kristeva’s semiotic self-in-process).

In contrast to deconstructive *sans-savoir*, diacritical *savoir* must be understood in its original etymological sense of tasting: *savourer*, *sapere*, *sapientia*. It is not knowledge, in the purely cognitive or theoretical attitude, but some kind of sense nonetheless. A sensing which makes sense in the three connotations of the French *sens*: sensation, direction, meaning. We are concerned here, in short, with a multilayered sensing which

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goes all the way up and down—like Jacob’s ladder—from thought to touch and back again.⁴

* * * *

Let me move on now to Jack’s other key question: my hermeneutic reading of “God after God.”

Jack asks about the relationship of our respective approaches to a “poetics of the im/possible”—deconstructive and dia-critical. We clearly agree that the notion of possibility which interests us transcends the binary opposition between the actual and the possible which, in traditional metaphysics and modal logic, placed the former above the latter. Both of us endeavor to go beyond these conventional models of possibility as *potentia* (Aristotle and scholasticism) and *possibilitas* (Leibniz and the rationalists) following Heidegger’s claim that “in phenomenology possibility stands higher than actuality.” We concur on this and gesture towards a notion of “possibility beyond the impossible” (as Angelus Silesius put it). So we are really aiming at the same phenomenon. But where Jack emphasizes the im-possible, I emphasize the hyper-possible. The hyper-possible, which is also a micro-possible, is something I have been seeking to explore from *La Poétique du Possible to The God who May Be* (2001). It is “poetic” in proposing an imaginative crossover between an ontology of the “loving possible” (after Heidegger’s *das mögliche Vermögen*) and an eschatology of the Perhaps (after Cusanus’ *Possess*). Such “onto-eschatology,” as I put it in *The God who May Be*, overcomes the metaphysics of presence twice (both as “being-as-presence” and “God-as-presence”). In terms of the second move, I propose a hermeneutic retrieval of the “possible beyond the impossible” in keeping with Silesius and Cusanus. The latter’s term *Possess* combines both *posse* and *esse* in a manner which opens both to a “surplus of meaning.” So understood, *Possess* has nothing to do with the Omni-God of absolute and immutable sovereignty—the *Ipsium esse subsistens* or *ens causa sui*. It is a far cry from the Scholastic *actus purus non habens aliquid de potentialitate*—for it is so superabundant in possibility (beyond the impossible) that it

calls for an endless possibilizing of what “is” in the light of what “is to come”: namely, the god who may be. This Perhaps (*Peut-être*) is the powerless power which capacitates all living things, enabling what-is-not to become. The Maybe is this not-yet which promises to become flesh if we respond to its call. It calls like “the cry of a child in the street” (Cusanus). For divine *Possess* is, paradoxically, a powerlessness which empowers us to become what we could not otherwise be. In short, it makes the impossible possible. When Joyce describes God as a “cry in the street” (*Ulysses*), I believe he has something similar in mind.⁵

Let me offer some illustrations. Think of an AA meeting where the addict invokes a “higher power” to enable him/her to overcome addiction—in other words, to make the impossible possible. The higher power (“however one wishes to understand it,” as AA says) operates as a sacred non-sovereignty which enables a person, enslaved to habit, to surmount the disease and say yes to a healing power. But this healing cannot happen if one does not consent to its ostensibly impossible “possibility.” The first step of AA recovery, in sum, is the recognition of one’s “helplessness” which in turn opens the possibility of receiving a promise of healing from someone or something “other” than oneself. And equally important is the twelfth step: namely, the recognition—witnessed by a community of AA members—that this possibilizing of what is impossible does not stop with the recovered person alone but opens onto an endless healing process for others. Having been healed one becomes a sponsor of other addicts. Not surprisingly, Thomas Merton describes AA as one of most important spiritual movements of the twentieth century.

This powerless power of *Possess* finds important testimonies in the great wisdom traditions of Western culture (our limited scope here alas) from ancient to modern times. Think of the primal biblical scenes where Sarah under the Mamre tree and Mary in Nazareth are approached by strangers who announce that the impossible act of conceiving a child is possible. Each welcomes a higher power which makes the impossible possible: they give birth. (“For what

is impossible to man is possible to God,” as Luke says.) This sacred Maybe is another name for “God After God,” the ana-God who is always coming after the God who has already come, the sacred stranger who is forever still to arrive. *Deus adventurus*. But this phenomenon is by no means confined to biblical traditions. Similar scenes can be found in Greek culture, to wit, the famous exchange between Glaucus and Diomedes in the *Iliad* where they lay down their arms in the name of the sacred promise of hospitality. (*Xenia* is the highest virtue of Hellenic culture and the greatest god is *Zeus Xenias*). Here as elsewhere, the handshake is the inaugural gesture of civilization where enemies become guests and hostility converts to hospitality. A gesture also witnessed in the famous handshakes of recent history where, in bold moments, impossible peace becomes possible—Gandhi, Mandela, Sadat, Havel, Hume.

But what, Jack asks, distinguishes this divine possibilizing from Hegelian becoming? Why is the dia-critical poetics of the possible not just one more dialectical system? Why does not the double departure of God—the double AA of “ana” signaling the death of the death of God—not fold back into a Hegelian synthesis? How does this differ from the negation of negation reaffirming itself as Absolute Concept? The *Aufhebung* of Spirit as new Self-identity of Presence?

First, unlike Hegel’s system, the Perhaps is about little things. It expresses itself in what I call a “micro-eschatology” of the Maybe where infinity incarnates in infinitesimal thisness (*haecceitas*). Witness the poets: Hopkins’ celebration of the divine in the smallest “dappled things,” Proust’s *petits miracles* of sacramental surprise, Joyce’s epiphanies of unexpected advents like “a cry in the street.” All of these escape the totalizing “Ruse of Reason.” Where Hegel’s dialectic reduces the stranger to the Same, diacritical hermeneutics unfolds as a carnal hospitality to the stranger as Other. Think—to return to our practice of narrative *phronēsis*—of Zeus appearing to Philemon and Baucus in the guise of a vagrant; or the guest who manifests divinity in the Hindu notion of *atithi devo bhava*; or Christ as the thirsting stranger (*hospes*) (Matthew 25). In

all these literary and religious examples, the divine is embodied in the alien who escapes the System.

The Perhaps contests the Dialectic’s claim to full adequation. It resists the lure of Total Resolution. Far from being some “immutable rock of ages” or “unshakeable warrantor of a promise” (as Jack suspects), we find here the fragile risk of May-Be, the possibility to be that cannot be unless we incarnate it. As such, *Posse* is an invitation rather than an invasion of human freedom. (And here, if there were more time, I would express some reservations about the violent terms associated with the Divine not only in Hegel but also in some of the later writings of Levinas, Derrida, and Marion.) For if the Perhaps connotes an eschaton it is as micro as the cry of a street child. The micro-eschaton is the opposite of the Macro-Telos. It refuses the speculative synthesis of a God-in-itself-for-itself. Understood diacritically, the *Posse* is not some dialectical conflation of the human and the divine: a temptation, we might note, not just for Hegel and the Idealists but also for any Process theology which construes God as an immanent becoming culminating in some Final Being.

So, far from collapsing horizons, ana-theism keeps them open and overlapping. Far from resolving conflicting interpretations, ana-theism preserves the hermeneutic circles in motion. It renounces the romantic nostalgia for some original oneness (of being, meaning, intention, authorship), declining to end the story, happy or unhappy. And it does this out of fidelity to an endless interplay between transcendence and immanence. As such, ana-theism holds that two is better than one—and that three (or four) is better still.

Let me conclude with one last illustration drawn from a poetics of the possible. Where might theo-poetics find a figure to describe the play of “ana”? Where locate an image to depict the double A-A of release and return, of leaving and arriving, retreating and advancing, withdrawing and inviting, ceding and receiving? What might this double move look like? Here I

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propose to hermeneutically retrieve the metaphor of *perichōrēsis*.

The God who-may-be is not, as Jack critically suspects, a God who will “be” as full self-identical presence at the eschaton. It is an ana-God who, after the last God, would continue forever in the mode of may-being, resisting always the lure of sovereign self-presence. Hence the fertile resonances of *perichōrsis*: *peri-chōra* meaning a movement around, a circling about a centre which, as *chōra*, remains empty, a centreless centre, a free space for the three persons to move in and out, back and forth, up and down. In this spaceless space of “ana”—as a movement “back, up, again, in time or space” (OED)—each divine person remains in part a stranger to the other, refusing to collide, conflate or collapse into a fusion of totalizing identity. The Trinitarian figures of Father, Son, and Spirit themselves refigure the earlier trinity of strangers who appeared to Abraham and Sarah under the Mamre tree. And this primal scene of hosting the three strangers (*hostes*) marks the inaugural moment of Abrahamic hospitality: a moment which prefigures Andrei Rublev’s famous icon of the three divine persons seated as guests around the bowl/*chōra*/womb/chalice. Thus we witness a mutual, chiasmic mirroring between New and Old testaments of the God-who-may-be and the humanity which enables this Word of promise to become flesh (in Sarah and Mary). The circular dance around the *chōra*-center is guaranteed by the free space between each of the dancers. They move toward and away from each other ceding place to the other so that each may sit down as guest at the table.

The Latin translation captures this ingeniously by offering a double graphemic rendering of the phonetically identical term—*circum-in-cessio* and *circum-in-sessio*. The swing-door of inward and outward hangs on the hinge of this *c/s* exchange. In the first option, the verb *cessio* conveys a gesture of surrendering one’s place to the incoming other, offering a free place in an act of self-emptying and self-giving. In the second option, the alternative spelling *sedo/sessio* describes a complementary gesture of moving in-

ward, taking a seat as one moves toward the other’s place and receives the gift.⁶

Here in this iconic image of Greek Oriental mysticism we find a powerful rendering of the double dance of immanence and transcendence, of position and disposition, of appropriation and disappropriation: the delicate and fecund tension between belonging and letting go. *Innigkeit* and *Gelassenheit*. But if this perichoretic tension is broken one risks lapsing back into the polar extremes of dogmatic theism (pure presence) or dogmatic atheism (pure absence). *Perichōrēsis* serves as a theo-poetic image of the interplay between being and non-being, resisting both the ontological temptation of “total being” as much as the meontological temptation of “no being at all.” The *chōra* at the heart of *perichōrēsis* is that chiasmus of empty fullness and full emptiness so powerfully attested by the mystics of the great wisdom traditions, and famously captured in the Buddhist *Heart Sutra*—“emptiness is form, form emptiness.” *Chōra* thus becomes the sacred “container of the uncontainable”: the *chōra achoraton*, celebrated in Greek murals of the Madonna’s womb as carrier of the child-to-come.⁷ (And the mention of Greek here is also a reminder of how the *chōra* of Plato’s *Timaeus* finds its place in Jerusalem. When it comes to *chōra* we follow James Joyce’s formula: “Greekjew is Jewgreek. Extremes meet.”)

The feminine womb at the core of the three-personed dance represents the perpetuation of human flesh, space, and time at the heart of divinity. It signifies an eschatological May-be forever dedicated to *amor mundi*—love of the world. This inexhaustible space in the eschaton is what Gregory of Nyssa called *epektasis*: a cleft in the body of God which ensures that the promised Kingdom is a place of perpetual desire, of *dunamis* rather than *stasis*, of endless giving and receiving. And it is precisely this cleft which enables hosts to become guests and guests hosts in circles of endless motion.⁸ At the eschaton, the more desire is answered the more it is reborn as desire: a desire beyond desire which fomented desire. What is imagined here is open-ended eros. Excess breeding ceaseless natality, re-turning to life again and again, to God after god after God.

But such an eschaton, I repeat, may be only if we allow it to be. If we say yes. Like the Shulamite, like Molly, like Raphaelle. That is the wager of ana-theism. The risk of eros.

* * * *

Let me respond finally, in summary fashion, to Jack's main questions.

Jack claims that the ana-God of diacritical hermeneutics is "untouchable." It is anything but. It begins with touch and taste (*sapere*)—the primary sensings of the infinite in the infinitesimal. Diacritical hermeneutics goes all the way down. It is carnal in its ascent and descent between gods and dogs.

Far from interpreting history as guaranteed by "divine warrantry," ana-theism interprets every moment of human history as radical responsibility. The Ana-God is the opposite of the Alpha-God in that it *promises* a kingdom which cannot come unless we risk everything. Nothing is given in advance. *Posse* needs us for its *esse*. It is up to us. Hence the irreducibility of anatheism as hermeneutic wager.

Jack contrasts my ana-theist reading of Perhaps with Derrida's deconstructive version. He claims the latter may be a "promise or a threat"; and this, he says, constitutes the "may-not" of undecidability inscribed within the May-be. For me, the may-not is, by contrast, a matter for *us* to decide on, not something intrinsic to the Maybe itself. The promise of *Posse* is, I hold, trustworthy but entrusts us with the task of enfleshment. Unconditional in its call but conditional on our response. The God-who-may-be is not itself a "threat," a "monster," a power of "terror" or "destruction";⁹ not even in part and in *potentia* as in some Gnostic-Jungian-Schellingian notions of dark or evil deity. What threatens destruction is uniquely "our" free decision to refuse the promise of justice and goodness. The threat, if it comes, comes from us alone by not heeding the call of justice-to-come or by replacing it with our own construct of a sacrificial Omni-God. *Posse* invites reception and risks rejection—by us. *Posse* says "let me become." But we are the ones who say yes or no. In this respect, diacritical hermeneutics remains not just phenomenological—

in its fidelity to lived experience—but profoundly existential in its commitment to human agency and freedom (often subverted, I find, in thinkers like Levinas and Derrida whose notion of the Other-in-me trumps human initiative and choice).¹⁰

As noted above, Jack suspects that ana-theism is ultimately a crypto-Hegelianism. Before ending, I need to respond more precisely to this challenge. The "ana" is, on Jack's reading, about a third moment which comes to dialectically reconcile the opposed positions of theism and atheism. He thus reads the "return" of ana-theism as a restoration of theism, albeit a second more mature version. Instead of such a "sublated" God, Jack proposes a deconstructive *chōra* "before" God.

But my position has always been that "ana" refers to both a God *before and after* God—that is, a God of possibility who calls us prior to our wager of response, prior to becoming "flesh" in our lives. Anatheism is not Hegelian "recomposition," as Jack claims. It is a radical dis-position which both precedes and follows the opposed positions of theism and atheism. As such it can lead, again and again, to new re-positionings (e.g., ana-theist theisms or ana-theist atheisms), but these never represent a Terminal Solution. If there is a choice of faith *after* theism and atheism, it is not a restoration of some propositional belief in divine being but rather a *fides* that expresses itself as *fidens*. Or better still as *confidens* in the sense of entrusting oneself to the promise, having confidence in the possibility of its impossible arrival, confiding in the word becoming flesh. And if one wishes to extend anatheist faith to the question of truth, I would say it is a matter of truth as trust ("by my truth") and betrothal (*fiançailles*). God as confidant and fiancée! As in the nuptial theo-erotics of the *Song of Songs*. So re-turning to God after God should be read not as Hegelian re-collection (*Erinnerung*), but as a perpetual turning anew in ever extending circles. This is what defines the re-turning (the "re-" understood as "ana") as a perpetual desiring and seeking after God. Not only *post-deum* but *ad-deum*, in the double "a" of *a-dieu* (through dia-critical ac-

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cent!). Hence a God of “hope against hope”—as Jack rightly claims.

So let me return, finally, to the question of the “third.” Jack writes: “By ‘Hegelian’ I mean that everything culminates in a moment of the ‘third’ ... of a more mature correction of two moments that, taken by themselves are one sided and abstract . . . letting their momentum unfold into a third, higher, concrete unity.” Let me address here the question of the “third.” *Ana* is not about three but four. It opens from and onto the “fourth” dimension of *chōra* which alone keeps the three persons free and mobile.¹¹ Without the *chōra* of Sarah’s womb (represented in Rublev’s iconic bowl offered to the three strangers under the Mamre tree) there would have been no Isaac, Jacob, or prophets. Without the *chōra* of Mary’s womb there would have been no Christ. And, by extension, without the *chōra* within each one of us—open to receive strangers every moment of our lives—there would be no landing site for the advent of the Maybe. The fourth dimension is what keeps the door ajar.

So when I say *ana* is the figure of four, not three, might I be coming close to what Jack calls the “innumerable”? Where we differ is, I suspect, on the question of “decomposition.” “In radical

hermeneutics,” says Jack, “one seeks not a higher composition but a decomposition, a deconstruction of each one (of the three) in its place.” Dia-critical hermeneutics tries to avoid both alternatives—of composition and decomposition—in the name of a dis-position that comes before and after these “positions”: a being disposed toward the Maybe that never stops coming as the fourth which promises, knocks, calls and—if we open the door—becomes the stranger at our table. “You must sit down, says Love, and eat my meat. So I did sit and eat” (George Herbert).¹² The fourth is the time-space where host and guest exchange places, without end. Four is the cardinal number of *perichōrēsis*.

A last word on *kenōsis*. I fully share Jack’s critique of classical kenosis as the act of an Omni-God willing to give up absolute Power so it can get it back with interest. Here kenosis is no more than divine investment in a rigged market. The ana-theist understanding of kenosis fully accepts a Maybe exposed to “fragility, contingency and provisionality”—for while the Maybe is unconditional in its loving it is utterly conditional upon us for embodying and realizing this love.¹³ God is impotent without us. The God-who-may-be calls. The rest is up to us.

NOTES

1. For my main philosophical writings on sacred eros see *Desiderio e Dio* (co-authored with Ghislain LaFont [Camaldoli, 1996]); “Desiring God,” chp. 4 of *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Indiana University Press, 2001); and “The Shulammitte’s Song: Divine Eros Ascending and Descending,” in *Toward a Theology of Eros*, ed. Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 306–07. See also the role of carnal hermeneutics in the readings of Joyce, Woolf, and Proust in chp. 5 of *Anatheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
2. We might also include here, *On Stories* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); *Poetics of Modernity: Toward a Hermeneutic Imagination* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1999); *Navigations* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006); and *Debates in Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), especially the dialogues with Ricoeur, Marcuse, Kristeva, Lyotard, Steiner, and Eco.
3. For my previous descriptions of dia-critical hermeneutics, see the “Introduction” to *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), and *Debates in Contemporary Philosophy*, 249–50.
4. For earlier sketches of a carnal hermeneutics, see *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, chps 3–5 and 7; and *Anatheism*, chp. 1–2, 5.
5. For discussions of a hermeneutics of epiphany in Hopkins, Joyce, Proust, and Woolf see *Anatheism*, chp. 5; and “Epiphanies of the Everyday,” in *After God*, ed. John Manoussakis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 3–20. On the notion of “sacramental Imagination,” see *Anatheism*, chp. 4.

6. For earlier discussions of “perichoresis” see *The God Who May Be*, 109–11; *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 207, and *Debates in Contemporary Philosophy*, 26 and 288–90. By a felicitous double play, the letters of AA may be related to Ana-theism as a two-step departure from the Omni-God of metaphysics—the first departure of a-theism from theism, and the second departure from this a-theism by way of a turn to ana-theism. The à-dieu which bids farewell to God is followed by a second a-dieu (in sense of *ad-deum*) which returns “toward” a God after God. God here simply serves as a name for “what we hope for” (Augustine), a name with many names (as the multiplicity of religions testify), names which seek to express the transformative promise of the Perhaps.
7. On the *chōra achōraton*, see *Anatheism*, 24–26, and *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (including the mural illustration of Mother and Child from the Monastery of Khora, Istanbul), 191f. I am indebted to John Manoussakis for this reference.
8. On Nyssa’s notion of *epektasis*, see my debate with Jean-Luc Marion, in “Hermeneutics of Revelation” in *Debates in Contemporary Philosophy*, 24; John Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), chp. 5–6; and Tamsin Jones, *A Genealogy of Marion’s Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 31–32, 43, 49.
9. See Derrida on the question of the Stranger as a potential “monster,” murderer, or traumatizing intruder in our discussion, in “Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility,” in *Questioning Ethics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999), 65–83, and “On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion moderated by Richard Kearney” in *God, The Gift and Postmodernism*, ed. John Caputo and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 73–77. Unlike *ana-theos*, Derrida’s *chōra*, like the abyssal deity of Schelling, does not love or care. It is indifferent.
10. See Derrida’s discussion of the “other in me” and Levinas’s discussion of the traumatizing invasion of the Other, in “Diachrony and Representation,” in *The Religious*, ed. John Caputo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 76–85.
11. We might think of an analogy here with the role of a fourth dimension in physics where it is only in an extra dimension that three-dimensional partial spatial views can be brought together to give an entire view. Since one sees only slices at any given time (e.g., circles of different proportions), it is in the extra fourth dimension that they are brought together to constitute a full perspective. In the four-dimensional analogy, solid three-dimensional objects change shape as we view three-dimensional slices of their full four-dimensional shapes. I am grateful to my friend and physicist from Harvard University, Leon Golub, for this suggestion.
12. See John Herbert’s poem, “Love Bade me Welcome,” and Kascha Semonovitch’s essay on this subject in “Incarnate Experience and Keeping the Soul Ajar,” *Religion and the Arts* 14:5 (2010): 515–690. See also my discussion with Derrida on our respective (hermeneutic and deconstructive) readings of resurrection and reconciliation in “Terror, Religion and the New Politics,” in *Debates in Contemporary Philosophy*, 3–14.
13. See my frequent discussions of *kenōsis* in *Anatheism*, 52–53, 133–37, 159–60. The eschaton opens kenotically onto the innumerable, constantly amplifying the inter-personal circles as it safeguards the inexhaustible *chōra*, womb, emptiness at its centreless centre. It thus expresses the gap of distance and difference—the cut and cleft of *kenōsis*—between each of its personas in a dance without end.

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