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**Of poetics and possibility:  
Richard Kearney's "Re-imagining God"**

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree M.Div  
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September 2011

*Eigenlijk geloof ik niets*

Eigenlijk geloof ik niets,  
en twijfel ik aan alles,  
zelfs aan U.

Maar soms,  
wanneer ik denk dat Gij waarachtig leeft,  
dan denk ik, dat Gij Liefde zijt, en eenzaam,  
en dat, in zelfde wanhoop,  
Gij mij zoekt,  
zoals ik U.

Gerard Reve

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## DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENT WORK

Student full name: Yolande Steenkamp

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Subject of dissertation: Of poetics and possibility: Richard Kearney's "Re-imagining God"

Declaration:

- (i) I understand the concept plagiarism and am aware of the University's policy in this regard.
- (ii) I declare that this dissertation is my own, original work. Where the work of others was used (whether from a printed source, the Internet or any other), such sources were duly recognised and referenced in accordance with departmental requirements.
- (iii) No work previously created by any other student or person was used under the pretence that it is my own.
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## SUMMARY

The study explores Richard Kearney's 2007 essay, "Re-imagining God," as an example of his characteristic hermeneutic exploration of the possible as a means of steering a middle way through philosophical extremes. Specifically, the essay is approached as a portal into Kearney's post-metaphysical proposal of re-imagining God eschatologically, that is to say as neither Being nor non-Being, but as the possibility-to-be. The hypothesis is that Kearney's notion of possibility engenders new prospects for discourse about God that moves us beyond metaphysical categories to allow for an eschatological understanding of God in terms of post-metaphysical thought.

After an overview of Kearney's recent work and a discussion of "Re-imagining God," the body of the dissertation identifies seven main aspects of Kearney's proposal (post-metaphysical discourse about God; the idea of enabling God; Kearney's eschatology and ethics; poetics; his hermeneutics; and imagination), and reflects on these largely by means of a literary study of Kearney's own writings on the topics in his other publications. Finally, the study considers the possibilities disclosed by Kearney's approach as an invitation to Systematic Theology to engage with philosophy in exploring post-metaphysical ways of speaking about God.

Apart from providing an explication on the most significant of Kearney's philosophical motifs in light of his invitation to re-imagine God as *posse*, the study outlines certain possibilities for the theological application of Kearney's proposal. Kearney's ultimate contention – that an eschatological revision of God may enable us to "retrieve certain neglected texts of our intellectual heritage and offer an account more consonant with the Messianic promise of theism," receives attention in the light of his invitation to theologians to enter into dialogue with philosophy and make their contribution to the "religious turn" in Continental Philosophy (Kearney 2001:80).

Keywords: Richard Kearney; postmodern theology; post-metaphysical theology; Exodus 4:13; possibility/impossibility; philosophy-theology debate; "Religious turn" in Continental Philosophy; imagination and theology; God-who-may-be.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I feel grateful to life and God for bringing me to this point. A heartfelt thanks to:

*My mother, father, and sister*, for your unwavering support in view of a somewhat unconventional life. Thank you for inspiring me to understand, love, and laugh before passing judgment. I love you.

*Annene Mullins*, for the sheer joy of your friendship, your wise and gentle guidance and understanding, for not judging my faults, for receiving me into your home and family, and for the many cups of Jacob's Krönung without which these pages would not have been written.

*Anne-Marth Mullins*, for the wonderful and unexpected gift of extended sisterhood, the bigness of your heart, your patience with my going-left-before-I-go-right-ways, allowing me to feel free, and for keeping my feet on the ground when I would gladly spend all my time in the clouds.

*Dr. Kobus Myburgh*, for your "Incredible Lightness of Wisdom," inspiring hermeneutic insight, commitment to sharing power, refreshing honesty and generosity, and for first helping me understand *sola gratia* on a boat in Turkey years ago.

*Randolph Potter*, for proof reading and being awesome! Thank you (and *Dr. Marinus van der Westhuizen*) for looking after my sister on the other side of the planet, and for writing me encouraging Facebook messages when I'm working while everyone on this side of the world is fast asleep.

*Oom Bobby*, whom I know only through the stories of the lives you've touched. Thank you to the *WR Hartman Trust* for the financial support that has enabled me to devote myself to my studies this year, and to *NG Oosterlig* for their financial contribution during the first year of the Master's programme.

*NG Wierdapark*, for allowing me a safe and constructive space to learn and experiment during my internship year. I am grateful to the Revv Kobus Myburgh, Jan Bester and Pieter Visser for the way in which you've shared your experience and time.

*Dr. Fanie Cronjé*, for your friendship, mentorship, encouragement and hospitality. I will always remember your life, scholarship and ministry as a first pointer to new possibilities at a time when I had thought myself lost to faith.

*Dr. Willem Nicol*, for walking with me and embodying the richness of silence in the face of knowledge arrogantly insisting on frustrating my every effort of making it into a saviour. Thank you for welcoming whatever shows up in the space of the candle, and for facilitating my journey back home.

My wonderful, patient, and always encouraging friends and family. Thank you *Anjenita Hugo* (for your unconditional acceptance, and for teaching me about allowing life to be as it is), *Keran Ducasse* (for being so creative, giving, intuitive and supportive), *Stephan Greyling* (for listening to me complain about whatever latest thing I'm not understanding), *Rudi Olivier* (for being you and wonderful), *Olga Coetzee* (for finding my work interesting), the *Rev. Stefan Botha* (for giving so freely of yourself, your time and your acceptance), *Tania Kotzé* (for that "connection"), *Nicol Mullins and Una Wilson* (for your support, your chair and your understanding), *Pierre Lourens* (for your advice and your faith in me), *Wanelda Terreblanche* (for giving me my longest friendship and a wonderful Tuesday when I needed it), *Prof. Frances Klopper* (for your enthusiasm and beauty), *Erik Immelman* (for your cut-to-the-bone approach to life), *Hanno Langenhoven* (for reminding us all to "tread lightly upon the earth"), *Benjan Knoetze* (for asking), *Corné Waldeck* (for being so interesting, caring and understanding – you are awesome!), *Dawie Venter* (for seeing), *Doret Jordaan* (for translating, entertaining and listening), *Pat Louw* (for your unconditional approval and enthusiasm), *Frans van Loggerenberg* (for first instilling in me the love for the Reformed tradition), *Ronald van der Bergh* (for the innocent joy with which you live), *Jo-Marí Schäder* (for being strong), *Sharon and John Gowland* (for always having me in your prayers), *Tommy Dry* (for loving me even if you'll never understand me), *Tshepo Morokong* (for broadening my horizons), *Prof. Andries van Aarde* (for the lasting impression you made on me), and *Prof. Jurie le Roux* (for your admirable honesty and contagious love of scholarship).

*Mienka and Spotty* (a.k.a. Bakboord en Stuurboord), as well as *Silas, Quinn and Krummel*, for your faithful, furry, four-legged company through many long nights of writing when everyone else have long since fallen asleep.

The University's *Academic Information Centre*, and especially all personnel at the Inter-Library Loan Department, for their fast, friendly and efficient assistance.

*Prof. Gert Prinsloo*, for your friendship and understanding. You will always remain an academic father to me, even if I had to part ways with Psalm 106. I am grateful for every opportunity pointed out, every encouragement, and every door opened. Thank you also to every lecturer, colleague and friend at the *Department of Ancient Languages*. I look back on those years with the fondest memories of learning and laughter.

*Prof. Conrad Wethmar*, who first taught me the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi*. Your humility, gentle spirit and devotion to the discipline of Systematic Theology have made a lasting impression and have taught me about the kind of person and theologian I hope to become.

*Prof. Johan Buitendag*, who first encouraged me to pursue further study in Systematic Theology. Thank you for your faith and the interest that you have shown in my personal and academic development.

*Prof. Dirk Human*, for all the years of providing me with academic opportunities and making it possible for me to continue my studies. Thank you for all the reassuring words over the years, and for looking beyond achievement when I couldn't.

*Prof. Danie Veldsman*, for introducing me to the work of Richard Kearney. I am grateful for every hour spent providing me the space to give a stuttering voice to the questions that have remained "silent all these years," and for meeting my efforts so poetically. Thank you for your sense of humour, for remembering Mienka's name, and for teaching me to take myself and life a little less seriously. This year has been an amazing gift and a personal *On first looking into Chapman's Homer*-experience. I look forward to continuing the journey.

Last, but not least, I wish to thank *Prof. Richard Kearney*, whom I have so far only had the pleasure of meeting through his work. It seems the dawn is breaking after a long and persistently dark intellectual night. I dedicate these pages to you.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Preliminary remarks

While philosophy may be his homeland, Richard Kearney traverses many disciplines and fields of interest. Born in December 1954, this prolific Irish author has published widely in fields as diverse as theology, politics, literary theory, and Irish studies. As a husband and father to two daughters, Kearney, a practising catholic, is professionally at home on both sides of the Atlantic, holding the Charles Seelig Chair of Philosophy at Boston College, and as visiting lecturer at University College Dublin. Having completed his doctoral work under Paul Ricoeur, Kearney shares his teacher's commitment to middle ways,<sup>1</sup> and has consistently explored the imagination as one way of creating new worlds that obliterate binary oppositions in philosophy. His 2007 essay, "Re-imagining God," serves as a case in point. Here, Kearney utilises the vocabulary of possibility and impossibility to suggest that

the infinite is experienced as possibility, even "when such possibility seems impossible to us" (51). He sets out three "concentric circles" which he believes show how a God of the possible "reveals itself poetically" (52). The first poetic mode is scriptural, the second is testimonial, and the third is literary. In each circle, he considers *dunamis* and argues for an understanding that discards the image of God as omnipotent ruler of a yet to come Kingdom, for and (*sic*) image of God as smaller, closer, and as making possible love and justice in this world. He imagines a god of small things who does not exclude, but rather continuously invites all to a feast (Johnson 2010:63).

It is this novel approach to thinking about God that this study wishes to espouse and understand in the context of Kearney's other writings.

#### 1.2 Research problem

The study explores the post-metaphysical possibilities for reflecting on God's relationship with his creatures that result from Kearney's utilisation of the imagination

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<sup>1</sup> As Kearney himself reflects on Ricoeur's hermeneutic: "He ... developed his own particular brand of philosophical hermeneutics. Determined to find a path between a) the romantic hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Gadamer and b) the more radical hermeneutics of the deconstruction (Derrida, Caputo) and critical theory (Habermas), Ricoeur endeavored to chart a middle way that combined both the empathy and conviction of the former and the suspicion and detachment of the latter. He himself never gave a name to this third path... But I think we would not be far wrong in naming it dialogical or diacritical hermeneutics" (Kearney 2005a:4)

as a way of negotiating between the oppositional understandings of God as either Being or Non-Being. It aims to understand his essay “Re-imagining God” within the larger context of his other publications on the subjects of the imagination, narrative, and “thinking God” post-metaphysically.

### **1.3 Hypothesis**

The hypothesis of the study overlaps to a large extent with the research problem. The reason for this lies in the fact that Kearney’s eschatological approach to the existence of God is explored in order to determine the extent to which his description of God’s power, grounded in the notion of possibility, can enable us to move beyond the traditional categories of actuality and omnipotence. The hypothesis is therefore that Kearney’s notion of possibility engenders new prospects for discourse about God that moves us beyond metaphysical categories to allow for an eschatological understanding of God in terms of post-metaphysical thought. Specifically, Kearney’s eschatological approach mediates between the polar opposition of thinking God as either Being or Non-Being, thereby providing post-metaphysical avenues for re-imagining God as the God-who-may-be.

### **1.4 Research method**

The research problem will be addressed by means of a literary study. After an introduction to Richard Kearney’s most important work surrounding his God-who-may-be project in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 will provide a discussion of “Re-imagining God,” his 2007 essay that is the subject of this dissertation. Chapter 4 raises questions that emerge from “Re-imagining God,” and reflects on these largely by means of Kearney’s own writings on the topics in his other publications. *The God who may be*, *On stories*, and *The wake of the imagination* will receive particular attention. Finally, Chapter 5 deliberates the possibilities disclosed by Kearney’s approach as an invitation to Systematic Theology to engage with philosophy in exploring post-metaphysical ways of speaking about God.

In practical terms, “Re-imagining God” can therefore be understood as a portal to the most significant aspects of Kearney’s thought regarding his hermeneutics of religion, since questions that emerge from this article will serve as

signposts to introduce the reader to the more intricate aspects of Kearney's thought on the subject.

### **1.5 Expected results**

Apart from providing an explication on the most significant of Kearney's philosophical motifs in light of his invitation to re-imagine God as *posse* (Chapter 4), the study will outline certain possibilities for the theological application of Kearney's proposal. Kearney's ultimate contention – that an eschatological revision of God may enable us to “retrieve certain neglected texts of our intellectual heritage and offer an account more consonant with the Messianic promise of theism,” will receive attention in the light of his invitation to theologians to enter into dialogue with philosophy and make their contribution to the “religious turn” in Continental Philosophy (Kearney 2001:80).

It is precisely such a hermeneutical exploration and such a dialogue with philosophy to which I intend to contribute with this study. But all in due course. Let us first meet Richard Kearney – the man and his work.

## CHAPTER TWO

### RICHARD KEARNEY: AN EXERCISE IN DIVERSITY

Since the late 1970s, inventive Irish author and philosopher, Richard Kearney, has been producing a body of work that is as voluminous as it is diverse. With interests ranging from philosophy, theology and religious studies,<sup>2</sup> to politics,<sup>3</sup> literary theory<sup>4</sup> and aesthetics,<sup>5</sup> this renowned academic has, in addition to being involved in political activities and inter-religious dialogue, also published fiction and poetry<sup>6</sup> (Gregor 2008:147). As is clear from his guiding commitment to interaction with other thinkers, Kearney's work has benefited much from the "disciplinary cross-pollination" occasioned by his wide range of interests (Gregor 2008:147). Since his body of work is simply too extensive to allow an overview here, this chapter will merely aim to introduce the reader to the author, scholar and man through an overview of his main works over the past 15 years, and then especially those relevant to this study.

Having written his dissertation under Ricoeur's supervision,<sup>7</sup> his work is recognised by the same commitment to mediating philosophy that characterised his mentor, as well as by the question of understanding other thinkers (Gregor 2008:148).<sup>8</sup> Proceeding from this foundation, however, recent years have witnessed

<sup>2</sup> Cf., e.g.: "Ideology and religion: a hermeneutic conflict" (1990b); "Thinking after terror: an interreligious challenge" (2006b); "Introduction: a pilgrimage to the heart" (2008); *Traversing the heart: journeys of the inter-religious imagination* (2010, ed. with Eileen Rizo-Patron); "Interreligious discourse" (2010f); "Translating across faith cultures" (2011d).

<sup>3</sup> Kearney has published widely on Irish culture and politics, but also on politics in general. Cf., e.g.: *The crane bag book of Irish studies* (vol. 1, 1982, ed., and vol. 2, 1987c, ed.); *Myth and motherland* (1984c); *The Irish mind: exploring intellectual traditions* (1984d); *Transitions: narratives in modern Irish culture* (1987d); *Across the frontiers: Ireland in the 1990's* (1988c, ed.); *Migrations: the Irish at home and abroad* (1990a, ed.); "Postmodernity and nationalism: a European perspective" (1992c); *Visions of Europe: conversations on the legacy and future of Europe* (1993b); *Postnationalist Ireland: politics, culture, philosophy* (1997a); "Terror, philosophy and the sublime: some philosophical reflections on 11 September" (2003b); "Thinking after terror: an interreligious challenge" (2006b); *Navigations: collected Irish essays, 1976-2006* (2007); "Memory in Irish culture: an exploration" (2010d); "Renarrating Irish politics in a European context" (2010e).

<sup>4</sup> Cf., e.g.: "Utopian and ideological myths in Joyce" (1991c); "Poetry, language, and identity: a note on Seamus Heaney" (1998).

<sup>5</sup> Cf., e.g.: *Continental aesthetics: romanticism to postmodernism – an anthology* (2001, ed. with David Rasmussen); *Sacramental aesthetics: between word and flesh* (2007c); "Aesthetics and theology" (2010g).

<sup>6</sup> Apart from the significant role that narrative plays in his philosophical writings, Kearney has also published poetry volumes and written a number of his own novels. Cf., e.g.: *Angel of Patrick's hill* (1991b); *Sam's fall* (1995b) and *Walking at sea level* (1997b).

<sup>7</sup> *Poétique du Possible: Vers une Herméneutique Phénoménologique de la figuration* (1984e).

<sup>8</sup> Cf., for example: *Dialogues with contemporary continental thinkers: the phenomenological heritage* (1984a); "Kierkegaard's concept of God-man" (1984b); "Friel and the politics of language

Kearney increasingly developing his own opinions in his writing (Gregor 2008:148). As a case in point, Kearney developed his hermeneutics of religion in the trilogy entitled “Philosophy at the Limit,” of which I can only provide a brief overview here. As the title suggests, all three volumes are concerned with what transpires when humans are confronted with the apparently inexplicable and unthinkable, and share the conviction that, when this happens, “*narrative matters*” (Kearney 2002b:157, note 2).

The first book of the trilogy, *On Stories*, looks to the central role that narrative and storytelling plays in the lives of human beings, giving us a “shareable world,” (2002b:3) and providing us with a most viable form of identity (2002b:4). Before outlining a philosophy of storytelling in the final section, Kearney treats a number of actual stories to explore the interweaving of fiction and history. This he does by first examining the relation between fiction and history in the three individual cases of Stephen Daedalus, Ida Bauer (Dora) and Oskar Schindler. Secondly, he turns to collective narration by considering the national stories of Rome, Britain and America. Having given his theorising the opportunity to be “instructed by the rich complexities and textures of these narratives,” Kearney concludes in his final section that narrative matters:

Whether as story or history or a mixture of both (for example testimony), the power of narrativity makes a crucial difference to our lives. Indeed, I shall go so far as to argue, rephrasing Socrates, that the unnarrated life is not worth living (2002b:14).

In *Strangers, gods and monsters: ideas of otherness* (2002), Kearney considers the strange, the divine and the monstrous as three different figures of otherness, illustrating the essential role of hermeneutical understanding for responding to the other (Gregor 2008:148). He follows, namely, a diacritical

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play” (1987a); *Modern movements in European philosophy* (1987b); “Paul Ricoeur and the hermeneutic imagination” (1988b); *Poetics of imagining: from Husserl to Lyotard* (1991a); *Heidegger’s three gods* (1992a); “Between Kant and Heidegger: the modern question of being” (1992b); “Derrida and the ethics of dialogue” (1993a); *States of mind: dialogues with contemporary thinkers on the European mind* (1995a); *Modern movements in European philosophy* (1996); “Aliens and others: between Girard and Derrida” (1999); *On Paul Ricoeur: the Owl of Minerva* (2004a); *Debates in Continental Philosophy: conversations with contemporary thinkers* (2004b); “Time, evil, and narrative: Ricoeur on Augustine” (2005b); “Paul Ricoeur and the hermeneutics of translation” (2007b); “Returning to God after God: Levinas, Derrida, Ricoeur” (2009); “Eucharistic aesthetics in Merleau-Ponty and James Joyce” (2010a); “Ricoeur and Biblical hermeneutics: on post-religious faith” (2010b); “Paul Ricoeur” (2010c); “Paul Ricoeur: dying to live for others” (2011a); “Disabling evil and enabling God: the life of testimony in Paul Ricoeur” (2011b); and “Derrida’s messianic atheism” (2011c).

hermeneutics (as a middle road between romantic and radical hermeneutics) to retrieve selfhood through the “odyssey of otherness,” as a way to address diverse experiences of human estrangement (Thompson 2003:101). Aiming to offer an interpretation of difference that will make us more hospitable to the other, he holds that the deconstruction of the *cogito* needs to be supplemented by a critique of the postmodern obsession with otherness, bringing us to “a proper relation to ourselves-as-others”: “With no limit on the Other we lose ourselves, and with no limit on the ego we lose the other” (Thompson 2003:101-102).

Kearney’s essay, “Re-imagining God,” forms part of the third leg of the trilogy, the 2001 publication *The God who may be: a hermeneutics of religion*. In this volume, he treads the ground between onto-theology’s metaphysical God as pure being and negative theology’s God as pure non-being, choosing instead to articulate a narrative eschatology (Thompson 2003:102), where.

God neither is nor is not but may be. That is my thesis in this volume. What I mean by this is that God, who is traditionally thought of as act or actuality, might better be rethought as possibility. To this end I am proposing here a new hermeneutics of religion which explores and evaluates two rival ways of interpreting the divine – the *eschatological* and the *onto-theological*. The former, which I endorse, privileges a God who possibilizes our world from out of the future, from the hoped-for eschaton which several religious traditions have promised will one day come. [...] Instead of seeing possibility as some want or lack to be eradicated from the divine so that it be recognized as the perfectly fulfilled act that it supposedly is, I proffer the alternative view that it is divinity’s very potentiality-to-be that is the most divine thing about it (Kearney 2001:1-2).

Through the course of the book, Kearney takes the reader on a journey past four biblical texts from which he attempts to draw “latent eschatological” meanings in the light of contemporary phenomenological, hermeneutic and deconstructionist debates (2001:1).<sup>9</sup> Such readings will, he claims, challenge the tendency of metaphysics to “subordinate the possible to the actual as the insufficient to the sufficient,” and thereby allow for Kearney’s view that divinity’s very “potentiality-to-be” is the most divine thing about it” (contrary to the metaphysical antagonism

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<sup>9</sup> Kearney explores the theme of transfiguration – first in terms of a phenomenology of the *persona*, and then by referring to epiphanic moments (e.g. the burning bush [Ex 3:15], the transfiguration of Christ on Mount Thabor [Mk 9, Mt 17, Lk 9, Jn 12], and what Kearney refers to as the story of divine-human love in the Song of Songs) (2001:9).

against possibility “as some lack to be eradicated from the divine so that it be recognized as the perfectly fulfilled act that it supposedly is”) (Kearney 2001:1-2).

Two companion volumes – originally intended as a single collection – were published as a response to the trilogy.<sup>10</sup> *Traversing the imaginary: Richard Kearney and the postmodern challenge*, edited by Peter Gratton and John Panteleimon Manoussakis, focuses on Kearney’s contributions to the themes of ethics, politics, culture and aesthetics (Gregor 2008:148). Questions regarding the status of the imagination and the imaginary in postmodern thought, as well as dialogues between Kearney, Ricoeur, Derrida, Martha Nussbaum, Charles Taylor and Noam Chomsky on the intellectual’s part in forming the social imaginary comprise Part One (Gregor 2008:148-149). Kearney’s involvement in the political processes of Ireland form the theme of Part Two, and Part Three is concerned with the significant role of narrative in Kearney’s thought (Gregor 2008:149). *Traversing the imaginary* can be seen as a worthy supplement to Kearney’s *On stories*, as well as to the socio-political aspects in *Strangers, gods, and monsters* (Gregor 2008:149).

*After God: Richard Kearney and the religious turn in Continental Philosophy*, edited by John Panteleimon Manoussakis, contains an abundance of critical response to the religious aspects of *Strangers, gods, and monsters* and *The God who may be*.<sup>11</sup> A collection of seventeen essays, the volume addresses the theme of “philosophy about God *after God* – that is to say, a way of thinking God otherwise than ontologically,” as well as the problematic of the otherness of the Other (Manoussakis 2006a:xviii). Critical questions regarding Kearney’s God-of-the-possible concern, especially, the meaning of possibility when used in terms of God, Kearney’s interpretation of other philosophers, and the methodological status of Kearney’s hermeneutics of religion (Gregor 2008:149).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The volumes are comprised of essays by, amongst others, Kearney’s teachers (Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor), interlocutors (Noam Chomsky, Jacques Derrida, Martha Nussbaum), peers (Jack Caputo, Merold Westphal, Kevin Hart) and former students (John Panteleimon Manoussakis, Brian Treanor) (Gregor 2008:148).

<sup>11</sup> In 2006, with the publication of *After God*, John Panteleimon Manoussakis notes in his introduction to the volume that, since the publication of *The God who may be* and *Strangers, gods, and monsters*, “over a dozen international academic societies have devoted conferences, book panels, and seminars to major aspects of Kearney’s hermeneutics of religion” (2006a:xviii; cf. 2004:3).

<sup>12</sup> “Where exactly does it stand in terms of doctrinal commitments? Is it still phenomenology? Can phenomenology even make the sort of moves Kearney makes, or should he reckon with the fact that

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The essay that is the topic of this dissertation, “Re-imagining God,” appeared in a 2007 publication edited by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, *Transcendence and beyond: a postmodern inquiry*. Dedicated to Jacques Derrida for his significant contribution to the first three of Villanova University’s conferences on “Religion and Post-modernism,” the volume contains the conference proceedings from the fourth conference. In the spirit of Derrida, the title for the conference, “Transcendence and beyond,” carries intentional ambiguity in the word “beyond”: “Moving beyond transcendence may mean finding an ultimate transcendence or it may mean ceasing to speak of transcendence and focusing on immanence. The articles in the volume take both approaches (Johnson 2010:61).

Philosophically, Kearney positions himself in the introduction to *The God who may be* as speaking from a phenomenological perspective, in that he endeavours to offer – as far as possible and before crossing over to hermeneutic readings – descriptive accounts of phenomena such as *persona*, transfiguration, and desire. To this end, he was influenced most by philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Levinas, Ricoeur, and Derrida (Kearney 2001:5). Religiously, his point of departure is Christian, and the traditions he draws from in the book are mostly Western. But this is due more to his “limited competence” confining him to the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman traditions than to any Euro-centric presumptions (Kearney 2001:6). As he puts it:

Religiously, I would say that if I hail from a Catholic tradition, it is with this proviso: where Catholicism offends love and justice, I prefer to call myself a Judeo-Christian theist; and where this tradition so offends, I prefer to call myself religious in the sense of seeking God in a way that neither excludes other religions nor purports to possess the final truth. And where the religious so offends, I would call myself a seeker of love and justice *tout court* (Kearney 2001:5-6).

In 2009, Kearney published *Anatheism: returning to God after God*, where he consults phenomenology, hermeneutics, existentialism and political considerations, in asking the question of how we are to address God after the many tragedies that we have seen in recent history (Soultouki 2010:445). Moving in-between theism and atheism, Kearney proposes anatheism as a movement back and beyond God and a

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he cannot avoid making metaphysical claims? Can this sort of philosophy sidestep a deeper encounter with theology proper?” (Gregor 2008:149).

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revisiting of the idea of God as a gift, and faith as “a matter of reception and interpretation, rather than a teleological choice” (Soulouki 2010:445-446).

Richard Kearney does not write as a theologian, but as a philosopher who feels “entitled to draw from religious scriptures as sources, and to draw from phenomenology as a method” (Kearney 2006a:367). His work deserves to be considered theologically, but the boundaries that he outlines for himself should be kept in mind, namely that he is a philosopher doing a hermeneutic reading of texts – religious and otherwise (Kearney 2006a:367). Before undertaking his reading of the “defining epiphanic moments” in *The God who may be*,” he makes clear that

(w)hat follows is not [...] a strictly theological or exegetical account – a task beyond my competence – but an attempt to chart a hermeneutic path of thinking along the tracks and traces of the Possible God who comes and goes. My approach here, as elsewhere in this volume, draws liberally from post-Heideggerian accounts of the self-other relation (Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, Kristeva, Ricoeur, and Derrida), taking, in this instance, an additional cue from the Johannine promise: “A little while and you will no longer see me; and again a little while and you will see me” (John 16:16-20) (Kearney 2001:9).

Born in December 1954, Kearney’s work is in many ways still one in progress, and far from being concluded. Since the early 1980s, he “has been a consistent voice for an eschatological hope that faces the limitations of our human condition while championing the power of our imagination to transcend, in small yet substantial ways, these limitations” (Gedney 2006:90). The voluminous reactions to his work, especially his trilogy, illustrates not only the relevance of his philosophical writings for the study of religion in our day, but also the relevance of theology and religion for philosophy as it is being produced by major thinkers today (Manoussakis 2006a:xviii).

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## CHAPTER THREE

### “RE-IMAGINING GOD”:

#### A POSTMETAPHYSICAL REFLECTION ON TRANSCENDENCE

It is my wager in this essay that one of the most telling ways in which the infinite comes to be experienced and imagined by finite minds is as *possibility* – that is, as *the ability to be*. Even, and especially, when such possibility seems impossible to us (Kearney 2007a:51).<sup>13</sup>

Not the only, nor even most primordial way, Kearney insists, is this coming of God as possibility. It is, rather, a way that has traditionally been largely neglected in favour of metaphysical categories, and one that he aims to investigate through poetic conjecture that is informed by phenomenological description and hermeneutical interpretation (2007a:51-52).<sup>14</sup> This approach he works out in three concentric circles, a threefold “variation of imagination” consisting of the scriptural, the testimonial and the literary, through which he hopes “to identify some key characteristics of the God of the possible as it reveals itself to us poetically” (Kearney 2007a:52).

### 3.1 The Scriptural circle

The biblical message – that what humans would deem impossible is in fact possible for God – forms the basis for Kearney’s rethinking God as *posse*<sup>15</sup> (2007a:52).

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<sup>13</sup> Kearney’s essay was published as part of the conference proceedings from the fourth Villanova University conference on “Religion and Postmodernism” that was held from 18-20 September, 2003 (Johnson 2010:61). “Re-imagining God” was included in Part 2, “Re-imagining Traditional Transcendence,” where all the essays “take up the challenge of imaging God in a post-modern context and present ways of re-imagining the divine in order to overcome tendencies towards abstraction, idolatry, and injustice, . (sic)” (Johnson 2010:62-63).

<sup>14</sup> Kearney’s call for a philosophical hermeneutical approach that is “instructed by” the phenomena and signs in and through which God appears and signals to us, reflects his acknowledgment of the impact that our own interpretations, narrations and imaginations have on God’s coming to us (2007a:51).

<sup>15</sup> With the terms *posse* and *esse*, Kearney borrows from Nicholas of Cusa’s formulation *posse esse* (“possibility to be,” or *possest*, the compound term that he coined) (Kearney 2001:103). Commenting on how Heidegger plays on the latent etymological affinities between the two German verbs “loving” (*mögen*) and “making possible” (*vermögen*), Kearney acknowledges that by translating the operative term, “*mög-liche*,” as “*posse-ible*,” he is suggesting “that the shared semantic sense of *mögen* (to love) and *vermögen* (to be able/to make possible) is perhaps best captured by the Latin term *posse* – a term which according to Nicholas of Cusa, lies at the very heart of divine being, qua God’s power to love. Cusanus coined the term *possest* to capture this double belonging of possibility and being which he identified with God” (Kearney 2001:92).

Whether it is that humans are enabled to enter the kingdom,<sup>16</sup> become children of God in the kingdom,<sup>17</sup> experience the possibilising power of the Spirit,<sup>18</sup> or that Mary is told that the *dunamis* of God will overshadow her and that she will bear a son, since “nothing is impossible with God,”<sup>19</sup>

...divinity – as Father, Son, or Spirit – is described as a possibilizing of divine love and logos in the order of human history where it would otherwise have been impossible. In other words, the divine reveals itself here as the possibility of the Kingdom – or if you prefer to cite a *via negativa*, as the *impossibility of impossibility* (Kearney 2007a:52).

Along the way of his “hermeneutical poetics of the kingdom,” Kearney finds that, *spatially* speaking, the “metaphors, parables, images, symbols” that communicate the eschatological promise in the gospels, refer almost invariably to a God of “small things” (2007a:52).<sup>20</sup> As perhaps most telling of these images,<sup>21</sup> the kingdom is described as a minute grain that, once it sprouts, matures into a

<sup>16</sup> Mk 10:27: “Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, *but not for God; for God all things are possible.*’” (...Παρά άνθρωποις αδύνατον, ἀλλ’ οὐ παρὰ θεῶ· πάντα γὰρ δυνατὰ παρὰ τῷ θεῷ). “The eschatological ‘possible’ invoked in Mark 10 suggests that when our finite human powers – of doing, thinking, saying – reach their ultimate limit, an infinite *dunamis* takes over, transfiguring our very incapacity into a new kind of capacity. The reference to the kingdom in this passage of Mark points forward to the Resurrection of the Just ‘possibilized’ (*dia tes dunameos*) by the laws of Moses, to the wisdom of the Prophets, and to the dying and rising of Jesus (1 Corinthians 6:14). It alludes to the possibilizing power of the Spirit (*dunamis pneumatos/pneuma tes dunameos*) which raised Christ from the dead and prepared the disciples for their prophetic mission” (Kearney 2001:81).

<sup>17</sup> Jn 1:12: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, *he gave power to become children of God...*” (ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι). Confusingly, the word *δύναμις*, which later becomes important in Kearney’s argument, does not appear in the Greek, as Kearney alleges. The word translated “power” here is, instead, ἐξουσία. The same oversight appears in Kearney’s discussion of the text in *The God who may be* (2001:81). However, the eschatological motifs that he points out revolving around this passage, remain: “First, we are told that these children are born not ‘of blood’ but ‘of God.’ A new category of natality and filiality thus emerges which sees progeny as eschatological rather than merely biological – that is, as pro-created from the future rather than causally engendered by the past. This marks the transition from tribal to cosmopolitan affiliation, so celebrated by Paul, the opening up of a kingdom which includes each human being as son or daughter of the returning God. No longer mere offspring of archaic gods and ancestors, we are now invited to become descendants of a future still to come, strangers reborn as neighbors in the Word, adopted children of the *deus adventurus* – the God of the Possible” (Kearney 2001:81).

<sup>18</sup> The *δύναμις πνεύματος*, evidenced in the Pauline letters, especially to the Corinthians and the Romans.

<sup>19</sup> Lk 1:35-37: “The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the *power* (δύναμις) of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. *For nothing will be impossible with God.*’” (ὅτι οὐκ ἀδυνατήσει παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ πᾶν ῥῆμα).

<sup>20</sup> Kearney borrows here from Arundhati Roy’s award-winning novel, *The God of small things*.

<sup>21</sup> The kingdom of God is associated, for instance, with little children (Mk 10:13-16), the yeast in the flour (Lk 13:20-21), and a minute pearl of invaluable price (Mt 13:45-46).

flourishing, capacious tree (2007a:52).<sup>22</sup> This recurring motif of the kingdom as the last or least or littlest of things stands distinctly over against the standard interpretation of the kingdom as symbol of sovereignty, omnipotence and ecclesiastical triumph, so that one could speak of a microtheology over against the “standard macrotheology of the kingdom” (Kearney 2007a:53).<sup>23</sup>

Kearney considers next the *temporal* figures of eschatology, in which he sees an invariable achronicity that describes the kingdom as having *already come* (incarnate here and now through acts of mercy), yet always remaining a possibility *yet to come* (Kearney 2007a:53). The Kingdom, being eternal, transcends all chronologies of time and is therefore both “*already* there as historical possibility” and “*not yet* there as historically realized kingdom ‘come on earth’” (Kearney 2007a:53-54). This forms the basis for Kearney’s significant choice to translate God’s answer to Moses at the burning bush (אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, Ex 3:14)<sup>24</sup> not as the traditional “‘I am who am’ (*ego sum qui sum*), but as ‘I am who may be’” (Kearney 2007a:54).<sup>25</sup>

### 3.2 The testimonial circle

In what Kearney calls the testimonial or confessional genre, he explores a poetics of the Kingdom in light of a few religious writers who reverse the metaphysical tendency to “presuppose an ontological priority of actuality over possibility,” in favour of a “new category of possibility – divine possibility – *beyond* the traditional opposition between the possible and the impossible” (2007a:54).

<sup>22</sup> Mk 4:30-32: “He also said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.’”

<sup>23</sup> Kearney points out the following elements of the biblical witness as significant: judgment in the kingdom depends on our treatment of the “least of these” (ἐλαχίστων) (Mt 25:40); Christ’s *kenosis* whereby he renounced absolute power; that it is easier for the powerless and vulnerable to enter the Kingdom than the rich and powerful; Jesus embracing the *via crucis* and resisting the temptation to immediate glorification, thereby uprooting hierarchies of power not through force but as a “bruised reed” that does not quench a “smoldering wick” (Is 42:1-4) (Kearney 2007a:53).

<sup>24</sup> The Hebrew is wrongly transcribed in Kearney’s essay as “*eshher ayeh esher*” (2007a:54). He has it correctly, however, as ‘*ayeh esher ayeh*’ in his more thorough treatment of the passage in *The God who may be* (2001:20-38).

<sup>25</sup> Kearney warns against hypostatizing the “name,” and urges that it be relocated within “the orbit of a dynamic mandate”: “And this means reading the formula in terms of function rather than substance, in terms of narrative rather than syllogism, in terms of relation rather than abstraction. God’s ‘I shall be’ appears to need Moses’ response ‘Here I am’ in order to enter history and blaze the path towards the Kingdom” (2002a:78).

Kearney begins with Angelus Silesius' maxim: "God is possible as the more than impossible" (Kearney 2007a:54). The eschatological notion of possibility to which Silesius points here surpasses, for Kearney, the metaphysical dualism of possibility versus impossibility.<sup>26</sup> Silesius drafts the possible as a generous outpouring of divine play and depicts creation as perpetual giving of possibility which "calls us toward the Kingdom" (Kearney 2007a:54). Kearney observes a similar idea in Rashi's interpretation of Isaiah's God calling on his creatures to be his witnesses,<sup>27</sup> as well as in the words of Holocaust victim Etty Hillesum, "You God cannot help us but we must help you and defend your dwelling place inside us to the last" (Kearney 2007a:55).<sup>28</sup> Instead of understanding the *dunamis* of God as the imperial power of a sovereign, it refers for them to the *power of the powerless* – a dynamic call to love which makes it possible for humans to transform their reality. This way, which chooses suffering above doing evil and which loves adversaries, echoes the kenotic, self-emptying, crucified God whose "weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:25, 28). Indeed, the "God witnessed here goes beyond the will-to-power" (Kearney 2007a:55).

Kearney suggests that Etty Hillesum's notion subscribes to a long, but often neglected, biblical heritage that is evident, for example, in the many narratives where people could have chosen not to answer or not to follow God's beckoning to be

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<sup>26</sup> This is because it transcends "the three conventional concepts of the possible as: (1) an epistemological category of modal logic, along with necessity and actuality (Kant); (2) a substantialist category of *potentia* that lacks its fulfillment as *actus* (Aristotle, the scholastics); and (3) a rationalist category of *possibilitas* conceived as a representation of the mind (Leibniz, the idealists)" (Kearney 2007a:54).

<sup>27</sup> Rashi interprets God's call, "I cannot be God unless you are my witnesses," to mean that God comes to be whenever love and justice is born witness to in the world (Kearney 2007a:54). Kearney provides no Scripture reference for this verse from Isaiah, which prevents me from comparing this translation with the original Hebrew.

<sup>28</sup> Kearney brings Hillesum's words to bear on the question of theodicy by considering the implications of Nicholas of Cusa's dictum regarding the eschatological God, "God alone is all he is able to be" (*Deus est omne id quod esse potest*) (Kearney 2007a:55). Nicholas' notion of God as an "abling to be" (*posse* or *possest*) (Kearney 2007a:55) stands opposed to the God of metaphysical omnipotence, according to which evil is justified as part of the divine will. Instead, proceeding from the assumption that God is all good, Kearney concludes that, if God is "all that he is able to be," then it follows that God is not omnipotent in the traditional metaphysical sense. Because God is unable to be all good *and* evil things, and is therefore not responsible for evil, Etty Hillesum understood well that God cannot rescue us from evil, but that it is *us* who must help God to be God. Despite this, David Tracy has criticised Kearney for not having a stronger focus on suffering: "The ultimate horror of onto-theology is theodicy. Kearney's rejection of theodicy does not become an occasion to reflect upon innocent suffering, the Cross, Apocalypse, but there is no reason why his thought cannot be developed in this way" (2006:353-354).

manifested through them.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, no measure of love would have met the hatred of the Holocaust if Hillesum and others had not “let God be God” by their openness to the love of God inside them (Kearney 2007a:55). He concludes,

For if God’s loving is indeed unconditional, the realization of that loving posse in this world is conditional upon our response. If we are waiting for God, God is waiting for us. Waiting for us to say “yes” – to hear the call and to act, to bear witness, to answer the *posse* with *esse*, to make the word flesh – even in the darkest moments (Kearney 2007a:55-56).<sup>30</sup>

Writing about “possibility beyond being,”<sup>31</sup> which stimulates our desire for the good and for abundant living, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite suggests that “(b)eing itself only has the possibility to be from the possibility beyond being,” and that it is “from the infinitely good *posse* (*dunamis*) of what it sends to them (that) they have received their power (*dunamis*)” (Kearney 2007a:56). Kearney relates this notion to a different section where Dionysius writes of the God of little things,<sup>32</sup> and describes it as a “passionate invitation to embrace a microtheology of the Kingdom,” a “solicitation to embrace an eschatology of little things” (2007a:56). Gerald Manley Hopkins’ “Pied Beauty” is also suggestive of this kind of microtheology (Kearney 2007a:56). Recording God’s grace in small and scattered epiphanies of the ordinary sort, it is for him “the court fool, the joker in the pack, the least and last of these”<sup>33</sup> rather than the mighty monarch that epitomise the Kingdom (Kearney 2007a:56).

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<sup>29</sup> He refers to Elijah hearing the “still small voice” of God in the cave, to Mary who submitted to God’s will with the incarnation, and to the fishermen, tax collectors and prostitutes who answered the call to follow Jesus, so providing us with a Gospel witness (Kearney 2007a:55).

<sup>30</sup> “Another [...] feature of this conception of God as possibility is the claim that although God has a bearing on human history, human history has a comparable bearing upon God” (Masterson 2008:257). He refers to Kearney’s formulation that recognises God as “someone who *becomes with us*, someone as dependent on us as we are on Him” (Kearney 2001:29-30, cf. 2002a:80).

<sup>31</sup> In Greek, ὑπερουσιας δυναμεος.

<sup>32</sup> “God is said to be small as leaving every mass and distance behind and proceeding unhindered through all. Indeed the small is the cause of all the elements, for you will find none of these that have not participated in the form of smallness. Thus, smallness is to be interpreted with respect to God as its wandering and operating in all and through all without hindrance ‘penetrating down to the division of the soul, spirit, joint and marrow,’ and discerning thoughts and ‘intentions of the heart,’ and indeed of all beings. ‘For there is no creation which is invisible to its face’ (Hebrews 4:12). This smallness is without quantity, without quality, without restraint, unlimited, undefined, and all embracing although it is unembraced” (Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, in Kearney 2007a:56).

<sup>33</sup> Hopkins’ poetic view of the eschatological kingdom: “In a flash, at a trumpet crash, // I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and // This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond, // Is immortal diamond” (Kearney 2007a:56).

Hopkins' deity is thus "one of transfiguration rather than coercion, of *posse* rather than power, of little rather than large things"<sup>34</sup> (Kearney 2007a:57).

### 3.3 The literary circle

In this section, Kearney explores the more explicitly poetic epiphanies of the possible, thereby moving beyond the confessional limits of theism or atheism and welcoming the liberty of imagination that poetic freedom offers. In this endeavour, he pauses briefly at Emily Dickinson's link between possibility and imagination, which guided her presentation of the eschatological possible;<sup>35</sup> at Rabelais' "*J'avance vers le grand possible*" in his last moments, through which he affirmed the possibility of life through death;<sup>36</sup> and at Robert Musil's claim that "possibility is the dormant design of God in man" that is awakened by our poetic dwelling in the world.<sup>37</sup> Musil poetically suggests our true vocation in history to be one of utopian invention that "involves an audacious surpassing of given reality toward imagined possibility" (Kearney 2007a:57).<sup>38</sup> In a poem addressed to George Santayana, Wallace Stevens conveys the correspondence between the simple and the eschatological by the image of a candle flame that irradiates the real in the light of the celestial possible.<sup>39</sup>

Rainer Maria Rilke combines the eschatological promise of a coming God with the erotic anticipation of a waiting lover when he suggests that we think of God as the coming one who will someday arrive (Kearney 2007a:58). If the most perfect one is preceded by everything less perfect than himself, then he is able to "choose himself out of fullness and superabundance," and "include everything in himself." And then, "(a)s bees gather honey, so we collect what is sweetest out of all things and build him." What follows for Rilke is an attitude of vigilant attention and

<sup>34</sup> The lines are from Hopkins' poem "*That nature is a Heraclitean fire, and of the comfort of the resurrection.*"

<sup>35</sup> "Possibility is a fuse lit by imagination" (Kearney 2007a:57).

<sup>36</sup> "I advance toward the great possible" (Kearney 2007a:57).

<sup>37</sup> Musil makes this suggestion in his novel *A man without qualities* (Kearney 2007a:57).

<sup>38</sup> His remarkable passage deserves to be quoted in full: "One might define the meaning of the possible as the faculty of thinking all that *might be* just as much as what is [...] The implications of such a creative disposition are huge [...] The possible consists of much more than the dreams of neurasthenics; it also involves the still dormant plans of God. A possible event or truth is not just the real event or truth minus the 'reality'; rather it signals something very divine, a flame, a burning, a will to construct a utopia which, far from fearing reality, treats it simply as a perpetual task and invention. The earth is not so spent, after all, and never has it seemed so fascinating" (Robert Musil, *A man without qualities*, in Kearney 2007a:57).

<sup>39</sup> Wallace Stevens, *To an old philosopher in Rome* (Kearney 2007a:57).

expectancy, and he counsels the young poet to whom he writes to wait patiently and realise that “the least we can do is to make coming into existence no more difficult for Him [God] than the earth does for spring when it wants to come”<sup>40</sup> (Kearney 2007a:58).<sup>41</sup> This eschatological desire transcends human existence to include the universe in its entirety “as it awaits, yearns and prepares itself for the *prima vera*” (Kearney 2007a:58).

### 3.4 The meaning of the possible

Much depends on the content we give to the concept of the *possible*, and Kearney sets out by listing two alternatives. The first defines possibility along the lines of established convention as “a category of modal logic or metaphysical calculus,” an approach which in fact brings God closer to the impossible than the possible. The second yields different stakes, seeking to “reinterpret the possible as eschatological *posse*, from a post-metaphysical poetical perspective” (2007a:58). Kearney seems to approach a meaning for *posse* that reminds us of Lefebvre’s concept of “lived space,”<sup>42</sup> defying conventional dialectic categories, and bringing us closer to Kierkegaard’s “passion for the possible” as the portal to faith (Kearney 2007a:59):

For now we are talking of a *second* possible (analogous to Ricoeur’s “second naïveté”) *beyond* the impossible, *otherwise* than impossible, *more* than impossible, at the *other side* of the old modal opposition between the possible and the impossible (Kearney 2007a:58-59).

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<sup>40</sup> In his endnotes, Kearney points to the “incarnational tendency of theo-eroticism,” which sees the earth as permeated with the seeds of divinity, “incubating within the finite historical world like latent potencies waiting to be animated and actualized by the infinitely incoming grace of God as transcendent *posse*.” If removing this transcendent *posse* results in “a purely immanentist dialectic (evolutionary materialism, or, at best, process theology),” then overlooking the “immanence of terrestrial and human potencies” produces an “inordinately inaccessible and abstract deity – a sort of acosmic alterity without face or voice (e.g., deism or deconstruction).” Kearney feels that a hermeneutical poetics of divine *posse* can succeed in treading a middle ground between these extremes (2007a:64, note 9). Cf., also, Masterson (2008:257): “One significant feature of this view is the insistence that God conceived as possibility is not to be understood simply as an intrinsic possibility of the historically evolving world. God has indeed a relationship to the historical world, but as a transfiguring possibility *beyond* its own intrinsic possibilities. Here we are in the domain of eschatology not teleology, of ethical invocation not latent purpose.”

<sup>41</sup> This reminds Kearney of Kierkegaard’s “pregnant sense of the possible” – “the interweaving of the divine and the human in patient prayer and longing” (2007a:58).

<sup>42</sup> Henri Lefebvre’s protest against dialectic categories (in his anti-capitalist fashion) found expression in his concept of *lived space*. As opposed to traditional dialectic thinking, he proposed a trialectic approach to space that encompassed three fields: the physical (nature, the cosmos – the spatial practice of society which he calls *perceived space*); the mental (logical and formal abstractions – representations of space, which he calls *conceived space*); the social (spaces of representation, space as it is mediated to us by symbols and images, and which engages the imagination, which he calls *lived space*) (Lefebvre 1991: 11, 38-39).

At this point, Kearney returns to the Greek word *dunamis*, which he touched on under the Scriptural circle, and considers two competing translations. While metaphysics usually renders the term as *potestas/potentia*, so that it becomes a matter of potency in terms of power, causality, and substance, Kearney advocates an eschatological rendering of *dunamis* as *posse/possest*, as a “gracious and gratuitous giving which possibilizes love and justice in this world” (2007a:59).<sup>43</sup> The implications of the meaning we give to this word is perhaps most visible in the different interpretations given to the advent of the Messiah by advocates of the different approaches. While the first approach sees the coming Messiah as triumphant and describes him in militaristic terms, Kearney understands his proposal of divine *posse* as “more healing than judgmental, more disposed to accept ‘the least of these’ than to meet out punishment and glory” (2007a:59).<sup>44</sup>

### 3.5 Conclusion: risks of a possibilising God

By way of conclusion, Kearney turns to the question that perpetually begs an answer once the metaphysical categories of speaking about God is challenged: if we are to help God be God (Hillesum), what implications does our failure to do so have – for both God and God’s promise? He addresses this question by way of the eschatological promise of a new earth:

Sometimes I have been asked what would happen to the God of the Possible if we were to destroy the earth? How can God’s promise of a kingdom on earth be fulfilled if there is no earth to come back to? What might be said of the existence of God in such a scenario? (Kearney 2007a:59).

Kearney offers an answer in three parts. *Firstly*, he suggests that, as “eternally perduring and constant” (in the sense of remaining faithful and attentive to us in each present moment), “God would live on as an endless *promise* of love and

<sup>43</sup> Commenting on Lk 1:34-37, Kearney notes that the English rendering of δύναμις as “power” carries overtones of a metaphysical or chronological cause and does not do justice to the “dynamic sense of eschatological possibility inscribed in the conception and nativity of Jesus and John. For what appeared *impossible* (*a-dunaton*) for both Mary and Elizabeth in the Annunciation narrative is made *possible* (*dunaton*) by God. ... But by any account an extraordinary enigma of the impossible being transfigured into the possible: one powerfully captured in the appellation of Mary, in certain ancient Byzantine churches, as ‘container of the uncontainable’ (*khora tou akhoretou*). The Madonna is *khora* transfigured by the Word” (Kearney 2001:83).

<sup>44</sup> So, for example, Kearney finds Peter Damian’s God, who can prevent evil by recreating the historical past, to be a God who has the power to decide whether good or evil prevails in history, and therefore as a God of theodicy. He judges this approach of “*potestas* rather than *posse*” to be “a far cry” from Etty Hillesum’s summons to help God be God in the face of evil, and “a world away from the God of little things” (Kearney 2007a:59).

justice,” even if we were to fail this covenant by frustrating its historical fulfilment *on earth* (2007a:59). While God would be like “a spouse abandoned by a spouse,”<sup>45</sup> or the *posse* like a “tree deprived of its greening,”<sup>46</sup> and while the divine advent would not see a historical, human future, it would still remain enduringly faithful – “a ‘yes’ in the face of our ‘no’” (Kearney 2007a:59-60).<sup>47</sup>

*Secondly*, Kearney proposes that all the “eschatological ‘moments’” where, in the past, the divine was incarnated in the world through acts of *caritas*, would be preserved by the divine *posse* as eternal *memory* (past). “In kairological as opposed to merely chronological time, these instants would be eternally “repeated” in divine remembrance” (Kearney 2007a:60).<sup>48</sup> The “deeply eschatological” character of the biblical command to “remember” (זכר) translates God’s mindfulness of creatures into a form of “anticipatory memory” which preserves a future for the past. As Psalm 105 promises that God will always remember his covenant, we can rest assured that “the promise made at the beginning of time is kept by the divine *posse* as an ‘eternal’ remembrance of both the historical past and present right up to the *parousia*” (Kearney 2007a:60).

The *third* part of Kearney’s answer suggests that, should world annihilation prevent a future realisation of the divine *posse* as a kingdom come *on earth*, we cannot by such an act of destruction prevent God from starting over again, since *posse* is precisely the possibility of endless beginning (Kearney 2007a:60). But, since the *posse* of the Kingdom is not only a promise for universal humanity, but also for unique selves “whose singular good, but not evil, will be preserved eternally in the recollection of the *deus adventurus*,<sup>49</sup>” such selves would “return with *posse* – as

<sup>45</sup> Kearney is drawing from the bride/bridegroom analogy from the Song of Songs (2007a:59).

<sup>46</sup> Kearney borrows this metaphor from Hildegard of Bingen (Kearney 2007a:59).

<sup>47</sup> “God helps us to be more fully human; we help God to be more fully God – or we don’t. If we don’t, we can blow up the world and that’s the end of humanity, and that’s the end of God qua Kingdom on earth because there’s nobody here anymore to fulfil the promise. There is no one home to receive God’s call. In that instance, God remains as pure *desiring*, of course, as pure *poeticizing* – except God’s world has just been broken up by God’s own creatures – us. And to revisit the terms of *The God Who May Be*, God remains *transfiguring*; but there’s nothing left to transfigure because we’ve destroyed it” (Kearney 2006a:372).

<sup>48</sup> Kearney finds echoes of this idea in the biblical assurances that God will remember the faithful who lived and died in history (e.g. Is 49:14-15), coupled with the pledge to erase the memory of evil (e.g. Ps 34:16-19).

<sup>49</sup> In English, the “coming God.”

part of God's eternal promise – but without the *esse* of a Second Coming” (Kearney 2007a:60-61).

While Kearney claims “the poetic license of a free imaginative variation” with regards to the above propositions (2007a:59), he finds textual support for them in the “Palestinian formula’ of eschatological memory” from late Jewish and early Christian literature, with textual witness in Psalms 37, 69, and 112 (“the righteous [...] will be remembered forever, v. 6). Here, the memory of God refers both to creatures remembering their Creator in worship and to the Creator recalling creatures in an eternal re-presentation of the past before God (Kearney 2007a:61). Similarly, the Ecclesiastical prayer for God to remember God's children bears witness to this remembering as an “effecting and creating event which is constantly fulfilling the eschatological covenant promise” (Jeremias in Kearney 2007a:61).<sup>50</sup>

In the New Testament, the notion of eschatological memory is found in the form of a double “repetition” that looks to the past and the future simultaneously (Kearney 2007a:61). The Eucharistic formula<sup>51</sup> serves as an example, especially when the repetition-injunction is translated according to the Palestinian memorial formula: “(d)o this so that God may remember me.” This appeal to divine memory echoes, for Glatzer, the third benediction of the grace after Passover meal, which appeals to God to remember the Messiah as well as “all thy people” (Kearney 2007a:61). This ties the remembrance of past suffering to the hope for the eschatological future. This is why, in the *kairological* rather than *chronological* sense, the petition for repetition may be translated as: “God remembers the Messiah in that he causes the kingdom to break in by the parousia” (Kearney 2007a:61).

Paul's addition to the Eucharistic remembrance formula<sup>52</sup> also suggests such a bilateral temporality (divine memory recalling the *past* as *future*) (Kearney

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<sup>50</sup> In the full passage, Jeremias refers to such remembrance as an “effecting and creating event which is constantly fulfilling the eschatological covenant promise [...] When the sinner ‘is not to be remembered’ at the resurrection, this means that he will have no part in it (Ps. Sol. 3.11). And when God no longer remembers sin, he forgets it. God's remembrance is always an action in mercy or judgment” (Kearney 2007a:61).

<sup>51</sup> Lk 22:19: “Do this in remembrance of me,” (εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν).

<sup>52</sup> 1 Cor 11:23: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, *you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*” (τὸν θάνατον τοῦ κυρίου καταγγέλλετε ἄχρις οὗ ἔλθῃ). The preposition ἄχρις with the subjunctive often has eschatological reference in the New Testament, so that Kearney suggests that the crucial phrase, “until he comes,” may be read “in light of the liturgical *maranatha* (Come, Lord!) invoked by the faithful in their prayers for the coming of God” (2007a:62). In the words

2007a:61). Instead of remembering the death of God as a mere historical event from the past, then, the remembrance formula celebrates it as an eschatological advent, the inauguration of a New Covenant (Kearney 2007a:62). It therefore becomes understandable why Luke mentions the gladness that characterised the meals that the earliest Christian communities shared together (Ac 2:46). Kearney summarises:

In sum, the close rapport between the Eucharistic request for repetition and the Passover ritual, suggest that for both Judaism and Christianity the Kingdom advent is construed as a *retrieval-forward of the past as future*. The remembrance formula might be interpreted accordingly as something like this: 'Keep gathering together in remembrance of me so that I will remember you by keeping my promise to bring about the consummation of love, justice and joy in the parousia. Help me to be God!' (Kearney 2007a:62).

For Kearney, the "Post-God of *posse*" does not stop knocking on the door and does not cease inviting us to the feast until every door is opened, every creature included, and every heart opened to the invitation to the kingdom – the kingdom which

is a cup of cold water given to the least of these, it is bread and fishes and wine given to the famished and un-housed, a good meal and (we are promised) one hell of a good time lasting into the early hours of the morning. A morning that never ends (Kearney 2007a:63).

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It is important that these propositions be understood in the context of what Kearney aims to accomplish, and interpreted within the playfield that he has demarcated for himself, namely that of hermeneutical poetics. This allows him what he calls a "certain imaginative liberty vis-à-vis the strictures of theological dogma, speculative metaphysics and empirical physics," while he maintains that a fruitful dialogue remains open with all three these disciplines (2007a:62). To an extent it is such a dialogue with theology that this study has in mind: exploring the imaginative probings that enable him to travel beyond the chartered waters and fixed landscapes

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of Joachim Jeremias, "(t)his proclamation expresses the vicarious death of Jesus as the beginning of the salvation time and prays for the coming of the consummation. As often as the death of the Lord is proclaimed at the Lord's Supper, and the *maranatha* rises upwards, God is reminded of the unfulfilled climax of the work of salvation until [the goal is reached, that] he comes. Paul has therefore understood the *anamnēsis* as the eschatological remembrance of God that is to be realized in the *parousia*" (Kearney 2007a:62).

of metaphysical, epistemological and dogmatic categories, and reflecting about what is gained, what is lost, and what is promised along the journey.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### QUESTIONS EMERGING

In this chapter, we consider some of the suggestions made by Kearney in “Re-imagining God,” discussed in Chapter Three. Many elements of his reasoning in this 2007 essay are the result of years of reflection, and therefore may appear ungrounded or disconnected due to the spatial and temporal constraints of a conference paper. For this reason, the main elements of Kearney’s thought, as it presents itself in “Re-imagining God,” will here be considered mainly in light of his other publications. The aim is to provide a larger context against which the condensed arguments in the above essay may be understood.

#### 4.1 *Posse and esse: Kearney’s post-metaphysical God*

In *The God who may be*, Kearney explores how we may move from old metaphysical notions of God – “as disembodied cause, devoid of dynamism and desire” – to a more eschatological idea of God as possibility to come: “the *posse* which calls us beyond the present toward a promised future” (Kearney 2001:3). It is wiser, he holds, to understand divinity as a “possibility-to-be” than as pure being (onto-theology) or pure non-being (negative theology), and he proposes a re-evaluation of history as a chiasmus where “God traverses being, the biblical *’eshet* intersecting with the Greek *einai* and transfiguring it according to its image and desire” (Kearney 2001:4).<sup>53</sup> He envisions his God of the possible as passionately involved in human affairs and history, and therefore as much closer than the metaphysical and scholastic deity to

the God of desire and promise who, in diverse scriptural narratives, calls out from burning bushes, makes pledges and covenants, burns with longing in the song of songs (*sic*), cries in the wilderness, whispers in caves, comforts those oppressed in darkness, and prefers orphans, widows, and strangers to the

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<sup>53</sup> In a dialogue with Derrida on 16 October 2001 in New York City, Kearney positions his God-who-may-be in relation to Derrida’s *Khôra* and the ontological God of Being: “I suppose I could see the God-who-may-be emerging from *khora*, from that space. If I had to try to locate it, this god, I would place it somewhere between the God of messianism and Being on the one hand and *khora* on the other. The God-Who-May-Be hovers between these two. It is not identical with *khora*. This is the sort of dialogue I develop throughout the book with you and Jack Caputo. I am aware of our differences on the issue of how one speaks about God. For me it is a hermeneutic problem: how do you speak, and name and identify a God without falling back to metaphysics and onto-theology and yet without saying ‘God is *khora*’” (Manoussakis 2004:10). (At this point Derrida denies that he ever said that “God is *khora*,” to which Kearney replies, “I know you never said that but you see the problematic ...” (Manoussakis 2004:10).

mighty and the proud. This is a God who promises to bring life and to bring it more abundantly. A God who even promises to raise the dead on the last day, emptying deity of its purported power-presence – understood metaphysically as *ousia*, *hyperousia*, *esse*, *substantia*, *causa sui* – so that God may be the promised kingdom (Kearney 2001:2).

#### 4.1.1 Readings of Exodus 3:14

Since the epiphany of Exodus 3:14 occupies such a significant place in Kearney's argument, it is necessary for us to consider his reading of the narrative. He reads the epiphany, namely, as an example of religious transfiguration,<sup>54</sup> and aims at identifying and addressing the enigma of a deity

which appears and disappears in a fire that burns without burning out, that ignites without consuming, that names itself, paradoxically, as that which cannot be named, and that presents itself in the moment as that which is still to come (Kearney 2001:20).

Kearney sees the enigmatic formula whereby God answers Moses' request to disclose his name, אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה,<sup>55</sup> as God declaring his own *incognito* and manifesting himself in terms of an indefinable divine self-definition where the verbal play leaves us wondering whether God is reducing himself to a metaphysics of presence, or in fact rendering himself immune to it (2001:22).<sup>56</sup> He proceeds to discuss two main traditions of interpretation, one which he terms the "ontological," and the other "eschatological," before offering an "onto-eschatological" interpretation as a third, median way. He suggests an interpretation of the Transfiguring God as "I am who may be" as a way of obviating the extremes of being and non-being, so that "Ehyeh'asher'ehyeh might thus be read as signature of the God of the possible, a God who refuses to impose on us or abandon us, traversing the present moment while opening onto an ever-coming future" (Kearney 2001:22).

<sup>54</sup> "Not only is the bush transfiguring itself but so too is the God who speaks through it (*per-sona*). And it threatens to transfigure Moses too" (Kearney 2001:21).

<sup>55</sup> The original Hebrew is translated into Greek as *Εγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν* (*ego eimi ho on*), into Latin as *ego sum qui sum* and into English as "I am who am," "I am he who is" (Kearney 2001:22). These English translations serve as an illustration of the extent to which most Western translations have been influenced by "Greek ontology and particularly the metaphysical emphasis on presence and identity. This is surely one of the main reasons why the non-Hebrew versions of Ex 3:15 take the form of the present tense of the verb to be – "I am he who is" (New Jerusalem Bible) or "I am that I am" (King James Bible)" (Kearney 2001:117, note 2).

<sup>56</sup> The fact that this rare passage adds the verbal promise "to be" to the "I Yahweh" of other passages, suggests that the Tetragrammaton partakes "in the semantic field of the verb traditionally rendered as 'to be' – in the constative or conditional mood" (Kearney 2001:22).

*The ontological reading of אֱדֹנָי אֲשֶׁר אֶדְוֶנֶה*

With the Greeks rendering the phrase – *Εγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν* (*ego eimi ho on*, I am the one who is) – in terms of *εἶναι*, the verb “to be,” Augustine<sup>57</sup> and the Latin interpreters read the phrase as an affirmation of being, denying any fundamental difference between the Latin *ego sum qui sum* and the *esse* of metaphysics (Kearney 2001:22). Consequently, early and medieval theologians judged the formula to be the highest expression of “*vere esse, ipsum esse*, that is, Being-itself, timeless, immutable, incorporeal, understood as the subsisting act of all existing” (Kearney 2001:22). Augustine’s views (that the *qui est* of the Exodus formula is the principal name of God, and the highest formulation of being), was developed further by Aquinas. For both these theologians, “the *esse* of God is nothing other than his *essentia*, and as such exists eternally in the present without past or future: that is, without movement, change, desire, or possibility,” and so the God of Exodus became enthroned as “the most fully-fledged ‘act of Being’”<sup>58</sup> (Kearney 2001:23).<sup>59</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Augustine turned the verbal “is” of God into a substantive formula (*Confessions* 13.31,46). When commenting directly on Ex 3:14, this move became more explicit, with Augustine saying of God that “he is Is,” that is to say God is Being itself (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 101.10) (Kearney 2001:23). “Consolidating this quasi-Parmenidean reading, Augustine makes an important distinction between what God is for us (his *nomen misericordiae*) and what He is in Himself (his *nomen substantiae*). While the former more historico-anthropomorphic perspective is conveyed by the formula ‘I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,’ the latter – safeguarding the absolute, inaccessible, and transcendent character of God – is expressed by the *ego sum qui sum*. It is this latter sense that Augustine has in mind in the *De Trinitate* when he identifies the God of Exodus with the Greek-Platonic notion of substance (*ousia*), understood as an a-temporal, immutable essence: ‘He is no doubt *substantia* (*sic*), or if one prefers, he is the *essentia* which the Greeks called *ousia* ... *essentia* comes from *esse*. And who “is” more than He who said to his servant Moses: “*ego sum qui sum*” ... That is why there is only one substance or immutable essence which is God and to which being itself (*ipsum esse*) properly belongs’ (*De Trinitate* 5.2, 3). Augustine concludes from this that anything that changes or is capable of ‘becoming something which he was not already’ cannot be said to possess being itself. We can say of God therefore that ‘He is’ precisely because he is that which does not change and cannot change” (Kearney 2001:23). We should note, however, that Kearney also includes references in his notes to post-metaphysical readings of Augustine’s formative interpretation of Ex 3:14 (2001:118, note 5).

<sup>58</sup> In a dialogue with John Panteleimon Manoussakis in Rome, 2002, that continues a conversation between Marion and Kearney on 2 October 2001 in Boston, Marion explains his attempt to speak of God in terms “otherwise” than Being: “For a long time, one could actually say since the times of Plato, philosophy has been thinking of God in terms of ‘beingness,’ of the *ousia* that grounds or is grounded by the highest being. And for a good reason, being is *our* ultimate concern: the being we have or the being we lack. But when translated and projected as God, being becomes an idol and perhaps the most resistant idol of God. That is why I have been trying to speak of God *without* Being or in terms that are *otherwise* than Being, such as the event, the icon, the other. I was happy to see that I am not alone in this effort. Richard Kearney’s recent book, *The God Who May Be*, signals a new way of thinking of God or, better still, as a call that provokes us to think of the phenomenon of God in new ways” (Manoussakis 2004:17).

<sup>59</sup> “In both his *Commentary on the Sentences* and *De Substantiis Separatis*, the Exodus verse is invoked by Thomas to corroborate speculative thought about the most ultimate mode of Being. For

Kearney concurs with Ricoeur's claim that it is the encounter of biblical religious thought with Greek metaphysics that led philosophers to the idea of Being as the proper name of God and of it designating God's very essence. He also agrees with Etienne Gilson's conclusion that Exodus has laid down the foundation on which all Christian philosophy will build: the claim that there is one God, and that this God is Being (Kearney 2001:24). This ontological tenure that the God of Exodus secured in the God of metaphysics has come to be known, after Heidegger, as "onto-theology": "a tendency to reify God by reducing Him to a being (*Seiende*) – albeit the highest, first, and most indeterminate of all beings" (Kearney 2001:24).<sup>60</sup>

*The eschatological reading of אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה*

Kearney argues that the eschatological counter-tradition to ontological approaches, where the emphasis falls on the ethical and dynamic character of God, is more attuned to the original biblical context of meaning than the essentialist conceptions of divine Being in medieval and post-medieval metaphysics (2001:25). He begins by exploring the ethical mandate offered by the "God who promises," and refers to the great medieval Jewish commentator Rashi's interpretation of the Exodus 3 account: "And God said unto Moses, 'I shall be what I shall be.' And he said, 'so shall you say to the children of Israel, I shall be has sent me to you.'" To this promise, God adds, "This is my name for ever and this is my remembrance from generation to generation" (Kearney 2001:25). Rashi interprets the "name" in terms of mandate and mission, and the assurance of the last phrase to draw a picture of God as one who remembers his promises in the past and stays true to them in the eschatological

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Being says more of God than either the Good or the One. The proper name of God revealed in Ex 3:14 is none other than the absolute identity of divine being and essence (Kearney 2001:23).

<sup>60</sup> "Onto-theology, we might say, sought to have its cake and eat it: to equate God with a modality of being while safeguarding His ultimately ineffable and transcendent nature. Unlike the negative theology of Dionysius and the Christian Neoplatonists, however, most Scholastics identified God with Being by means of proofs and analogies, seeking some sort of balance between Being's universality and indeterminacy on the one hand, and God's density as a quasi-subject or person (which holds God from infinite dispersion) on the other. It is, some argue, a short step from such onto-theological equilibrium to Hegel's notion of a 'concrete universal'; or Schelling's famous equation of the divine 'I AM' with the self-identification of the transcendental Ego. [...] This unification of divine and human consciousness finds modern echoes not only in German idealism and romanticism (Schelling, Fichte, Hegel, Coleridge), but also in a contemporary strand of New Age mysticism. In short, if one pole of the ontological reading of the I AM leads to *onto-theology* (the conceptual capture of God as a category of substance), another pole comprises what we might call *mystical ontologism* (the conflation of divine and human consciousness)" (Kearney 2001:24).

future (Kearney 2001:25).<sup>61</sup> Also, for Rashi, the phrase that God uses when he tells Moses to go to the Pharaoh and say that the God of the Hebrews “happened upon us” (Ex 3:18), communicates a crucial sense of “chance occurrence” that suggests an openness to a future where nothing is predetermined, and where the choice to remain as faithful to God as God has promised to remain to us, is ours to make (Kearney 2001:26).

Kearney points to the appellative (rather than predicative) nature of God’s self-revelation that comes in the form of a promise (“This is the name I shall bear forever, by which future generations will call me” (Ex 3:15). For this reason he warns against hypostatizing the name, suggesting that we rather read it in the context of dynamic mandate. Reading the formula in terms of function, narrative and relation rather than in terms of substance, syllogism and abstraction, enables multiple interpretations of the verb “to be,” and suggests that Moses’ “Here I am” (in response to God’s call) and God’s “I shall be” are dependent on each other if the Kingdom is to enter history (Kearney 2001:26).<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> “He offers this daring commentary on God’s address to Moses on Mount Horeb: ‘the vision that you have seen at the thornbush is the sign for you that I have sent you – and that you will succeed in My mission, and that I have the wherewithal to save you. Just as you saw the thornbush performing My mission without being consumed, so too, you will go on My mission and you will not be harmed.’ And Rashi adds, tellingly, that this mandate itself prefigures the fact that three months later Moses and his followers would receive the Torah upon the very same mountain. Going on to render the key passage of Exodus 3:14, he writes, in very much the same spirit of futural promise: ‘I shall be what I shall be – I shall be with them during this trouble what I shall be with them at the time of their subjugation at the hands of other kingdoms.’ In other words, Rashi tells us, the transfiguring God of the burning bush is pledging to remain with those who continue to suffer in future historical moments, and not just in the present moment” (Kearney 2001:25).

<sup>62</sup> In an interview with Richard Kearney in Dublin, 11 January 2003, Jean-Luc Marion comments as follows on the application of his “saturated phenomenon” to Kearney’s hermeneutic reading of Exodus 3:14: “(I)t is fascinating, because there are three possible interpretations. The first interpretation is the *kataphatic*: we take ‘I am who I am’ as I am, I am an *ousia*, and more than that, I am Being itself, and so on. Then you have the negative or *apophatic* interpretation: ‘I am who I am, and you will never know who I am’ – which is a very old and traditional interpretation too. And there is a third one, which is beyond both affirmation and negation, namely the hyperbolic one, where the two previous readings are both surpassed and assumed – ‘I am the one who shall be. Forever.’ Shall be what? He who can say ‘Here I am,’ because ‘Here I am’ is the name under which the encounter between God and man is made, throughout all Revelation. So, ‘I will be the one always able to answer or to call.’ And so, with the same words of Exodus 3:14, the same intuition, to some extent, we have three possible significations, and we need at least those three. This is mystical theology. It is also a saturated phenomenon. And, finally, this is the possibility of an endless hermeneutic. The Exodic revelation may be repeated for other *logia*. I think Richard and I agree on this issue” (Manoussakis 2004:19).

The historical and religious context of the text reminds us that God's answer to Moses' question about his name does not indicate an unwillingness to be addressed by Moses, but rather a refusal to be reduced to the status of an idol.<sup>63</sup>

... God is repudiating any name that would seek to appropriate Him here and now as some thaumaturgical property. Instead, God keeps Himself open for a future, allowing for a more radical translation of his nameless name as "I am as I shall show myself" (Kearney 2001:27).

The translations of Buber ("As the one who will always be there, so shall I be present in every time) and Rosenzweig ("I will be there as I will be there") bring across the view of these commentators that the suffering Hebrews were in no need for metaphysical proof about God's existence as *ipsum esse*, but needed the assurance of his presence. The אֶהְיֶה ("I shall be") with which the promise commences, pledges God's faithfulness to his people and clarifies, for Buber, the *kind* of God that Yahweh is, and indicates the eschatological meaning of the name (Kearney 2001:27). Too much of this original dynamism is lost in the Greek translation ( Εγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν, "I am the one who is") that "concedes too much to Hellenistic ontology," Kearney feels. For rather than an example of the case of ontological substance against non-being, the epiphany should be understood as a "self-generating event" (Kearney 2001:28).

The Name is therefore both theophanic and performative: having been experienced by the Israelites as God of their fathers, God now reveals godself as God of their sons and daughters,<sup>64</sup> so that the subject of the "I am"

<sup>63</sup> In the Near Eastern religious context, deities were thought, apart from the various names that they bore for general use, to have a secret, inaccessible name that carried great power. If Moses' request was for such a name of power, then God's answer can be seen as a refusal of the request, for the "very circularity and indeterminacy of the nameless name – 'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh – confounds the attempt to glean magical profit from it" (Kearney 2001:27).

<sup>64</sup> Kearney seems to argue that the name given in answer to Moses' question of God's identity indicated a "new plan of action," where "the One who has revealed himself as the God of his ancestors" is now "*becoming different* from what he has been until now," and that this is signalled by the new name revealed to Moses (Kearney 2001:28). He states also, for example, that the "revelation of Exodus 3:14 thus marks a displacement from an ancestral deity (of magic, territory, and inheritance) to a salvific God who vows to free the faithful from bondage in Egypt and prize open the more universal horizon of a Promised Land" (Kearney 2001:29; cf. also 2001:30). The development of Israelite religion is historically much more complicated than this, however. While differences between Eil/Elohim and Yahweh can be found, it is textually and historically naïve to reduce this complicated field of scholarship in the way that Kearney does above. To give just one example: it is precisely the "ancestral" deity that calls Abraham to a new country and assures him of descendants as numerous as the sand of the sea, sealing this rather eschatological focus (that I suspect Kearney would

is *both* an I that is identical with itself in its past *and* a Thou that goes forth into the future. It reveals God as he is, at the same time as it commits God, and his emissary Moses, to an action of salvation. [...] And it is this excess or surplus that saves God from being reduced to a mere signified – transcendental or otherwise. The transfiguring God of the burning bush remains a trace which explodes the present toward the future, a *trait* which cannot be bordered or possessed. [...] In short, the nameless Name is not an *acquis* but a promissory note. Its self-disclosure is inextricably tied to Moses' commission to go and announce to his fellow Hebrews their liberation and redemption. [...] Henceforth, Yahweh is to be experienced as a saving-enabling-promising God, a God whose performance will bear out his pledges (Kearney 2001:28).

But the eschatological promise is made in the context of an I-Thou relationship (Moses and God), which implies that there are two sides to the promise: both human and divine. God's commitment to a kingdom of justice needs the commitment of his faithful too, as heralded by the response of the people when they enter into covenant with Yahweh at Sinai. And yet this does not entail conditionality, for the promise is granted unconditionally. The gift is not imposed, and the people are free to accept it, or not to: "the I puts it to the Thou that the promise can be *realized* only if those who receive it do not betray its potential for the future" (Kearney 2001:29).<sup>65</sup> Kearney hints at the radical existential implications of this "inauguration of a personal God":

For what we are witnessing here is a radical alteration of the metaphysical use of the copula. What was crucial for Greek thought was *to be* since divine being was ultimately deemed timeless and permanent, ontological rather than moral. (Just think of Aristotle's God.) For the Hebrews, by contrast, what is most important is to *become*, to *be able*. Thus while the Hellenists translate Exodus 3:14 as "I am the Being who is eternal," a non-Hellenic Jew like Maimonides encourages us to conceive of Yhwh as an agent with an active purpose, a God who *does* rather than a *being who is* (*Guide of the Perplexed* 1.45-58) (Kearney 2001:31).

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associate with Yahweh) with the promise that in Abraham, all the peoples of the earth will be blessed (Gn 12).

<sup>65</sup> "God does not reveal himself, therefore, as an essence *in se* but as an I-Self for us. And the most appropriate mode of human response to this Exodic revelation is precisely that: *commitment to a response*. Such commitment shows Yahweh as God-the-agent, whose co-respondents, from Moses to the exilic prophets and Jesus, see themselves implicated in the revelation as receivers of a gift – a Word given by someone who calls them to cooperate with Him in his actions. That is why Moses is called to be as 'God for Aaron' and 'for the Pharaoh' (Exodus 4:16 and 7:1). Moses and the prophets are *implicated* in the revelation showing us how Yahweh acts concretely through his human emissaries. With the revelation of his Name, God says of himself something like 'with you Moses – and with Israel throughout history – I stand or fall!' Exodus 3 is the proclamation that God has invested the whole of Himself in his emissary's history" (Kearney 2001:29).

For Kearney, then, אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, the “unnameable Name,” is “God’s way of transfiguring – that is, of appearing-disappearing – in a bush that never burns away. The Exodic epiphany is an ingenious wordplay which heralds an eschatological transcendence: a transcendence with the wherewithal to resist the lures of logocentric immanence” (2001:31).<sup>66</sup> He concludes:

In the circular words, I-am-who-may-be, God transfigures and exceeds being. His *esse* reveals itself, surprisingly and dramatically, as *posse*. The Exodus 3:14 exchange between God and Moses might, I have been suggesting, be usefully reread not as the manifestation of some secret name but as a pledge to remain constant to a promise. God, transfiguring himself in the guise of an angel, speaks through (*per-sona*) a burning bush and seems to say something like this: *I am who may be if you continue to keep my word and struggle for the coming of justice*. The God who reveals Himself on Mount Horeb is and is not, neither is nor is not. This is a God who puns and tautologizes, flares up and withdraws, promising always to return, to become again, to come to be what he is *not yet* for us. This God is the coming God who may-be. The one who resists quietism as much as zealotry, who renounces both the onto-theology of essence and the voluntarist impatience to appropriate promised lands. This Exodic God obviates the extremes of atheistic and theistic dogmatism in the name of a still small voice that whispers and cries in the wilderness: *perhaps*. Yes, perhaps if we remain faithful to the promise, one day, some day, we know not when, I-am-who-may-be will at last be. Be what? we ask. Be what is promised as it is promised. And what is that? we ask. A kingdom of justice and love. There and then, to the human “Here I am,” God may in turn respond, “Here I am.” But not yet (Kearney 2001:37-38).

Since possibility plays such a central role in Kearney’s post-metaphysical thinking of God, we would benefit from considering his overview of metaphysical and

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<sup>66</sup> At this point, Kearney offers a few critical considerations regarding thought about transcendence. When transcendence becomes too transcendent, namely, and God is entirely removed from historical being, the result is the numinous, utterly unknowable deity of apophatic theology (2001:31). A further strand of mystical postmodernism, which Kearney calls a “*teratology of the sublime*,” focuses on the “monstrous” character of God: “One finds examples of this in certain New Age invocations of a neo-Jungian or neo-Gnostic ‘dark god’ – an ambivalent deity which transcends our conventional moral notions of good and evil and summons us to rediscover our innermost unconscious selves, to ‘follow our bliss’” (Kearney 2001:33). Kearney holds that it is possible to “respect the otherness of the Exodic God without succumbing to the extremes of mystical postmodernism, and in particular its dispensing with ethical and historical judgment.” Specifically, “a rebel iconoclast like Moses already showed us how we can break open a new order of existence without dissolving into a void. He confronted the burning bush without succumbing to the monstrous. His encounter with the absolutely Other revealed a deity who, as noted, calls us to an ethico-political task – the eschatological quest for liberty and justice” (Kearney 2001:34). To avoid the danger of a God without being (where the alterity of God becomes so “other” that it becomes indistinguishable from monstrosity), Kearney suggests that we reinterpret the Exodic God as “neither being nor non-being, but as something before, between, and beyond the two: an eschatological *may be*” (Kearney 2001:34).

post-metaphysical readings of the possible, especially when it is used in terms of the divine. It is to this that we now turn.

#### **4.1.2 Perspectives on the possible**

##### *Metaphysical readings of the possible*

Standard metaphysics largely understood the category of the possible as a dimension of being that was pre-contained within reality, and therefore as a “latency or lack in matter to be realized into act” (Kearney 2001:83). Apart from a material “striving toward fulfilment” – to which he referred as *dunamis* – Aristotle also distinguished a “potential intellect” (*nous en dunamei*) from an eternal, quasi-divine “active intellect” (*nous poetikos*): the former being a material, receptive faculty that needed completion and activation by the latter (Kearney 2001:83).<sup>67</sup> Coming to the Middle Ages, Aquinas and the scholastics agreed with the ancients that, in the light of a deity that was “deemed to be a self-causing, self-thinking Act lacking nothing and so possessing no ‘potencies’ which might later be realized in time,” the possible could not possibly be thought of as divine (Kearney 2001:83).

Coming to the modern period, the rationalists and idealists referred to the concept of intellectual representation as *possibilitas*, and contrasted it with various notions of “reality” (Kearney 2001:83). With theistic metaphysics of the time considering God to be “Supreme Reality” or “Sufficient Reason,” to describe the divine in terms of the merely “possible” would have bordered on blasphemy (Kearney 2001:83):

Possibility, as a category of modal logic, fell far short of a true grasp of God. And this falling short was no less true of dialectical logic, as became clear in Hegel’s argument that the possible is that which is actualizable (non-self-contradictory) but not yet actualized. Actuality supersedes possibility by actualizing one possibility rather than its negation and by realizing the internal and absolute necessity of things (Kearney 2001:83-84).

Under the influence of evolutionist or vitalist thought, the possible was understood as “the *retrospective* result of reality as it invents and creates itself” (Kearney 2001:84). This means that the possible post-exists the real in the sense

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<sup>67</sup> Aquinas and the scholastics translated Aristotle’s *dunamis* as “*potentia*” and his *nous dunamei* as “*intellectus possibilis*” (Kearney 2001:83).

that it is recognised as a possibility after the event (therefore not pre-existing the real ontologically), and that the possible exists only “as a retroactive image which Spirit projects backward into the past once it has been historically realized!” (Kearney 2001:84).

### *Post-metaphysical readings of the possible*

The fact that metaphysics understood the possible as a sub-category of the real (being, act, reason, existence, history) in all the above cases, prevented it from pioneering any new understandings of the divine (Kearney 2001:84). Moving towards countering the metaphysical opposition between the “divinely real” and the “non-divinely possible,” Kearney explores some post-metaphysical attempts to rethink the whole notion of possibility. Reviewing the attempts of Husserl, Bloch, Heidegger and Derrida, his ultimate aim is to illustrate how these attempts may provide pointers for a new eschatological understanding that will, guided by a hermeneutical recovery of biblical traditions, summon us to consider God as *posse* rather than *esse* (Kearney 2001:84).<sup>68</sup>

Looking, first, at Husserl’s teleological idea of possibility that motivates the “development of reason toward a universal goal,”<sup>69</sup> Kearney points to the ambiguity in his phenomenology in respect of this *telos* being transcendent of history or

<sup>68</sup> Commenting on Kearney’s title, *The God who may be*, during a 2002 dialogue with John Panteleimon Manoussakis, Jean-Luc Marion states that, regardless of its biblical connections, Kearney’s title “is provocative insofar it may suggest that ‘to be’ or ‘being’ itself is not enough to give us access to God. The crux of philosophy is always the question of the validity of being in general and in particular the validity of being as an attribute of God. There is, however, the possibility of a deeper way for God to reveal the richness and the glory of His divinity, and this way, following Kearney’s breakthrough, might be none other than the experience of ‘possibility’ itself. I completely agree with Richard Kearney in embracing the axiom that possibility stands higher than actuality. [...] In any case, we should remind ourselves of another fact, closely connected to Richard’s own intellectual history; Richard started his philosophical work by writing his thesis, *La Poétique du Possible*, under the direction of Ricoeur, in Paris. To a large extent, then, I read *The God Who May Be* as a fuller realization of his first intuition on the significance of possibility. His thought is reaching its maturity as he is returning [...] to possibility as the best way to think of God” (Manoussakis 2004:17).

<sup>69</sup> In Husserl’s teleological Idea of reason as the ultimate aim of Western philosophy, the “telos plays the role of a Kantian limit-Idea which surpasses the categorial intuition of essences toward a horizon of *pure possibility*. As such, it signals a radical openness to the ongoing perfecting – or as the phenomenologists would say ‘filling out’ – of meaning. It recognizes the possible as the *future of meaning*. [...] Identifying philosophy as the conscience of a universal humanity, Husserl declared that ‘to be human is to have a teleological meaning, to have a duty-to-be.’ Both our theoretical and ethical consciousness, Husserl insists, are structured according to the teleological possibility of an Idea which is unconditioned and therefore surpasses any determined intuitive fullness (or presence) we may presume to have. Any attempt by our consciousness to grasp the telos as a fixed or complete object fails, for the goal of meaning is forever escaping us, *immer wieder*. The telos is always beyond us” (Kearney 2001:84-85).

immanent in it: “There is always a lingering suspicion that his elusive notion of ‘God’ may slip back into some kind of rationalist or idealist theodicy where the possible is predetermined from the outset” (Kearney 2001:99).<sup>70</sup>

While Bloch’s possible is firmly grounded in the dialectical history of striving toward utopia, his neutral position regarding the eschatological status of the *noch-nicht* leaves him theologically uncommitted,<sup>71</sup> and his Utopian Possible at times a mere “dream-projection of a universalist humanism”<sup>72</sup> (Kearney 2001:99).

Although Heidegger’s notion of the “loving possible” moves beyond both Husserl’s transcendental idealism and Bloch’s dialectical humanism, being more interested in Being than in God,<sup>73</sup> he avoids identifying this “possibilizing power” (*das*

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<sup>70</sup> “In a striking passage in his late E Manuscripts (III, 4), Husserl identifies this teleological possibility of reason as ‘God.’ Again using language more akin to Hegel or Aristotle than to Kant, Husserl speaks of this deity taking the form of an evolving telos-logos whose ‘hidden meaning’ goes beyond the world of actual being in itself (*Ueberwirklich/Ueber-an-sichlich*) toward a goal yet to be realized. It is, as Husserl puts it, ‘teleologico-historical.’ At a more personal level, he confided to his student Edith Stein in December 1935 that ‘the life of man is nothing other than a path towards God.’ But while he leaves such tantalizing hints and guesses, Husserl never chose to elaborate on his understanding of God in his published work” (Kearney 2001:86).

<sup>71</sup> For Bloch, the dialectical category of the possible thus serves a double duty: “In so far as it signals the world according-to-possibility, it plays a critical role regarding the limits of what is possible (almost a Kantian condition of possibility); while as token of the world-in-possibility it mobilizes an unlimited dynamism of meaning, forever extending into the ‘utopian *novum* of all of history.’ It would be a mistake, therefore, to construe the *novum* as some kind of ontological *entelecheia*, understood in the sense of a ‘form of forms’ or ‘self-thinking-thought’ – timeless, immutable, devoid of potency. The *novum*, qua end of history, is not a transcendent *actus purus*; nor is it some Supreme Being already accomplished beyond time and awaiting the culmination of history to reveal itself. No, the *novum* is that promise of possibility inscribed in the not-yet-now of time and the not-yet-there of space. And as such, far from being an indifference that leaves us, human agents, indifferent in turn, the *novum* galvanizes our utopian drive toward the kingdom whose realization ‘here on earth human labour so powerfully helps to accelerate.’ What connects this distant goal to our everyday earthly labors is, according to Bloch, precisely the intermediary realm of ‘dream,’ both aesthetic and religious. For without the ‘visible pre-appearing’ of our images and icons, our struggling toward the *novum* would be blind and directionless. With it, by contrast, we are liberally instructed in the ‘power-to-be’ (*Kann-sein*) of human history” (Kearney 2001:89-90).

<sup>72</sup> Bloch does not see possibility as an *a priori* condition of formal knowledge (Kant), but as a precondition of historical transformation: “Utopian possibility is less a power-to-know than a power-to-become-other than what is at present the case. This transmutational capacity reaches its highest expression in Bloch’s secularized concept of salvation (*Heilsbegriff*): ‘Interdependence is here such that without the potentiality of the power-to-become-otherwise, the power-to-make-otherwise of potency would not have the space in which to disclose itself; just as without the power-to-make-otherwise of potency, the power-to-become otherwise of the world would have no mediating meaning with humans. Consequently, the possible reveals itself as being what it is ... thanks to the activating intervention of humans in the field of the transformable: the concept of salvation’” (Kearney 2001:90).

<sup>73</sup> Heidegger speaks of the “quiet power of the possible,” by which he denotes a “privileged way in which Being reveals itself to us as temporal-historical beings” and an “unambiguous gift of Being itself” (Kearney 2001:91). Kearney illustrates how he distances himself from logical and metaphysical residues of possibility and humanism: “Our words ‘possible’ and ‘possibility’ are,’ he explains, ‘under the domination of “logic” and “metaphysics”, taken only in contrast to “actuality”, i.e., they are conceived with reference to a determined – viz. the metaphysical-interpretation of Being as *actus* and

*Vermögen des Mögens*) with a “theistic or theological God” (Kearney 2001:99). The curious “saving god” that he does invoke seems more akin to a god of myth and poetry than to Yahweh or Jesus (Kearney 2001:99).

In Derrida’s case, while he exposes the intriguing enigma of the impossible-possible,<sup>74</sup> even linking it to the “origin of faith,” the faith in question remains a “deconstructive belief in the undecidable and unpredictable character of incoming everyday events (what he calls ‘experience in general’) rather than in some special advent of the divine as such (Kearney 2001:99).<sup>75</sup>

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*potentia*, the distinction of which is identified with that of *existentia* and *essentia*.’ But Heidegger explains that when he speaks of the ‘quiet power of the possible,’ he means neither (1) the ‘possible of a merely represented *possibilitas*’ (a Leibnizian-Kantian category of modal logic), nor (2) ‘the *potentia* as *essentia* of an *actus* of the *existentia*’ (an Aristotelian-scholastic category of metaphysics). He means, as he states here, ‘Being itself, which in its loving potency (*das Mögend*) possibilizes (*vermag*) thought and thus also the essence of man, which means in turn his relationship to Being.’ Heidegger concludes this decisive passage thus: ‘To possibilize (*vermögen*) something is to sustain it in its essence, to retain it in its element’” (Kearney 2001:91-92). Kearney continues to map out the development between the earlier and later Heidegger: “Heidegger I’s humanist-sounding language of Being as temporality and historicity is now replaced with a more sacred-sounding liturgy of love and grace, consistent with Heidegger II’s rethinking of Being as Gift (*Es gibt*). Playing on the latent etymological affinities between the German verbs for loving (*mögen*) and making possible (*vermögen*), Heidegger invites us to rethink Being itself as the power that possibilizes the authentic being of things: ‘It is on the strength of this loving potency or possibilization of love’ (*das Vermögen des Mögens*) that something is possibilized (*vermag*) in its authentic (*eigentlich*) being. This possibilization (*Vermögen*) is the authentic ‘possible’ (*das eigentlich ‘mögliche’*), that whose essence rests on loving” (Kearney 2001:92).

<sup>74</sup> Derrida argues that “im-possibility is not the mere contrary of possibility but rather its mark of renewal and arrival as event. No event worthy of its name is simply an actualization of some precontained potential program. For an event to be possible it must be both possible (of course) but also impossible (in the sense of an interruption by something singular and exceptional into the regime of pre-existing possibles-powers-potencies). The event happens not just because it is possible, qua ontological acting-out of some inherent *dunamis* or *potentia*, but also because something impossible – hitherto unanticipated and unplanned – comes to pass. It is precisely the impossibility of formerly predictable possibilities which makes new ones announce themselves beyond this very impossibility. The impossible reminds us, therefore, that beyond our powers the impossible is still possible. There are impossible possibles beyond us, never dreamt of in our philosophies. Or as Derrida puts it in *Politics of Friendship*: ‘Perhaps the impossible is the only possible chance of something new, of some new philosophy of the new. Perhaps; perhaps in truth the *perhaps* still names this chance’” (Kearney 2001:96). Kearney goes on: “What Derrida is trying to do, it seems to me, is to think a post-metaphysical category of the possible by rethinking the category of the im-possible in a way that is not simply negative or disabling. The impossible needs to be affirmed because, as I have noted above, it is precisely im-possibility which opens up possibility and makes it possible. Strangely, however, this can occur only when my power of possibility undergoes its own death as ‘my’ possibility – acknowledging in mourning, passion, suffering, and anxiety that it is this very impossibility which allows a new possible, another possible, another’s possible, an im-possible possible, to come, or to come back. This ‘other’ possible returns, says Derrida, as a specter. It assumes the guise of a *revenant*, rising up from the grave of my own possible in the form of an in-coming other. And we experience this as surprise, gift, openness, grace, resurrection” (2001:96-97).

<sup>75</sup> For Kearney, the “impossible-made-possible signals the promise of new thinking about the ‘possible God.’ Resurrection rather than deconstruction. (Though I would not deny that the former traverses the later and has constant need of its purging powers). There is not opposition here, in my view, but difference. And the difference is one of emphasis as much as of substance. Derrida sees in

The philosophers above share a common reservation when it comes to religious explorations, and yet their approaches suggest markers for what Kearney develops into a new eschatology of God, or the “God-who-may-be.” Specifically, they all illustrate how metaphysical concepts of the possible (*dunamis*, *potentia*, *possibilitas*) reduce its potency when they submit it to the “actual” (Kearney 2001:99). For him, even if they don’t pursue this line of thought, the above four authors can be read to suggest that “since onto-theology defined God as the absolute priority of actuality over possibility, it may now be timely to reverse that priority.” Kearney then proceeds to outline the following crucial implications of a Possible God – the eschatological May-be (Kearney 2001:99-100):

- (1) It is radically transcendent – guaranteed by the mark of its “impossible-possibility.”
- (2) It is “possible” in so far as we have faith in the promise of advent – the scandal of “impossible” incarnation and resurrection! – but also equally reveals itself as what “possibilizes” such messianic events in the first place.
- (3) It calls and solicits us – where are you? Who are you? Who do you say that I am? Why did you not give me to drink or eat? – in the form of an engaging personal summons (unlike Husserl’s *Telos*, Bloch’s *Utopia*, Heidegger’s *Vermögen*, or Derrida’s *Perhaps*);
- (4) And, finally, the eschatological May-be unfolds not just as can-be (*Kann-sein*) but as should-be (*Sollen-sein*) – in short, less as a power of immanent potency driving toward fulfillment than as a power of the powerless which bids us remain open to the possible divinity whose gratuitous coming – already, no, and not yet – is always a surprise and never without grace (Kearney 2001:100).

#### **4.1.3 The desire of God**

Kearney also explores the onto-theological and the eschatological approach by exploring the history of religious thought regarding the desire of God. The onto-theological paradigm takes desire to indicate lack – a “striving for fulfillment in a plenitude of presence,” where “desire expresses itself as a drive to be and to know absolutely” (Kearney 2001:60-61). The result of such an evaluation of desire is that it

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the play of impossible-possible a structure of ‘experience in general.’ (Indeed at one point Derrida admits that his entire reflection on the impossible-possible may be little more than a gloss on his early exegesis of Husserl’s phenomenology of the possible as a never-adequate intuition; see his *Introduction à ‘L’Origine de la géométrie’ de Husserl*). By contrast, I would want to suggest that this is a difference not only of language games but also of ‘reference.’ *Differance* and God, as Derrida is the first to remind us, are *not* the same thing (Kearney 2001:98).

compromises the futural coming of the kingdom and the eschatological yearning invoked by Paul in his description of the desire for the kingdom as “hope for what we do not see” (Kearney 2001:61). Critique of such onto-theological desire can be understood as an attempt to exchange our captivity to all that is (*ta onta*) for a kind of desire “for something that eye has never seen nor ear heard” – eschatological desire (Kearney 2001:62). From a Pauline-eschatological view,

the ontology of presence (*ousia*) is a travesty of the *parousia* still to come (*apousia*). Only in the light of *parousia* can we speak of realizing our desire to see God’s *persona*, “face to face.” Until then we live our eschatological desire as a yearning for an Other who beckons but has not yet fully arrived, who is present in absentia (Philippians 2:12), a *deus adventurus* who seeks me yet still promises to come, unpredictably and unexpectedly, in the twinkling of an eye (1 Corinthians 15:52), like a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:2).

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Kearney concludes *The God who may be* by briefly reflecting on how the eschatological God of *posse* may be said to relate to being (*esse*). He believes that, instead of merely another dualism, some kind of “nuptial chiasm” can bring *posse* and *esse* together. Indeed, *possest* contains the possibility (not the necessity) of *esse* within itself (Kearney 2001:110). Unlike the metaphysical *esse* (conceived of as presence or the necessary unfolding of a pre-existing identity – Cusanus), Kearney’s eschatological *possest* may be seen as advent and *eschaton* rather than *arche* and *principium*:

The realization of *possest*’s divine *esse*, if and when it occurs, if and when the kingdom comes, will no doubt be a new *esse*, refigured and transfigured in a mirror-play where it recognizes its other and not just the image of itself returning to itself. In this way, *posse* may bring being beyond being into new being, other-being. It promises a new heaven and a new earth (Kearney 2001:111).

Even if such a thing is impossible for us alone, it is not impossible to God. By “opening ourselves to the ‘loving possible,’” and “acting each moment to make the impossible that bit more possible,” we help God to become God (Kearney 2001:111).

## 4.2 Enabling God: Kearney’s God of small things

From his perspective on the Exodic theophany as a revelation of God not as “an essence *in se* but as an I-Self for us,” Kearney draws as a result an indissoluble

communion between God and humans that finds expression in “commitment to a shared history of ‘becoming’” that began with the liberation from Egypt (2001:29): “God may henceforth be recognized as someone who *becomes with us*, someone as dependent on us as we are on Him” (Kearney 2001:29-30). And if God’s relation with humans is indeed characterised by covenant rather than conceptuality, then this calls for revision of most philosophical reflections of God (such as “the orthodox onto-theological categories of omnipotence, omniscience, and self-causality) (Kearney 2001:30).

Kearney takes the unaccomplished (imperfect) form of the verb in Exodus 3:14 to imply that “God is what he *will* be when he becomes his Kingdom and his Kingdom comes on earth” (Kearney 2001:30). God’s promise is to be God at the *eschaton*, and meanwhile he is in the process of establishing his kingdom of justice in the world. But the relative pronoun אֲשֶׁר (*’asher*, “what, who”) stretches this point even further, indicating that the content of what God will be depends on the content that his people will give it through their actions in space and time (Kearney 2001:30). Seen comprehensively, then, it is the unaccomplished nature of the verb, the relative pronoun, and also the performative (rather than constative) formulation in the voice of the first person (“I may be”) that renders Ex 3:14 “a call to human attestation through a history of effectivity” (Kearney 2001:30).

Kearney wagers that a “seismic shift” occurs at the chiasmus where אֶהְיֶה (*’ehyeh*) meets εἶναι (*einai*), with “God putting being into question just as being gives flesh to God. At this border-crossing, the transfiguring Word struggles for carnal embodiment even as it dissolves into the flaming bush of its own desire” (2001:34). For him, the counter-tradition of readings calls for a new hermeneutic of God as May-Be, or, as he calls it, an “onto-eschatological hermeneutics” or a “*poetics of the possible*” (Kearney 2001:37). This does not imply that God is conditional, however, because for Kearney God’s infinite love is not conditional, even if God’s future being may be dependent on our actions in history: “As a gift, God is *unconditional* giving. Divinity is constantly waiting” (Kearney 2001:37).

Kearney’s God-who-may-be offers to humans “the possibility of realizing a promised kingdom by opening ourselves to the transfiguring power of transcendence” (Kearney 2001:2). This God does not impose a kingdom, and neither

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declares it already accomplished from the beginning. Instead, he pictures each human person as carrying the capacity within him/herself to both be transfigured in this way and transfigure God in turn by giving life and incarnation to divine possibility (Kearney 2001:2). It is this possibility of receiving and responding to divine invitation that Kearney has in mind when he speaks of *persona* (cf. section 4.4.2). Paradoxically, then, it is the recognition of our own powerlessness that leads to our being empowered to respond to “God’s own primordial powerlessness and to make the potential Word flesh” (Kearney 2001:2). This implies that God cannot be God unless we enable this to happen (2001:2).

Because the promise that God will be God at the *eschaton* is exactly that – a promise rather than an already accomplished possession – it indicates the “space of the possible” as “a free space gaping at the very core of divinity, rendering “all things possible which would be otherwise impossible to us – including the kingdom of justice and love” (Kearney 2001:4). But with a God that is *posse* (“the possibility of being”) instead of *esse* (“the actuality of being as *fait accompli*”), without our response the promise remains ineffective. Therefore “(t)ransfiguring the possible into the actual, and thereby enabling the coming kingdom to come into being, is not just something God does for us but also something we do for God” (Kearney 2001:4).

But enabling the kingdom to be manifested in our world as *esse* is no grandiose and imposing manifesto, but instead materialises through small acts of love and mercy, for

God speaks not through monuments of power and pomp but in stories and acts of love and justice, the giving to the least of creatures, the caring for orphans, widows, and strangers; stories and acts which bear testimony – as transfiguring gestures do – to that God of little things that comes and goes, like the thin small voice, like the burning bush, like the voice crying out in the wilderness, like the word made flesh, like the wind that blows where it wills (Kearney 2001:51).<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Kearney explores the post-paschal appearances of Jesus, which he calls “stories of the transfiguring *persona*” to illustrate how “the Kingdom is given to hapless fishermen and spurned women, to those lost and wandering on the road from Jerusalem to nowhere, to the wounded and weak and hungry, to those who lack and do not despair of their lack, to little people ‘poor in spirit’” (Kearney 2001:51).

### 4.3 Presence from the beyond: Kearney's eschatological God

Kearney's probing into ways of overcoming metaphysical concepts of God as disembodied cause, devoid of dynamism and desire, in favour of the God of the *posse* that "calls us beyond the present toward a promised future," gives a voice to what the prophets called "the Lord of History" (Kearney 2001:3). Reading from an eschatological rather than a purely ontological perspective, allows us to hear the voice of the God of Exodus and Transfiguration:

I am the one who will always be faithful, and by my faithfulness all future generations will know me and call me: I am the promise to remain with my people and they can all count on me in the future. I am the God not only of their memories and of their fathers and mothers, but also of their hopes and aspirations, of their sons and daughters (Kearney 2001:4).

But it is not always clear from Kearney's essay ("Re-imagining God") what exact content he gives to eschatology, or the *eschaton* as such. At times the eschatological moment seems to refer to all the small instances of love and justice in the world – when humans actualise the possibility of the Kingdom, transforming *posse* into *esse*. And yet, Kearney's response to the question of the destruction of the earth at the end of his essay seems to suggest that he does envision a form of delayed *eschaton*. His essay does not solve this problem, and thus we are dependent on his other publications for clarification.

In a poetic manner, Kearney attempts to articulate the gift in terms of "a cocreation of history by humanity and God, leading to the Kingdom" (2006a:368). Although this cocreation, from the human side, involves our ethical being in the world, we are ignorant of what it will be, since it "goes beyond the sphere of the phenomenology of history... It's an *eschaton*. We can prefigure it as eschatology, but it's really something that God knows more about than we do" (2006a:369).<sup>77</sup> Divinity, for Kearney, is a constant gifting of the possibility of the Kingdom. This can be

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<sup>77</sup> Despite the traditional link between eschatology and responsibility, Kearney's is not an ethics of responsibility *per se*. However, "whether or not the connection between judgment and responsibility is explicitly acknowledged, the uncertainties of life that subject us to ironic judgment lead us to reproduce in our modern account of responsibility the same paradox that marked the eschatological consciousness of early Christianity: As we become more aware of ultimate judgment, we pay more attention to our present choices" (Lovin 2009:393). Kearney's ethical vision is not driven by the uncertainty of judgment or the obligation of responsibility, but rather is built on the transfiguring presence of God as *posse*. But he would agree, I would think, that "(o)ur relationship to divine judgment is a participation in God's mercy toward those who are within our reach," so that an awareness of the *eschaton* focuses our attention on the present rather than the end (Lovin 2009:393).

interpreted as the eschatological Kingdom at the *end* of history, or as the Kingdom *now*, “in the mustard seed, in the little, everyday, fragile, most insignificant acts” (2006a:372).

The divine possible takes its leave of being having passed through it, not into the pure ether of non-being, but into the future which awaits us as the surplus of *posse* over *esse* – as that which is more than being, beyond being, desiring always to come into being again, and again, until the kingdom comes. Here at last we may come face to face with the God who may be, the deity yet to come (Kearney 2001:4).

Thus the possibility of good and the possibility of non-good exists in every moment, with the implication that we are actualising or not-actualising the Kingdom in every moment (2006a:373). Kearney therefore urges us to depart from thinking that when the Messiah comes, he brings the end of everything:

The coming of Christ *wasn't* the end of the world: the Messiah always comes again in history. And the Messiah is always – including the Christian Messiah – a God who is *still* to come (even when the Messiah has already come). The Messiah is one who has already come and is always still to come. [...] God always comes *and* goes. And that's the nature of the Messiah: it's already here – the Kingdom is already here – but it is also not yet fully here. And it's this double moment that's terribly important because the possible does not mean The End: the telos of universal history coming to an end at the end of time – that's Hegel. That's triumphalism. [...] In contrast to such triumphalist teleologies and ideologies of power, the divine possible I am speaking of comes in tiny, almost imperceptible acts of love and poetic justice (Kearney 2006a:373-374).

Yet, despite this emphasis on the moment-to-moment tiny acts of love and justice bringing in the Kingdom, Kearney also describes a more comprehensive *eschaton*:

If and when the Kingdom comes, I believe it will be a great kind of “recollection,” “retrieval,” or “recapitulation” (*anakephalaiosis* is the term used by Paul) of all those special moments of love. But you can't even see it in terms of past, present, and future because the eternal is outside time, even though it comes *into* time all the time. Christ is just an exemplary figure of it. [...] Because we're temporal, we're confronted with this unsolvable paradox or *aporia* – namely, that the Kingdom has already come and yet is not here.<sup>78</sup> And that's the way it is for

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<sup>78</sup> “The kind of hermeneutics of religion that I'm talking about in my recent trilogy, by contrast, would be much more guided by the paradigm of Jacob's ladder, where there's to-ing and fro-ing, lots of people going up and down, in both directions. No absolute descent or absolute ascent. It's little people going up and down ladders. And that, to me, is how you work toward the Kingdom. “Every step you take...” (as the song goes). Each step counts. Messianic incursion, incarnation, epiphany is a possibility for every moment of our lives. Because we are finite and temporal, the infinite can pass

our finite phenomenological minds. And no metaphysics and no theology or philosophy can resolve that one (Kearney 2006a:374).

He sums up:

But for me, God is the possibilizing of the impossible. “What is impossible to us is possible to God.” We actualize what God possibilizes and God possibilizes what remains impossible for us. To sum up: God as gift means God is *poeticizing*, *possibilizing*, *transfiguring*, and *desiring*. That’s my religious phenomenology of the gift (Kearney 2006a:374).

Another way to understand this is by referring to messianic time, which in Kearney’s understanding “subverts and supersedes the linear, causal time of history moving ineluctably from past to present to future” (Kearney 2001:81):

The messianic progeniture of the possible is “eternal,” not because it refuses time but because it brushes historical time against the grain – anti-clockwise as it were – disclosing a past which unfolds achronically out of the future. Such achronic time is neither archaeological nor teleological. It is not preconditioned by some sacred *arche in illo tempore*; nor is it dialectically impelled by some *terminus futurus ad quem*. Resisting all modes of causal determinism – efficient, formal, material, or final – the messianic time of divine *dunamis* constantly surprises us. It operates according to a paradoxical tempo of *hysteron proteron*, or what Levinas calls “future anteriority.” A tempo wherein the Messiah can be now and still to come at one and the same time. This time was before time began, is here and now, and will be after the end of time. It is, paradoxically, already here and not yet here in the eternal now (*Jetztzeit*). Eternal, that is, in the eschatological rather than Platonic-metaphysical sense (Kearney 2001:81-82).<sup>79</sup>

The grace of the messianic time surprises us with now-possible impossibilities, revealing “possibles which are beyond both my impossibles and my possibles,” and which would have been impossible had they not been a gift (Kearney 2001:82). The advent promised by the possibilities opened up by the eschatological I-am-who-may-be is so infinite that it is never final, and it is for this reason that the *posse* calls us to struggle for justice – the coming of the kingdom from “out of the

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through time, but it can never remain or take up residence in some triumphant or permanent present. That’s the difference between the eternal and time. They can crisscross back and forth, up and down, like the angels on Jacob’s ladder. But they are never identical, never the same. That’s what a hermeneutic affirmation of *difference* is all about. As opposed to deconstructive *différance*, which, in my view, gives up hope in the *real possibility* of mediation and transition” (Kearney 2006a:379).

<sup>79</sup> It is in this sense that we should understand texts like the Johannine claim that “He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me” (John 1:15), or Isaiah’s prophesy that the child “born for us” today shall be “father of the world to come, or the messianic saying that “before Abraham was I am” (and ever will be). “The eschaton, like the *angelus novus* blown backward against time, comes to us from the future to redeem the past. It is *contre temps*” (Kearney 2001:81-82).

future into every moment, from beyond time, against time, into time – the Word becoming flesh forever, *sans fin*, without end” (Kearney 2001:82).

#### 4.4 Love and justice: Kearney’s theological ethics

God does not reveal himself, therefore, as an essence *in se* but as an I-Self for us. And the most appropriate mode of human response to this exodic revelation is precisely that: *commitment to a response*. Such commitment shows Yhwh as God-the-agent, whose co-respondents, from Moses to the exilic prophets and Jesus, see themselves as implicated in the revelation as receivers of a gift – a Word given by someone who calls them to cooperate with Him in his actions (Kearney 2002a:80).

This section explores the ethical implications of Richard Kearney’s hermeneutics of religion as a way of re-thinking the nature of Christian ethics. I argue that Kearney’s hermeneutics of religion opens many possibilities in regards to ethical debate in the public sphere and inter-religious dialogue on ethics, having as its main elements narrative, imagination, and *eschaton* – elements that are found in various religious traditions, and which can therefore stimulate ethical discourse in the inter-religious public sphere.

##### 4.4.1 Ethics as integrating force of Kearney’s hermeneutics

Kearney portrays the way in which the “Other” and the “Same,” God and humankind, transcendence and immanence can be related together, in ethical terms (Masterson 2008:258). As a response to the “deconstructionist rejection of any access by human consciousness to the radically ‘Other’ in its deepest significance” (Masterson 2008:258), Kearney

seeks to navigate an interpretation of divine otherness as an ethical appeal which escapes the dilemma of a God either so transcendent as to be anonymous or so immanent as to be a mere projection (Masterson 2008:247).

Furthermore, rejecting onto-theology in favour of eschatology,

Kearney envisages the divine as an ethically enabling possibility. This possibility, he claims, enables us to achieve, beyond our own intrinsic resources, an ethical order of justice and love through which the kingdom of God – the God Who May Be – is accomplished. There is a co-relativity between the divine as enabling possibility and humanity which accomplishes this possibility (Masterson 2008:247).

For Kearney, God is present as transfiguring, desiring, poeticising, and possibilising, where transfiguring is something that God does to us even as we do it to God through our creations of art, justice, and love. “We bring into being, through our actions – poetical and ethical – a transfiguration of the world. It’s a human task as much as a divine gift” (2006a:371). Kearney pictures God as the possibility enabling humans to respond ethically to an eschatological call (Masterson 2008:249). A transcendent deity who is accessible to human consciousness is explored by him as a horizontally beckoning possibility of ethical achievement rather than a vertically transcendent actual supreme being (Masterson 2008:256), so that any encounter with the true God must of necessity invite humans to sensitivity and care of their neighbours (Bloechl 2006:733). From his phenomenological perspective, avoiding questions of ontology, the point of speaking of God as “possible and possibilizing *eschaton* or finality of human aspiration, who is affirmed precisely as the not yet accomplished fulfilment of ethico-religious desire,” becomes clear. God encounters humans as the ‘impossible-possible,’ “transcending yet transfiguring human capacity by enabling it to achieve a kingdom of justice and love beyond its intrinsic own resources (Masterson 2008:259). Eschatology flows back into ethics, for the God that arrives as transformative possibility from the eschatological future, turns the attention to the other persons in the world:

To know oneself as being-toward-God while or perhaps even before one is being-in-the-world is to be awakened from any thought of relating to oneself as the locus of what offers itself to comprehension; it is to be opened out into the world and to others met in the world, without immediately gathering them around oneself. It is to be liberated from a heavier materiality, though not from material concerns altogether. The surprise is grace, and grace comes as a surprise, Kearney sometimes says. This grace renders us sensitive to the other person beyond what may be contained in a material understanding (Bloechl 2006:733-734).

#### **4.4.2 The “Other”**

The problematic of the other is the question of how to “think and speak of the Other *on the Other’s terms*, that is, without reducing otherness to a reflection of the Same – while, at the same time, being able to think and speak of the Other without falling into a sort of apophatic mysticism of the ineffable” (Manoussakis 2006a:xviii). Kearney’s approach to this dilemma is to seek a middle way between the unmediated, uncritical rapport with the Other (Levinas’ infinity, Derrida’s *différance*, Caputo’s *khora*) and the

rigid, out-dated onto-theological and metaphysical conceptions (Manoussakis 2006a:xix).<sup>80</sup> Understanding Kearney's approach to the "Other" is not only helpful in understanding his ethics, but also provides the context and terminology to comprehend his eschatological vision. What follows is an overview of Kearney's treatment of the problematic of the other in *The God who may be*.

Kearney explores the theme of transfiguration in terms of a phenomenology of the *persona* – an approach in which he draws liberally from post-Heideggerian accounts of the self-other relation (Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, Kristeva, Ricoeur, Derrida) (Kearney 2001:9).

### *Persona: Figure of the Other*

While, for Kearney, "person" refers to others in terms of what is the same or similar (empirically, biologically, psychologically, etc.), he uses *persona* to denote the otherness of the other. Each person embodies a *persona*, which he understands as "that eschatological aura of 'possibility' which eludes but informs a person's actual presence here and now" (Kearney 2001:10):

At a purely phenomenological level, *persona* is all that in others exceeds my searching gaze, safeguarding their inimitable and unique singularity. It is what escapes me toward another past that I cannot recover and another future I cannot predict. It resides, if it resides anywhere, beyond my intentional horizons of re-tention and pro-tention. The *persona* of the other outstrips both the presenting consciousness of my *perception* here and now and the presentifying consciousness of my *imagination* (with its attempts to see, in the mode of *as-if*, that which resists perceptual intuition). The *persona* of the other even defies the names and categories of *signifying* consciousness. It is beyond consciousness *tout court*. Though this "beyondness" is, curiously, what spurs language to speak figuratively about it, deploying imagination and interpretation to overreach their normal limits in efforts to grasp it – especially in the guise of metaphor and narrative (Kearney 2001:10).

The self cannot encounter another without configuring them in some way, and to configure another as a *persona* implies the paradox of configuration: "to grasp

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<sup>80</sup> In a dialogue with Kearney in New York City, 16 October 2001, Derrida put the difference between him and Kearney this way: "Now on a more, radical kind of reconciliation, beyond the political – the political is just a layer – I would not suspend every relation with the other for the sake of hope, salvation, or resurrection (I have been reading your admirable book these days on this subject). This is perhaps a difference between us: this indeterminacy of the messianic leaves you unsatisfied. To speak roughly, you, Richard, would not give up the hope of redemption, resurrection, and so forth; and I would not either. But I would argue that when one is not ready to suspend the determination of hope then our relation with the other becomes again economical..." (Manoussakis 2004:5).

him/her as present in absence, as both incarnate in flesh and transcendent in time” (Kearney 2001:10). This paradox must be accepted, for to refuse it is to regard another as pure presence (thing), or pure absence (nothing), and thus to disfigure the other (Kearney 2001:10). For the other can be held in disregard not only by overlooking their transcendence, but also by ignoring their “flesh-and-blood thereness”: “There is a thin line [...] between seeking to capture the other as divine (qua idol) and receiving the divine through the other (qua icon),” and as such the matter calls for hermeneutic caution (Kearney 2001:11).

### *Persona as Eschaton*

In contrast to the fictitious totalities whereby we often respond to the enigma of *persona* as presence-absence (Kearney 2001:11), the eschatological notion of *persona* allows the irreducible finality of the other as *eschaton*,<sup>81</sup> reminding us that we have no power over him/her (Kearney 2001:12). Once we confront this primary disablement in front of another, it is the other who re-enables us (Kearney 2001:12). With the *eschaton* as *persona*, Kearney refers to the future possibilities of the other which I am unable to realise, grasp, or possess: the “vertical ‘may-be’ of the other” that “is irreducible to *my* set of possibilities or powers: my “can-be” (Kearney 2001:12). Appropriating the other’s *persona* would rob the other of his/her otherness, temporality, futurity and alterity (Kearney 2001:12). For the absence of the other refers to a temporal absence – the sense in which “we might say that my *persona* is both younger and older than my person – pre-existing and post-existing the seizure of myself as presence (qua sum of totalizable properties). The *persona* is always already there and always still to come” (Kearney 2001:12). The *persona* is there where there is no one, and takes the place of the no-place without itself taking place:

Yet it does *give place* to the person and without it the person could not take its place. It is the non-presence that allows presence to happen in the here and now as a human person appearing to me in flesh and blood. It is, in short, the quasi-condition of the other remaining other to me even as s/he stands before me in this moment. But however non-present it is, *persona* is not to be understood as some impersonal anonymous presence (i.e., a Monarchian *deus absconditus*). Nor is it to be taken as a merely formal condition of possibility (Kant); nor indeed

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<sup>81</sup> *Eschaton* should here not be confused with *telos* “(i.e. a fulfillable, predictable, foreseeable goal)” (Kearney 2001:12). Instead, Kearney understands *eschaton* here “precisely in the sense of an end without end – an end that escapes and surprises us, like a thief in the night – rather than some immanent teleological closure” (Kearney 2001:12).

as some archaic and formless receptacle (Plato's and Derrida's *khora*). *Persona* is always inseparable from *this* person of flesh and blood, here and now (Kearney 2001:13).

While it always reminds us that there is always "something more to flesh and blood than flesh and blood," it is not some disembodied soul, but "gives itself in and through the incarnate body," even as it absolves and withholds itself (Kearney 2001:14).

### *Beyond fusion*

The *persona* refuses to be turned into an alter ego – into some version of me by which I can quench my desire to grasp it or to fuse with it (Kearney 2001:13-14). And against the fusionary sameness of the onto-theological relation of "one-for-one," or "the one-for-itself-in-itself," Kearney proposes the "eschatological universality of the Other" (2001:15). Insofar as this notion of the universal envisions a possible co-existence of unique *personas* where their transcendence is secured, it is more ethical. And insofar as such an ethical universal remains an eschatological possibility that calls at us from the future, it resists contentment with the accomplished and instead creates "a sense of urgency and exigency, inviting each person to strive for its instantiation, however partial and particular, in each given situation" (Kearney 2001:15). Kearney proceeds to express this by means of the patristic metaphors of trinitarian discourse:

(T)he eschatological universal holds out the promise of a perichoretic interplay of differing *personas*, meeting without fusing, communing without totalizing, discoursing without dissolving. A sort of divine *circumin(c/s)essio* of the Trinitarian kingdom: a no-place which may one day be and where each *persona* cedes its place to its other (*cedere*) even as they sit down together (*sedere*). The Latins knew what they were about when they played on the semantic ambidexterity of the *c/s* as alternative spellings of the phonetically identical root term *cessio/sessio*. They knew about the bi-valent promise of *personas* as both there and not there, transcendent and immanent, visible and invisible (Kearney 2001:15-16).

In the same way that the *eschaton* is a promise (not an acquisition), a possibility of a new future (but impossible in the present where "the allure of total presence risks reigning supreme"), the eschatological *persona* also defies my power and transfigures me before I can configure it. By acknowledging the asymmetrical

priority to the other, that particular *persona* transfigures me and empowers me to transfigure in turn, to “figure the other in their otherness” (Kearney 2001:16):

The asymmetrical priority of the other’s *persona* over my person (qua ego-cogito) finds expression in the fact that the other comes to me not as some fulfillment of my intentional consciousness; but as a figure-face which eludes and shatters my intentional horizons. The face of the *persona* discountenances me before I countenance it. Which is another way of saying that the *persona* never actually appears at all, as such, in that it has *already come and gone*, leaving only its trace; or is *still to come*, outstripping every figuration on my part. The *persona* hails and haunts me *before* I even begin to represent it *as if* it were present before me (Kearney 2001:16).

These temporal idioms signal a specifically ethical time that expresses itself in the “temporal ek-stasis of the self, surpassing itself toward the other who surpasses it, responding to the call of the *persona* issued from a time which exceeds my beginning and my end” (Kearney 2001:16). The *achronic persona* therefore “disrupts me before and after every *as-if* synchronism” that I would impose upon it.

#### *Persona as chiasm*

With the *persona* superseding all presentations and re-presentations that seek to capture it as intuitive adequation, the *persona* can be said to surpass phenomenology that is understood in the sense of an “eidetics of intentional consciousness,” and strives toward a “rigorous science of transcendental immanence.” For this reason the phenomenon of the *persona* calls for a new or quasi-phenomenology which, Kearney suggests, is mobilised more by ethics than by eidetics (Kearney 2001:16). As a quasi-figure that appears *as if* it was an appearance, the *persona* of the other “announces a difference which differentiates itself ad infinitum” (Kearney 2001:17).

*Persona* is infinitely premature and invariably overdue, always missed and already deferred. *Persona* comes to us as a chiasmus or crossover with person ... Which is why we cannot think of the time of the *persona* except as an immemorial beginning (before the beginning) or an unimaginable end (after the end). That is precisely its eschatological stature – the messianic achronicity which breaks open the continuous moment-by-moment time of everyday chronology. ... It marks a time that is always *more*, remaindered, excessive, sabbatical, surplus. And yet this extra-time reveals itself in time, in what Walter Benjamin called the *Jetztzeit* – the incursion of the eternal in the moment (Kearney 2001:17).

The time of the *eschaton* is therefore best explained as anti-clockwise, or even post-clockwise, in that the *persona* remains forever anterior and posterior to its manifestations, so baffling all cognitive attempts at understanding it (Kearney 2001:17). It is for this reason (the *persona* never being there on time, or never adequately there at all) that Kearney suggests that *persona* is literally *personne*:

It is *no-one*, if *some-one* means a person who is phenomenally symmetrical to me. But it is *this one* and no one but *this one*, if my neighbor appears to me eschatologically, defying the *as-if* figurations by means of which I try to tell its story. For the *persona* is always other than the other-for-me here and now. It is the figure which transfigures by absencing itself as *personne* in the very moment that it hails and holds me (Kearney 2001:17).

This calls for us to view the other as an icon for “the passage of the infinite,” but without construing the infinite as another being of some kind hiding behind the other. For *persona* is the “in-finite other in the finite person before me” (Kearney 2001:17). If we refer to this *persona* as the sign of God, it is because there is no other that is in such a way both bound to but irreducible to this embodied person. It is not the idolatry of seeing the other person as divine, but it is about the divine (as trace, icon, visage, passage) in and through that person (Kearney 2001:18).

### *Persona as prosopon*

Kearney uses the term *prosopopoeic substitution* in a phenomenological and ethical sense to refer to “the otherness of the other in and through the flesh-and-blood person here before me. Trans-cendence in and through, but not reducible to, immanence. *Prosopon* is the face of the other who urgently solicits me, bidding me answer in each concrete situation, ‘here I am’” (Kearney 2001:18).

It is telling that, in the original Greek usage, where *prosopon* refers to the face of a person facing another, revealing itself from within itself, the term appears almost always as a plural noun, suggesting that the “*prosopon-persona* can never really exist on its own (*atomon*), but emerges in ethical relation to others,” so that it can be said to be “radically intersubjective, invariably bound up in some ethical vis-à-vis or face-to-face” (Kearney 2001:18).

Reinterpreted hermeneutically from a post-Levinasian perspective, one can see just how appropriately this Greek-Latin pair of *prosopon-persona* may serve to translate the Judeo-Christian primacy of ethics. It perfectly captures the double

sense of someone as both proximate to me in the immediacy of connection and yet somehow ineluctably distant, at once incarnate and otherwise, inscribing the trace of an irreducible alterity in and through the face before me (Kearney 2001:18).

This paradoxical phenomenon Kearney calls *prosopon-transfiguration*, which we allow, finally, to transfigure us (Kearney 2001:18). And therefore he proposes that we prefer icons over idols. For the counter-tradition of eschatology challenges the priority granted to being over the good by the tradition of onto-theology. For in the eschatological approach to the other, the good of the *persona* takes precedence over my drive to be and holds it to account, even caring for it where possible:

Against Heidegger I say: it is not our being that cares for itself, as being-toward-death, but the good of the *persona* that cares for being, as promise of endless rebirth. Natality transfigures mortality. Openness to the *persona* of the neighbor in each instant is, as Matthew 25 reminds us, the ultimate in eschatological awareness. And so we find ourselves, on foot of the above analysis, at the threshold of a phenomenology of religion (Kearney 2001:19).

### *Transfiguration*

Kearney discusses the events on Mount Tabor as a biblical example of the act of transfiguration, where Jesus is metamorphosed into the *persona* of Christ not by abandoning his original person and becoming someone else, but by undergoing a change of “figure” that allows his divine persona to emanate through his “flesh-and-blood embodiedness” (Kearney 2001:39). As the person of Jesus transforms into his *persona* – the “very divine otherness of his finite being,” He becomes the “*prosopon par excellence*,” while refusing idolatry<sup>82</sup> and remaining *some* one that was still recognisable as himself, so that “the transfiguration signals a surplus or incommensurability between *persona* and person even as it inscribes the one in and through the other” (Kearney 2001:40-41). In phenomenological idioms,

we might say that the transfigured Christ breaches the limits of intentional consciousness. The very otherness and uniqueness of his *persona* exceed the horizontal reach of our three main modalities of noetic intentionality: It goes beyond *perception* (the dazzling whiteness and the cloud, recalling the veil protecting the holy of holies), beyond *imagination* (the refusal of Peter’s cultic

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<sup>82</sup> Kearney explains that the fact that it is the face that is registering the transfiguring event, marks an “ethical openness to transcendence which refuses idolatry.” The “whiteness,” commonly signaling the infiniteness of divinity, serves as another “distancing precaution, as does the manner in which the three disciples are prepared for the event, and afterward counseled to build no monuments and remain silent about what they had seen (2001:40).

imaginings), and beyond *signification* (the observing of silence). [...] The Transfiguration reminds us that when it comes to the *persona* of God – marking the unique thisness (*haecitas*) of each person – it is a question of the old enigma: now you have him, now you don't. One moment there, one moment gone (Kearney 2001:42).<sup>83</sup>

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul interpreted the Mount Thabor scene as a call for everybody to become transfigured in the light of Christ. While we receive this transfiguring as a gift by the “grace-giving *persona* of Christ,” it is also something that we can do to others (Kearney 2001:44). Referring to Christ as the final Adam (*eschatos Adam*) in 1 Corinthians 15:49-58,

Paul suggests that the transfigured – or what he calls “heavenly” – body of Christ is in fact the secret goal of divine creation aimed at from the very beginning, though it is only fully revealed in the *eschaton*. And this eschatological revelation or *pleroma* will be one in which each person may find itself altered according to Christ's image and likeness. “And as we have borne the likeness (*eikon*) of the earthly man, so we shall bear the likeness (*eikon*) of the heavenly one ... we are all going to be changed, instantly, in the twinkling of an eye, when the last trumpet sounds” (1 Corinthians 15:49-52). That at least is the promise of the messianic *persona*. It is *all* humanity that is invited to be transformed according to the image-*eikon* of Christ. In this universalist scenario, the “old self” is “renewed in the image of its Creator” (Colossians 3:10-11) (Kearney 2001:45).

Moving on to Levinas and Derrida's concept of “Messianic time,” Kearney understands the story of transfiguration (as epilogue of Adam and prologue of Christ-to-come-again) as surpassing the limits of history as it is commonly understood (2001:45). It is in the sense of its unicity that the *persona* is “eternal,” and irreducible to the laws of causal temporality, because its *eschaton* is neither subject to laws of cause-effect or potency-act, nor exhausted in “the world-historical mutations of some teleological plan à la Hegel or Hartshorne” (Kearney 2001:45-46). Paul's description of the kingdom coming in a “blink of an eye” hints precisely at the unpredictable and unprogrammable character of its coming, and suggests that we understand the

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<sup>83</sup> By reminding the three apostles that the transfigured Christ is his “beloved son” (Mk 9:7), God “confounds the apostle's ‘natural’ expectations and announces Christ as the possibility of all humans becoming ‘sons of God’ – that is, by being transfigured into their own unique *personas*. Accordingly, Christ is held out to us as a promise inscribed in the long prophetic path pointing toward the coming kingdom, and already signposted by Moses and Elijah (the iconoclastic and messianic prophets, respectively). Indeed it is no accident that both these predecessors are harbingers of exodus (*exodos*, the way outwards) rather than of closure. Their accompaniment of Jesus in his moment of metamorphosis on the mountain serves as reminder that the transfigured Christ is a *way* not a terminus, an *eikon* not a fundamentalist fact, a *figure* of the end but not the end itself. A point powerfully brought home to us by Christ's insistence on his own exodic ‘passing’ in the days to come. The Mount Thabor narratives may thus be said to speak to us of a God of passage rather than of literal presence. God as way, truth and light – but never as fait accompli. The very discretion of Christ's *prosopon-persona* is a prohibition against premature possession” (Kearney 2001:43).

paradoxical language of anterior-posteriority regarding the kingdom's coming as being already amongst us, even as it is still to come: "the eschatological *persona* is transfiguring always, in each moment, but always remains to be ultimately transfigured, at the end of time. Which is another way of saying, its temporality exceeds the limits of ordinary time (Kearney 2001:46). Exploring Kearney's perspective of the "other" is thus helpful for understanding how he connects his onto-eschatological approach to God as Other with the ethical appeal of a kingdom of love and justice that is always already there, and yet still to come.

### *Desiring God*

Another way in which Kearney discusses transfiguration, is to speak of the desire of God, for through such desire the God of *posse* finds voice through many different *personas*. Where the transfiguring God shows himself through the faces of *eros*, *persona* becomes the passion of "burning love" and "endless waiting" (Kearney 2001:53). From the primacy of the Shulamite in the Song of Songs, Kearney deduces that God is the other who seeks human persons before they seek him – a "desire beyond my desire" that does not indicate lack or deficiency but is its own reward of excess, gift and grace (Kearney 2001:54). For Kearney, the lovers in the Song of Songs "come across as carnal embodiments of a desire which traverses and exceeds them, while remaining utterly themselves" (Kearney 2001:56). They are much more than personifications, representations, or mouthpieces for some spiritual message. With the poetics of the Song of Songs saying the unsayable, it indicates, for Kearney, that "burning, integrated, faithful, untiring desire – freed from social or inherited perversions – is the most adequate way for saying how humans love God and God loves humans. It suggests how human and divine desire may transfigure one another" (2001:58).<sup>84</sup> Kearney concludes his hermeneutic explorations of the Song of Songs with the following summary hypothesis:

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<sup>84</sup> "The Song marks an opening of religion – understood by Kristeva as 'the celebration of the secret of reproduction, the secret of pleasure, of life and death' – to aesthetics and ethics. Or to what we might call an ethical poetics of religion. The *persona* of the Shulamite's song may thus be seen as a figure who promises the coupling without final consummation of God and desire – 'sensuous and deferred love ... passion and ideal.' Claiming that the Shulamite woman transfigured by love is – in her inner longing, division, and desire – arguably the first 'Subject' in the modern sense of the word, Kristeva concludes her analysis with this account of the great paradox: 'Love in the Song of Songs appears to be simultaneously in the framework both of conjugality and of a fulfillment always set in the future (recognition of amorous alteration as unavoidably missing the other who was barely touched and immediately lost ...). [...] The Unique is imagined, seen, sensed – witness all the visual, tactile

While God's lovers will always continue to seek and desire him whom their soul loves, they have always already been found, because already sought and desired, by him whom their soul loves. Their eros occupies a middle space, a two-way street between action and passion, yearning and welcome, seeking and receptivity. [...] When it comes to God at any rate, you rarely have one without the other. *Attente* and *accueil* are the two Janus faces of desire. Why? Because desire responds to the double demand of eschaton and eros. God's desire for us – our desire for God. The Shulamite loves as she is loved (Kearney 2001:79).

With regards to the debate on whether the 'Other' is really accessible to human consciousness, or whether it lies beyond it as unknowable, Masterson says that, according to Kearney,

we can, to some extent, navigate hermeneutically between these horns of the dilemma by recourse to narrative imagination which envisages the other as an ethical appeal which, precisely as other, is constitutive of my conscious self and not merely derived from or projected by it. This practical ethical approach to the other in terms of the requirements of justice to some extent overcomes the antinomies of a purely cognitive perspective (Masterson 2008:254).

It seems that, while Kearney is very engaged in the deconstruction of otherness, and greatly appreciative of it, he disagrees with its claim that otherness is wholly inaccessible to human appraisal – a view which, for him, results in intellectual and ethical paralysis (Masterson 2008:255). To avoid moral standoff, deconstructionist approaches need to be supplemented with a hermeneutics of practical wisdom, enabling us to discern between justice and injustice (Masterson 2008:256):

Prompted by a sensitive phenomenology of the self-other dyad, this hermeneutics involving narrative imagination and judgment suggests that the other is never absolutely transcendent nor absolutely immanent but somehow between the two. Others are intimately bound up with selves in various ways which constitute real ethical relationships between them (Masterson 2008:256)

The significance of all this to Kearney's programme springs from a question that rises from the conviction that, in order to "maintain an ethical appraisal of experience, all expressions of otherness including, notably, that which envisages a transcendent deity must be *somehow* accessible to human consciousness"

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and olfactory descriptions of the lovers' corporeal qualities – in opposition to the postulate of God's irrepresentableness. God is seen and heard by chosen ones, by lovers, rather feminine lovers; but never merging, never definitively offered for an incarnation that would be accomplished once and for all.' In short, the Song of Songs confronts us with a desire that desires beyond desire while remaining desire" (Kearney 2001:60).

(Masterson 2008:256). The question of what this *somehow* might mean, is played out post-metaphysically in *The God who may be*, seeking to delineate how a transcendent deity is accessible to human consciousness. For Kearney, it is the encounter with the other, opening up new possibilities for critical reflection, that feeds the passion for an eschatological hermeneutics:

Eschatological hermeneutics (or “diacritical hermeneutics” as Kearney often calls it) is fundamentally intersubjective, and if, as they say, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, then the proof of one’s conviction of the necessity of the other for hermeneutics is seen in the actual willingness to listen attentively and to respond honestly (Gedney 2006:98).

Further thought regarding the ethical consequences of Kearney’s proposal will need to take seriously the question of the nature of metaphysical and post-metaphysical ways of doing theology and ethics, as well as the claim that no ethics can avoid metaphysical grounding (cf., e.g., Sherlock 2009:631-649).<sup>85</sup>

#### 4.5 Poetics: naming the unnameable

To talk about God – the Other that forever eludes our intensions and cognitive categories – is to stretch language to its limits. It is for this reason that Kearney embraces poetics to give expression to that which cannot be named. He reflects on this while commenting on the Song of Songs and observes how

a powerful religious poetics can sing the unsayable and intimate the unnameable by means of an innovative and insubordinate language, a language resistant to both allegorist abstraction and metaphysical dualism. By intimating a “perfect similarity of relations between two quite dissimilar things” (Kant’s analogy of faith), this song of eros creates a surplus of meaning. It twists and turns accredited words and thoughts so as to bring about a sort of catachresis or mutation within language itself. And it is this very semantic innovation which transforms our understanding of both God and desire. So that engaging in the Song of Songs we can, in Paul Ricoeur’s words, think *more* about desire and *more* about God. We can think of each of them otherwise (Kearney 2001:57-58).<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> “In order to make sense of our common moral experience we need to have a metaphysics of the good that enables us to [...] choose among those things regarded by some as good” (Sherlock 2009:644). Also, “(t)he idea that one can reach moral conclusions without metaphysical or theological claims is illusory” (2009:645).

<sup>86</sup> Kearney further notes: “The psychodrama of incarnation here is, of course, provisional and premonitory: the love metaphor is conjugal but also and inescapably marks a movement of deferral. And this surplus of eschatological sense in and through the five erotic senses of carnal contact is evidenced, at the linguistic and rhetorical level of the Song itself, as an almost inexhaustible

So, too, Kristeva stresses that by evoking God in terms of amorous passion, we

enter a poetic realm of uncontained figurative meaning – e.g., “your love is more delightful than wine; / delicate is the fragrance of your perfume etc.” The transfiguring divine is named here at the same time as it remains nameless – a double movement of epiphany and withdrawal, which we have also witnessed in the burning bush narrative and in the Christian testimony of the transfigured Christ on Mount Thabor ... This double move manifests itself in the Song as a desiring *persona* who is both overwhelmingly there and yet ultimately transcendent of our appropriating grasp (Kearney 2001:58).

Reaching the end of his hermeneutical-phenomenological explorations, Kearney concludes *The God who may be* with just such an attempt at speaking the unsayable poetically. He asks, namely, what metaphors, figures, images or intimations we may use from our religious or philosophical heritages to give expression to the enigma and describe the “infinite May-be” (Kearney 2001:101). He draws, in this endeavour, from a hermeneutic retrieval of the (in his mind, neglected) thoughts of Aristotle, Cusanus, and Schelling on possibility, and then moves on to reinterpret these in light of the paradigm of God-play and *perichoresis*.

#### **4.5.1 Reclaiming metaphor: hermeneutic retrievals**

##### *Aristotle’s “nous poetikos”*

Despite the Aristotelian reading of *dunamis* as a subjugation of potentiality to actuality, Kearney suggests that the Aristotelian doctrine of the *nous poetikos* could be read in the light of an eschatological perspective that would see the “making mind” as enabling and transfiguring the human mind’s latent capacities (Kearney 2001:101-102). Kearney asks whether Aristotle’s concept of the light of the eternal, immortal *nous poetikos* that makes visible the latent colour quality of things, might not be conceived as

analogous to the transfiguring power of the Creator, as outlined in Genesis, Exodus, the *Sefer Yetzirah*, or the eschatological writings of Paul and the early patristic commentators. Going beyond a narrow metaphysical dualism of potency

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proliferation of innovative figures of speech. In short, unlike Platonic love, this incarnational love of the Bible *does* involve all the senses – sound, odor, touch, sight, taste – but unlike the old pagan rites of sexual fusion and sacrifice, it resists the phallic illusion of totality, finality, or fullness (the Shulamite reminds us that even though she seeks her lover on her bed at night she does ‘not find him’ (3:1)” (Kearney 2001:59).

versus act, we might then be in a position to say that for the eschatological God possibilizing is actualizing and actualizing is possibilizing – indeed that that is precisely what divine transfiguration means (Kearney 2001:102).<sup>87</sup>

### *Nicholas of Cusa's "possest"*

Cusanus equates God with the “possibility-to-be”<sup>88</sup> and claims that *possest* is the “most appropriate ‘approximate’ name” by which humans can designate their concept of God (Kearney 2001:103).<sup>89</sup> With neither being prior or posterior to the other, absolute possibility and actuality co-exists in a co-eternal union in God himself, who combines them in a miraculous identity, and who is “everything he is able to be (*posse esse*)” (Kearney 2001:103). Because it is only in the Beginning that possibility and actuality are identical, it follows that it is distinct in everything that exists “after” God. But since God is all he is able to be, for Cusanus this means that existing reality exists in its entirety “from the Beginning *enfolded* in God (*complicite in deo*),” so that “the whole process of creation in time and history must be seen ... as a universe *unfolded* into the created world (*explicite in creatura mundi*)” (Kearney 2001:104).

For Kearney such a “lapse into mystical pantheism” inevitably conjures up the problem of theodicy<sup>90</sup> and so forecloses the idea of human freedom and creativity as participation in the “transfiguring play of creation” (2001:104-105). For the idea of a possibilising God is disarmed of its radicality if it is “reduced to a totalizing necessity where every possible is ineluctably actualized from the beginning of time – history being reduced, by extension, to a slow-release ‘unfolding’ of some pre-established plan” (Kearney 2001:105). For Kearney and his eschatological perspective that

<sup>87</sup> In this context, Kearney considers L.A. Kosman’s question of whether the maker mind makes the “potentially thinkable actually thinkable,” or whether it makes the “already actually thinkable actually thought” (Kearney 2001:102). He comments: “In other words, does *nous poetikos* possibilize thought by making us really capable of thought or does it do the thinking for us by determining our actual thoughts as well? My eschatological reading is more inclined to the former reading in that it sees the divine Creator as transfiguring our being into a can-be – a being capable of creating and recreating new meanings in our world – without determining the actual content of our creating or doing the actual creating for us” (Kearney 2001:102). This gives important nuance to Kearney’s vision of God and humans variously enabling and transfiguring one another.

<sup>88</sup> “Possibility-to-be” translates *posse esse*, or *possest* according to the compound term that Cusanus coined for referring to God in this way (Kearney 2001:103).

<sup>89</sup> This is because it is simultaneously “‘no name,’ the ‘name of each distinct name,’ and the very ‘name of names’” revealed in Ex 3:14 – the multiplicity of the designation implying that it transcends human understanding (Kearney 2001:103).

<sup>90</sup> To this challenge Kearney responds with Augustine that evil is a “*lack* or *absence* of God – a *privatio boni* which removes misery and mayhem from the eternal design of divine volition” (Kearney 2001:104).

imagines the God-of-the-possible as ever inviting us to give *esse* to *posse* and leaving the choice of the response with us, Cusanus therefore doesn't go far enough.

### Schelling's "Seyn-könnende"

Rendering the divine name as "I will be what I will be" in his comments on Exodus 3:15, Schelling argues in *Philosophy of mythology* that God reveals his essence as the "capacity to-be or to-become" his existence, so that God is defined as the "can-be" (*Seyn-könnende*)<sup>91</sup> (Kearney 2001:105). But this "potentiality of essence" is inferior to God's free actualised existence, in that it is the latter which overcomes God's ground or nature – for Schelling God's "dark side." In a trinitarian paradigm, Schelling identifies the ground of God (the "immediate can-be") with Spirit (the "can-be of the divine ground as the beginning of its being"). But Spirit is subordinated to Christ as a "mediating cosmic potency," as well as to the Father as Being itself and ultimate source (Kearney 2001:105). Hermeneutically revisiting this trinitarian paradigm, Kearney allows for an eschatological revisioning of the primacy of the Father from the perspective of the eschatological Son and Spirit:

Thus rather than associating the possibilizing Spirit and Son with the dark ground or essence to be ultimately overcome in order that divine existence and freedom be achieved, we could see them rather as figures of the eschatological Kingdom which promises to fulfill the pledge of the Father in Exodus 3:14 (I shall be with you) and in Mathew (*sic*) 10 (Everything is possible to God). The Father might thus be re-envisaged as the loving-possible which transfigures the Son and Spirit and is transfigured by them in turn (Kearney 2001:105-106).

#### 4.5.2 Godplay

Referring to Heidegger's suggestion in *An introduction to metaphysics* that the relation between Being and God might be reconsidered in terms of proportional analogy, Kearney opts to explore how this might be applied to "the construal of the 'power of the possible' in terms of *play*: the play of Being and the play of God" (Kearney 2001:106). Asking how Heidegger's ontological model of play may relate, analogously, to the eschatology of the possible, Kearney begins to point out a number of differences. Firstly, while ontological play denotes the power of the Same returning to itself, eschatological play summons us beyond the Same by denoting the powerlessness of the other: "(u)nlike a destiny of Being unfolding itself with

<sup>91</sup> Kearney uses this peculiar spelling, although the reason is not clear.

ineluctable *Vermögen*, the eschatological possible invites us to freely realize its promises and prophecies” (Kearney 2001:106).<sup>92</sup>

Each human being is a *homo ludens* transfiguring the world to the extent that God is a *deus ludens* who possibilizes the world in the first place. Biblically interpreted, the possibilizing play of the world is a “may-be” dependent upon humans for its coming to be, a fragile promise symbolized in Judeo-Christian-Islamic mysticism by the naked playful child (Kearney 2001:107).<sup>93</sup>

God’s chosen mode of involvement in creation – as player rather than emperor – epitomises powerlessness, self-emptying, *kenosis*, and letting go. It is by the act of surrendering his own power that God empowers humans and possibilises their good actions to the end of them supplementing and co-accomplishing creation.<sup>94</sup> In this way the metaphor of eschatological play also discloses the kingdom as utterly dispossessive, in the sense that

it can never be fully possessed in the here and now, but always directs us toward an advent still to come – an alternative site from which to rebegin afresh.” Indeed we can only ever find the kingdom by losing it, by renouncing the illusion that we possess it here and now. If we think we have the kingdom, it can only be in the mode of the “as if,” as imaginary, a play of images (Kearney 2001:108).

But there is a risk involved in play, namely that players might forget that they are playing, deny the “as-if” nature of their images, and so confuse the figural with the literal and the possible with the actual. But the “virtue of play” resides precisely in

<sup>92</sup> Here Kearney notes Wisdom’s “play” before the Creator (Pr 8:30) as a “metaphor of the possible God as a *deus ludens* who creates and dances before its own creation”: “This creative play of *sophia* is the pre-figuration of the world’s genesis which itself serves as prelude (*praeludium*) to the eschatological kingdom still to come” (Kearney 2001:106-107).

<sup>93</sup> Kearney mentions Meister Eckhart’s *nackter Knabe*, the “little child” that enchants humankind as it creates the cosmos (Pr 8:28-31), David declaring that he will dance and play before his Creator, and Saint Jerome’s description of the messianic age “prophesied in Zachariah (*sic*) 8:5 as ‘a play between young men and women’ where the ‘joy of the Spirit will manifest itself in the harmonious gestures of its children who dance together, repeating David’s boast that he will dance and play before the face of the Lord’” (Kearney 2001:107). Furthermore, many early church fathers and later mystics reiterate this “eschatological vision of a kingdom of play,” e.g. Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Clement of Alexandria, and Maximus the Confessor (Kearney 2001:107). For Kearney, this “recurring motif of Creation as ‘child play’ epitomizes ... the eschatological *posse* as both promise and powerlessness, fecundity and fragility. For the God of the possible is like child play to the extent that it opens up a realm of free possibles but is unable to actualize those possibles without the help of other human beings” (Kearney 2001:107).

<sup>94</sup> Kearney continues: “To be made in God’s image is therefore, paradoxically, to be powerless; but with the possibility of receiving power from God to overcome our powerlessness, by responding to the call of creation with the words, ‘I am able.’ To God’s ‘I may be’ each one of us is invited to reply ‘I can.’ Just as to each ‘I can,’ God replies ‘I may be.’ ... (I)t is in the renunciation of my will-to-power, and even in my refusal to rest satisfied with my ownmost totality as a being-toward-death, that I open myself to the infinite empowering-possibilizing of God. Abandoning ego, I allow the infinite to beget itself in my persona” (Kearney 2001:108).

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not taking “ourselves, our world, or our God *literally*,” and in learning the “humility and humor” of a game without emperors. This playful possible, with its “double movement of engagement and detachment” for both humans and God, brings the point home that while we are in the world, we are also not wholly of it, for the “mystical metaphors of play teaches us to become *ioculatores domini* – players in the world who are at once iconoclasts and lovers of the earth” (Kearney 2001:109).

#### **4.5.3 Perichoresis**

The Orthodox image of the sacred dance-play between the persons of the Trinity – *perichoresis* in Greek and *circumincessio* in Latin – gestures reciprocal dispossession through its circular movement rather than fusion into a singular substance (Kearney 2001:109). The Latin play on the dual phonetic connotations of *circum-in-sessio* (*sedo*, to sit or assume a position) and *circum-in-cessio* (*cedo*, to cede or give away) further denotes an image of continuous moving toward and moving away from each other, a perpetual play of immanence and transcendence (Kearney 2001:109). With the incarnation of the Son, humanity becomes a part of this Trinitarian dance-play through the open invitation to join the dance of *posse* and become involved in an eschatological game whose possibles are always beyond that of our own. “(R)efiguring the play of genesis” and “prefiguring the play of eschaton,” this game knows no end-game, and its ultimate move is always still to come (Kearney 2001:110). Instead we are invited to partake in the divine play as a gift and a grace – “a love that comes to us from the future summoning us toward the other beyond ourselves”:

This is surely what Gregory of Nyssa had in mind when he spoke of our eschatological vocation to transfigure the world into a new creation by forming a “dancing choir which looks forever forward to the Lord who leads the dance.” In this sense we might describe the new creation as a pro-creation, for it is not something we invent out of ourselves, a possible projected by our subjective dreams and imaginings alone; no, it is a creation *for* the other, *on behalf of* the other. If God has created the world for us, we recreate the world for God. We carry each other within; we give birth to each other. And when we do, we cannot tell the dancer from the dance (Kearney 2001:110).

#### 4.6 Circles of meaning: Kearney's hermeneutics

Before probing the Torah and Talmud for its perspectives on imagination in *The wake of the imagination: toward a postmodern culture*, Kearney offers a condensed summary of his hermeneutic approach to the contemporary attempt to reappropriate the meanings of ancient texts. To his own question of how we can be sure we understand the meaning and intention of the original authors and commentators, he answers that it is in fact not a question of either *retrieving* some original intention, or of *reducing* the ancient meaning to the contemporary context of interpretation. Instead, a "mutual convergence of horizons, a meeting of old and new minds where each may grow from contact with the other," entails a *reinterpretation* of the historically distant in the light of contemporary commentaries and perspectives (1988a:38). Such an act of interpretation remains a two-way process, insofar as the foreign becomes familiar, and the familiar foreign:

Or to put it in another way, in *appropriating* other meanings, (i.e. the old Hebrew narratives) into our perspective (i.e. the current paradigm of understanding), we also *disappropriate* ourselves of our own perspective in order to open ourselves to such otherness of meaning. Each is, hopefully, enlarged by the other. In this manner, the hermeneutic circle which our contemporary reading of ancient texts entails, aims at a mutual *dialogue* in the etymological sense of *dia-legein*: welcoming the difference in order to learn from it (1988a:38).

In *Strangers, gods, and monsters*, Kearney works out his diacritical hermeneutics as a way of maintaining the healthy criticism of a hermeneutics of suspicion while also holding to a hermeneutics of suspension "that retrieves and even embraces forgotten or overlooked treasures in tradition's storehouse, such as Aristotle's *dynamis*, Gregory's *prosopon*, and Cusanus's *possest*" (Manoussakis 2006a:xix; cf. 2004:3).

In her essay "An ethics of memory: promising, forgiving, yearning," Pamela Sue Anderson marks that making narrative sense of our lives remains crucial to human knowledge, ethics, and justice. Memory informs, but is also informed by memoirs, myths and mimetic rituals that give shape to our communal and individual lives (Anderson 2005:233). But memory, providing the constant element (what Ricoeur calls promise-keeping) in the changing nature of our narratives, also looks to the future, giving diachronical coherence to one's past, present, and future life

(Anderson 2005:234, 238). Along the same lines, when commenting on Kearney's hermeneutical approach to the phenomenology of imagination, Masterson notes that

(i)n the context of sacred texts and narratives this activity of creative interpretation can point back to an 'archaeological' foundation and/or forward to a teleological or eschatological realm of human possibility (2008:251).

Memory is also a form of imagination (Anderson 2005:238), and it is this creative remembering and re-imagining of biblical texts that enable the possibilising of God and the kingdom in eschatological terms. For when we (individually and communally) recount our present situation in the light of past memories and future expectations, we bring about that which we begin to imagine: a kingdom of love and justice. It is now our task to investigate Kearney's own hermeneutical approach to narratives. For this task, we turn to the first volume in Kearney's trilogy "Philosophy at the Limit," namely his 2002 publication, *On stories*.

It is Aristotle who first argued that storytelling provides us with a *shareable world*. In transforming random events into story, and in so doing making them memorable over time, Kearney holds that we are ourselves transformed into full agents of our history and transitioned from a fluidity of happenings into society – a "meaningful social or political community) (Kearney 2002b:3). This is not true at a communal historical level only, but also of individual history. In introducing the self to another, we tell a story by narrating and interpreting our present condition in terms of past memories and anticipations of the future, thereby revealing a sense of the self "as a *narrative* identity that perdures and coheres over a lifetime" (Kearney 2002b:4).

While both historical and fictional narratives have a *mimetic* function, this involves much more than a mirroring of reality. *Mimesis* is fundamentally bound to *mythos* in the sense that scattered events is transformatively plotted into a new paradigm. "Narrative thus assumes the double role of *mimesis-mythos* to offer us a newly imagined way of being in the world" (Kearney 2002b:12). By seeing the world otherwise, we are purged of pity and fear through the experience of *catharsis* as we identify and empathise with acting and suffering characters in the story.<sup>95</sup> And yet

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<sup>95</sup> In the second section, where Kearney considers three case histories, he outlines three distinct but often overlapping senses of storytelling: "First, there are stories which we inherit from our family, culture or religion. These are the narratives of fatherlands and motherlands: ancestral stories which often function as *myths*. As such they can work as purveyors of tradition and heritage or of ideological illusion and cover-up. [...] Second, there are stories which serve the purpose of creation, in the sense

narrative also provides us with a form of aesthetic distance so that we find ourselves watching events unfold. By means of this conflation of empathy and detachment, narrative provides us the necessary vision “for a journey beyond the closed ego towards other possibilities of being” (Kearney 2002b:13).<sup>96</sup>

For Kearney, the retelling of the past takes place as an “interweaving of past events with present readings of those events in the light of our continuing existential story” (2002b:46). This means that narrative can work for us in the present, while remaining as true as possible to the historical event (2002b:46).

The relevance of Kearney’s perspective on stories and story-telling for the present study becomes clearer as we approach his analysis of communal or national narratives in Part Three of *On stories*. Here he recognises that “(h)istorical communities are constituted by the stories they tell to themselves and to others,” and that, in alignment with this fact, questions of historical revision and reinvention can be found in the genesis stories of the two major foundational cultures of Western civilisation (Graeco-Roman and biblical), both of which provide us with instances of “*nations as narrations*” (Kearney 2002b:79).

Unlike the Graeco-Roman dependence on mythologies transmitted by ancient poets, the “revealed” narratives of biblical Israel, recounted and reinterpreted by succeeding generations, complemented such stories by adding an eschatological dimension to the recollection of the ancient, founding events (Kearney 2002b:79).<sup>97</sup> Redeploying the same narrative tradition, Christianity drew from many narrations of

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of pure *creatio ex nihilo*. Here too we may encounter illusion and artifice, but in this instance we are responsible for it in so far as we are in the business of self-invention. [...] Third, we have the sense of stories as creative solutions for actual problems. Here narrative fiction draws from the first two functions while adding a supplementary one – that of cathartic survival. [...] In short, fiction as healing and transformative fantasy” (Kearney 2002b:29-30).

<sup>96</sup> “(I)t is precisely this double-take of difference and identity – experiencing oneself as another and the other as oneself – that provokes a reversal of our natural attitude to things and opens us to novel ways of seeing and being” (Kearney 2002b:140).

<sup>97</sup> Kearney illustrates this point well by referring to Thomas Mann’s sense of narrative historicity as he relates it in *Joseph and his Brothers* by letting Jacob initiate Tamar into the rites of Hebrew storytelling. The text deserves to be quoted in full: “The ‘once upon a time’ was still fresh, and Jacob’s voice shook ... for these were all God-stories, sacred in the telling. But it is quite certain now that Tamar’s listening soul in the course of instruction was fed not alone on historical, time-overlaid once-upon-a-time, the time-honoured ‘once’, but with ‘one day’ as well. And ‘one day’ is a word of scope, it has two faces. It looks back, into solemnly twilit distances, and it looks forwards, far, far forwards, into space, and is not less solemn because it deals with the to-be than that other dealing with the has-been.... Into all [Jacob’s] stories of the beginning there came an element of promise, so that one could not tell them without foretelling” (2002b:80).

the Christ-event to comprise the four Gospels,<sup>98</sup> illustrating what Kearney calls the ultimate responsibility of historical communities for the “formation and reformation of their own identity” (2002b:80-81).<sup>99</sup>

One cannot remain constant over the passage of historical time – and therefore remain faithful to one’s promises and covenants – unless one has some minimal remembrance of where one comes from, and of how one came to be what one is. In this sense, identity is memory. As Hegel put it, *das Wesen ist das Gewesene*. ‘What is is what it has become.’ Or more simply, the past is always present” (2002b:81).

Yet a culture’s sense of constancy over time does not tell the whole story, for it is accompanied by an “intendant imperative of *innovation*” that springs from the openness and indeterminacy of collective memory that is the result of a nation discovering that it is an imagined community, “a narrative construction to be reinvented and reconstructed again and again” (Kearney 2002b:81). As a nation discovers and continually rediscovers this openness at the root of its cultural constancy, it invites the nation to the freedom of always re-imagining itself<sup>100</sup> as it finds it increasingly difficult to assume that its inherited identity goes without saying (Kearney 2002b:81).<sup>101</sup> The *mimetic* function of narrative can therefore be said to refer to invention in the original sense (*invenire*), meaning both to discover and to create, or, put differently, “to disclose what is already there in the light of what is not

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<sup>98</sup> Cf. Lk 1:1-4: “Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.”

<sup>99</sup> Cf., also, Sir 44:9-13: “But of others there is no memory; they have perished as though they had never existed; they have become as though they had never been born, they and their children after them. But these also were godly men, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten; their wealth will remain with their descendants, and their inheritance with their children’s children. Their descendants stand by the covenants; their children also, for their sake. Their offspring will continue forever, and their glory will never be blotted out. Their bodies are buried in peace, but their name lives on generation after generation. The assembly declares their wisdom, and the congregation proclaims their praise.”

<sup>100</sup> Referring to the benefit of the originary stories of formative cultures, Kearney states that “they invite us to reimagine our past in ways which challenge the status quo and open up alternative modes of thinking” (2002b:90). They can, however, also “engender revivalist shibboleths of fixed identity, closing off dialogue with all that is other than themselves” (2002b:90). It is because of this ambivalent potency of collective memory that we need to keep our mythological memories in critical dialogue with history,” and “why every culture must go on telling stories, inventing and reinventing its inherited imaginary, lest its history congeal into dogma” (2002b:90).

<sup>101</sup> It is for this reason that Kearney argues that “the tendency of a nation towards xenophobia or insularity can be resisted by its own narrative resources to imagine itself otherwise – through its own eyes or those of others” (2002b:81).

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yet (but is potentially). It is the power, in short, to re-create actual worlds as possible worlds” (Kearney 2002b:132).

These words provide us with a key whereby to approach Kearney’s re-reading and reinterpretation of Biblical narratives such as the epiphany to Moses in Exodus 3:14. We see that his probing of Biblical traditions to speak, tell and narrate themselves again in such ways as to disclose new possibilities for living is preceded by his approach to narrative in general. For him, the recounted, narrated life is richer than the untold life, because

(t)he recounted life prisms open perspectives inaccessible to ordinary perception. It marks a poetic extrapolation of possible worlds which supplement and refashion our referential relations to the life-world existing prior to the act of recounting. Our exposure to new possibilities of being refigures our everyday being-in-the-world. So that when we return from the story-world to the real world, our sensibility is enriched and amplified in important respects (Kearney 2002b:132-133).

The result is Ricoeur’s triple *mimesis*, where we move from *prefiguring* our life-world (as it seeks to be told) to the *configuring* of the text (in the act of telling), and finally to the *refiguring* of our existence (as we return from narrative text to action) (Kearney 2002b:133). Contrary to the structuralist view of the text as a self-regarding play of signifiers, the circular move of *mimesis* (“from action to text and back again”) that Kearney advocates does not deny that life is linguistically mediated, but at the same time insists that such mediation always points beyond itself (referring both back to the life of the author and forward to that of the reader) (Kearney 2002b:133). It is for this reason that Kearney does not reduce *mimesis* to the “connotations of servile representation” that is usually associated with the term “imitation,” but rather understands it (with Ricoeur and MacIntyre) as a sort of “creative retelling” that allows for the “gap” separating the narrated and lived worlds due to unique point of view, style and genre of every narrative (Kearney 2002b:133-134).

Moving from fictional to historical narratives, this “gap” between reality and representation is of a qualitatively different kind. For while the past can only be accessed as a reconstruction via narrative imagination, our poetic licence is limited to the degree that there is at least a “minimal claim to tell the past as it truly was” (Kearney 2002b:134-5):

In other words, historical narratives, unlike fictional ones, hold that their accounts *refer* to things that actually happened – regardless of how varied and contested the interpretations of what happened may be. The reference can be multiple, split or truncated, but it still sustains a belief in the real events (*genomena*) recounted by the historian. [...] Once a story is told as history it makes very different claims on the past from those made by fiction” (Kearney 2002b:135).

While historical and fictional narratives therefore both refer to human action, the referential claims on which they do so are quite distinct.<sup>102</sup> With fiction aiming to open up new worlds of possibility in terms of human action, history aims at conforming to the criteria of evidence that agrees with the general body of science (Kearney 2002b:135).<sup>103</sup> And yet Kearney sees a particular kind of “phronetic” (Aristotle) understanding resulting from the overlapping of history and story. By this he means a “kind of understanding specific to narrativity in general,” or

a form of practical wisdom capable of respecting the singularity of situations as well as the nascent universality of values aimed at by human actions. ... It acknowledges that there is always a certain fictionality to our representing history “as if” we were actually there in the past to experience it (which in reality we weren’t). And by the same token, it recognises a certain historical character to fictional narratives – for example the fact that most stories are recounted in the *past* tense and describe characters and events as though they were *real* (Kearney 2002b:143).

In this regard the question of literary belief becomes key to the working of narrative. Once we enter the “secondary world” created by the author, we pretend that this narrated world is “true” and needs only to accord with the laws of that world. It is this belief that enables the art to work its magic and our imaginations to be swept away (Kearney 2002b:143-144).

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<sup>102</sup> Kearney offers the following quote from Ricoeur’s *Can fictional narratives be true?*, on the enigma of storytelling’s dual role as fictional invention and representation of reality: “As fictive as the historical text may be, its claim is to be a representation of reality. And its way of asserting this claim is to support it by the verificationist procedures proper to history as a science. In other words, history is both a literary artifact and a representation of reality. It is a literary artifact to the extent that, like all literary texts, it tends to assume the status of a self-contained system of symbols. It is a representation of reality to the extent that the world that it depicts – which is the ‘work’s world’ – is assumed to stand for some actual occurrences in the ‘real’ world” (Kearney 2002b:185, note 12).

<sup>103</sup> “This is not, of course, to deny that once history is narrated it already assumes certain techniques of ‘telling’ and ‘retelling’ that make it more than a reportage of empirical facts. Even the presumption that the past can be told as it truly happened still contains the gap of the figural ‘as’. History-telling is never literal (*pace* positivists or fundamentalists). It is always at least in part *figurative* to the extent that it involves telling according to a certain selection, sequencing, emplotment and perspective. But it does try to be *truthful*” (Kearney 2002b:136).

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Towards the closing of *On stories*, Kearney concludes with a look at the ethical role of storytelling. Most significantly in this respect, stories as a mode of discourse enables the “the ethical sharing of a common world with others” (Kearney 2002b:150). Kearney believes that it is precisely the interplay of agency<sup>104</sup> that grants us the sense of narrative identity without which a particular experience of selfhood, indispensable to any kind of moral responsibility, would be impossible (Kearney 2002b:151). For a sense of self-identity stretching, on the one hand, across a lifetime of past, present and future and, on the other hand, across a communal history of predecessors, contemporaries and successors, will prove vital if a moral agent is to be capable of making and keeping promises (Kearney 2002b:151). The act of telling our life-story to both ourselves and others provide us with a sense of selfhood – “a sense of being a ‘subject’ capable of acting and committing ourselves to others” (Kearney 2002b:151).

Against the postmodern tendency to overemphasise textual indeterminacy and anonymity challenges (and against the political paralysis that results from eradicating the subject), Kearney emphasises the intrinsically interactive nature of storytelling. He proposes that a model of narrative selfhood is able to satisfy anti-humanist suspicions of subjectivity without obliterating the possibility of the ethical-political subject:

The best response to this crisis of self is not, I believe, to revive some foundationalist notion of the person as substance, cogito or ego. ... A far more appropriate strategy, I suggest, is to be found in a philosophical model of narrative which seeks to furnish an alternative model of self-identity. Namely, the narrative identity of a person, presupposed by the designation of a proper name, and sustained by the conviction that it is the same subject who perdures through its diverse acts and words between birth and death. The story told by a self about itself tells about the action of the ‘who’ in question: and the identity of this ‘who’ is a narrative one. This is what Ricoeur calls an *ipse*-self of process and promise, in contrast to a fixed *idem*-self, which responds only to the question

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<sup>104</sup> By the “interplay of agency,” Kearney means recognising, on the one hand, that storytelling involves a “teller” telling a “story” to a “listener” about a “real or imaginary world” (Kearney 2002b:150). On the other hand, he holds that a critical hermeneutics that give due balanced attention to all four these aspects “allows us to recognise not only the highly complex workings of textual play, but also the referential *world of action* from which the text derives and to which it ultimately returns. The acknowledgement of a two-way passage from action to text and back again encourages us to recognise the indispensable role of human *agency*. This role is multiple, relating as it does to the agent as author, actor and reader. So that when we engage with a story we are simultaneously aware of a narrator (telling the story), narrated characters (acting in the story) and a narrative interpreter (receiving the story and relating it back to a life-world of action and suffering)” (Kearney 2002b:151).

'what?'. In sum, I would wager that no matter how cyber, digital or intergalactic our world becomes, there will always be human selves to recite and receive stories. And these narrative selves will always be capable of ethically responsible action (Kearney 2002b:152).

Kearney reminds us that storytelling is both something we participate in as actors, and something we do as agents: "We are subject *to* narrative as well as being subjects *of* narrative" (Kearney 2002b:153). Similar to our ancestral, linguistic and genetic codes, we are born into and inherit "a certain intersubjective historicity," and it is this sense of "belonging to history" as both storytellers and storyfollowers that cause us – instead of merely being informed by the facts, to be interested in and grabbed by stories. To the extent that what we consider communicable and memorable corresponds to what we value, this interestedness is essentially ethical (Kearney 2002b:154). As such storytelling is never neutral, and we might add *ethically neutral*:<sup>105</sup>

There is no narrated action that does not involve some response of approval or disapproval relative to some scale of goodness or justice – though it is always up to us readers to choose for ourselves from the various value options proposed by the narrative (Kearney 2002b:155).

But even if we deploy our own ethical presuppositions whenever we respond to a story, the fact that we always have something *to* respond to confirms that the story is confined neither to the mind of its author, nor to that of its reader, nor to the action of its narrated actors. Instead, the story comes into existence in the playfield between these influences, and the fact that the outcome is therefore never final explains narrative's "open-ended invitation to ethical and poetic responsiveness" (Kearney 2002b:156).

#### **4.7 Imagination now: producing new worlds**

Committed as he is to the primacy of the possible over the actual, and of imagination over speculative reason, Kearney's approach is a "characteristically hermeneutical exploration of the possible as an imaginative way of casting light upon a variety of

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<sup>105</sup> As Ricoeur notes in *Time and narrative*, vol. 1, the narrator undertakes a strategy of persuasion that "is aimed at giving the reader a vision of the world that is never ethically neutral, but that rather implicitly or explicitly induces a new evaluation of the world and of the reader as well. In this sense, narrative already belongs to the ethical field in virtue of its claim – inseparable from its narration – to ethical justice. Still, it belongs to the reader, now an agent, an initiator of action, to choose among the multiple proposals of ethical justice brought forth by the reading" (Kearney 2002b:190, note 27).

philosophical topics” (Masterson 2008:248), and of formulating ethically liberating interpretations of sacred myths and narratives (2008:249). This exploration of the possible is made possible by his phenomenological and hermeneutical account of the imagination (Masterson 2008:250). Imagination is seen as a power – an intentional act of (not merely in) consciousness which intuits and constitutes meaning and fashions truth (Masterson 2008:250). Insofar as imagination is intentional, it necessitates a hermeneutical turn in the phenomenological enterprise – a move from mere description to interpretation that considers imagination in terms of language (Masterson 2008:250):

The productive power of imagination is primarily verbal. The linguistic imagination is the capacity of language to open up new worlds of thought, action and self-understanding by means of illuminating interpretations of symbols, myths, narratives and ideologies. It is the creative capacity to decipher new possibilities of meaning beyond literal descriptions (Masterson 2008:251).

In *The wake of the imagination: toward a postmodern culture*, Kearney takes a historical approach to illustrate that the human ability to “image” or “imagine” has been mainly understood in the history of Western thought as a representational faculty (reproducing images of some pre-existing reality) or as a creative faculty (producing images which often lay claim to an original status in their own right) (1988a:15).<sup>106</sup> Tracing the views of imagination from the Hebraic<sup>107</sup> and Greek<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Kearney identifies four main meanings of the term imagination. “(i) The ability to evoke absent objects which exist elsewhere, without confusing these absent objects with things present here and now. (ii) The construction and/or use of material forms and figures such as paintings, statues, photographs etc. to represent real things in some ‘unreal’ way. (iii) The fictional projection of non-existent things as in dreams or literary narratives. (iv) The capacity of human consciousness to become fascinated by illusions, confusing what is real with what is unreal” (1988a:16).

<sup>107</sup> Kearney’s analysis sketches the Hebraic concept of imagination in terms of four fundamental properties: (i) mimetic – as a human imitation of the divine act of creation; (ii) ethical – as a choice between good and evil; (iii) historical – as a projection of future possibilities of existence; and (iv) anthropological – as an activity that differentiates humankind from both a higher (divine) order and a lower (animal) order, and that “opens up a freedom of becoming beyond the necessity of cosmic being” (1988a:53).

<sup>108</sup> Prometheus, together with other mythic heroes of imagination in Greek mythology, disturb the cosmic hierarchy in their efforts to elevate the human order in imitation of the divine, thereby committing the fault of pride which, importantly, become associated with the power of imagination from this point onward. The fate suffered by these rebels is “tragic” insofar as their acts of imagination that defy the gods, is already implicated in the evil of the cosmos itself – their fault is inevitable and so they are *subject* to evil and not the cause of it. Because the whole cosmos is subject to the guiltiness of being, hope and desire that springs from the human imagination are condemned from the outset (Kearney 1988a:86).

Such a mythology precluded, however, the religious belief in divine goodness, which Plato wished to ensure. He thus divided the cosmos into the radically opposing worlds of spiritual good and material evil and condemned imagination as a “mimetic” function that is divorced from divine being and confined to the lower order of human existence (Kearney 1988a:87). Therefore “Plato’s

cultures through Medieval<sup>109</sup> and modern perspectives<sup>110</sup> to the postmodern voices<sup>111</sup> of structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction, he illustrates how the

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*epistemological* opposition between the knowing faculty of reason (*nous*) (*sic*) and the mimetic functions of imagination (*eikasia* and *phantasia*) must be understood in the larger context of his *metaphysical* distinction between being and becoming” (Kearney 1988a:87-88). Apart from his epistemological condemnation, Plato further objects to image-making on the grounds that it is *non-didactic*, *unproductive* (not contributing anything practical to the *polis*), has an *irrational character* (appealing to our erotic and animal desires), is *immoral* (in propagating false imitations and misleading others to imitate its faults), and *tends towards idolatry* (in being a crime against truth, it is equally a crime against *being itself*) (Kearney 1988a:92-94). For Plato, human imagination (whether it concerns mimetic phantasies of artists or divine visions of seers), is only legitimate when it acknowledges that it (i) is an imitation rather than an original; (ii) is subordinate to reason; and (iii) serves the interests of the divine Good as absolute origin of truth (Kearney 1988a:105).

Aristotle focused on the psychological rather than the metaphysical level (Kearney 1988a:106), but his “realist” epistemology encouraged a more generous reading of imagination than that of Plato (Kearney 1988a:112). The fact that he located the forms of truth in the real world of experience instead of in some transcendental otherworld, meant that, while the image is still considered a picture or residue of sensory experience, it is now accepted as a necessary instrument for acquiring knowledge. But imagination is still not itself the origin of meaning, but instead serves higher truths that exist beyond our images of them. Aristotle is as insistent as Plato that imagination must remain subservient to reason. It remains “a *reproductive* rather than a *productive* activity, a servant rather than a master of meaning, imitation rather than origin” (Kearney 1988a:113).

<sup>109</sup> Kearney calls the Christian synthesis of Greek ontology and biblical theology “onto-theological,” but less in the Heideggerian sense of metaphysics in general than in sense of medieval Christian thought that brings together the Judeo-Christian notion of a Divine Creator and the Platonic-Aristotelian metaphysics of Being (1988a:114-115). This onto-theological alliance deepened the traditional suspicion of imagination: “it combined and consolidated a) the biblical condemnation of imagination as a transgression of the divine order of Creation (i.e. as *ethical* disorder) and b) the metaphysical critique of imagination as a counterfeit of the original truth of Being (i.e. as *epistemological* disorder). The medieval current of opinion was subsequently to carry a double negative charge” (Kearney 1988a:117).

“True to its dual ‘onto-theological’ nature, the medieval understanding of imagination conforms to the fundamentally ‘mimetic’ model of both its Greek and biblical origins. ... (T)he image is treated as an *imitation* ... It is never considered as an *original* in its own right. The recognized mimetic function almost invariably assumes the related function of ‘mediation’. Deeply influenced by Aristotelian epistemology, the medieval thinkers were, with few exceptions, prepared to accept that this mediational role of imagination could be positive or negative. Positive in the measure that it related the inner world of the mind to the outer world of the body and vice versa. Negative in the measure that it frequently deviated from the supervision of the higher intellect and confused the rational with the irrational, the spiritual with the sensible, being with non-being” (Kearney 1988a:130-131).

<sup>110</sup> A marked affirmation of man’s creative power most distinguishes modern views of imagination from their various antecedents (Kearney 1988a:155). The mimetic paradigm that viewed imagination as an intermediary agency that at best imitated some truth external to man, is replaced in modern times by the productive paradigm that makes imagination the immediate source of its own truth: “Now imagination is deemed capable of inventing a world out of its human resources, a world answerable to no power higher than itself. Or to cite the canonical metaphor, the imagination ceases to function as a mirror reflecting some external reality and becomes a lamp which projects its own internally generated light onto things. As a consequence of this momentous reversal of roles, meaning is no longer primarily considered as a transcendent property of divine being; it is now hailed as a transcendental product of the human mind (Kearney 1988a:155).

Kant and the German Idealists (late eighteenth and nineteenth century) provided the theoretical impetus for the rise of the productive imagination to supremacy in the romantic and existentialist movements. “This was achieved, first, by demonstrating that imagining was not merely a ‘reproduction’ of some given reality (the fallacy of imitation) but an original ‘production’ of human consciousness; second, by showing that the image was not a static ‘thing’ (res) deposited in memory

(the fallacy of reification) but a dynamic creative act; and third, by establishing that the image was not just a mediating courier between the divided spheres of the lower 'body' and the higher 'soul' (the fallacy of dualism), but an inner transcendental unity which resists this very duality. In thus denouncing the traditional interpretations of the image as *reproduction*, *reification* and *dualism*, the modern philosophers hailed imagination as the power of the human subject to create a world of original value and truth. Man could now declare his autonomy from all given being. Meaning no longer required the orthodox mediations of reality to prove itself. It became its own guarantee – the immediate invention of imagination" (Kearney 1988a:156).

Disillusionment was bound to set in after the extravagant claims for man's creative power in German idealism and romanticism. The subsequent recession of imagination seemed to mean that the creative imagination could survive only as a recluse. While it could continue forming images, any attempt to transform reality seemed hopeless (Kearney 1988a:185). As Kearney states, "(t)he collapse of imagination's dream before the encroaching realities of historical existence, is the point where romantic idealism ends and existentialism begins" (1988a:188).

Distancing itself from the abstract affirmations of transcendental idealism, existentialism "explodes the monadic isolation of the transcendental 'I'" (Kearney 1988a:200). It rebukes the optimism of speculative idealism and proclaims the tragic consequences of human life left to its own devices (Kierkegaard). It declares truth an illusion, and elevates acceptance of the arbitrary and perpetual cycle of existence as the greatest act of individual courage (Nietzsche). With Sartre and the twentieth-century existentialists, the affirmative cult of imagination is definitively inverted when he pushes the humanist premise of romantic idealism to its absurd extreme: "Man is indeed what he makes of himself, Sartre concedes, but this very act of self-creation is without any foundation or purpose. Sartre denounces the benevolent abstraction of a universal human nature, promoted by Kant and the German idealists, insisting that we are born without reason and exist without justification" (Kearney 1988a:200).

Furthermore, Sartre realised that the existential imagination's will to absolute autonomy resulted in each individual's imprisonment in its own self. The life of pathological negation to which the existential imagination was bound, ruled out the possibility of ethical commitment to others. In *Being and nothingness*, Sartre described how all attempts at ethical relations result in either sadism (the free subject negating the other as an unfree object) or masochism (the subject surrendering his freedom and submitting to the negating will of the other. While indifference is the only alternative to this intersubjective dialectic between sadism and masochism, Sartre realises that the human imagination can never remain completely indifferent to the existence of others (Kearney 1988a:247). Sartre, then, "failed to reconcile the conflicting claims of an existentialist imagination and a humanist ethics. The choice which Sartre ultimately faced was between the sovereign nothingness of an isolated imagination and the affirmation of a collective commitment to revolutionary action. By ostensibly opting for the latter, Sartre no doubt believed that he could give a second wind to the beleaguered project of humanism. And even though Sartre himself never explicitly admitted as much, his arguments all point to the same unavoidable conviction: the existentialist imagination must die for humanist man to live on..." (Kearney 1988a:248).

<sup>111</sup> In an age when the image reigns supreme, it is interesting to note that imagination is not accorded the same privileged place in contemporary philosophy: "Right across the spectrum of structuralist, post-structuralist and deconstructionist thinking, one notes a common concern to dismantle the very notion of imagination. Where it is spoken of at all, it is subjected to suspicion or denigrated as an outdated humanist illusion spawned by the modern movements of romantic idealism and existentialism. The philosophical category of imagination, like that of 'man' himself, appears to be dissolving into an anonymous play of language. For many postmodern thinkers, it has become little more than a surface signifier of a linguistic system" (Kearney 1988a:251).

The Graphic Revolution has contributed to both the demise of the creative humanist imagination and its replacement by a depersonalised consumer system of pseudo-images, resulting in a transformation of our ability to construct, preserve and communicate images. In the face of the technological innovations in image reproduction, the imaginary has become more persuasive than the real world (Kearney 1988a:252). To this crisis of the imaginary, Kearney sees modern philosophies reacting in a variety of ways, but with the central feature that they undermine the humanist understanding of imagination as an "original" creation of meaning. Denying the very idea of origin, they deconstruct meaning into an endless play of linguistic signs that relate to each other in parodic circles with no possibility of a single founding reference (Kearney 1988a:252-253). Without the concept of *origin*, the concept of imagination itself collapses. For whether it was situated outside or inside of man, imagination has always presupposed the idea that our images have derived from some

creative power of imagination which biblical culture identified with Adamic man, and Greek culture with Promethean or demiurgic man, reaches its ultimate humanist conclusion with existentialist man. And the logical implication would seem to be that the human imagination will disappear as man himself disappears. The concept of imagination cannot, apparently, survive the postmodern age of deconstruction (Kearney 1988a:30).<sup>112</sup>

But Kearney is concerned that talk about the demise of the human imagination may fuel a kind of apocalyptic pessimism that will accelerate the end of humanity itself. Indeed, postmodernism may eclipse the potential of human experience for liberation, and by its rejection of narrative coherence and identity, may abandon “the emancipatory practice of imagining alternative horizons of existence (remembered or anticipated<sup>113</sup>)” (1988a:30, 359).<sup>114</sup> In view of these risks

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original presence (Kearney 1988a:253). “While the premodern paradigm was expressed by the metaphor of the *mirror* (which reflected the light of a transcendental origin beyond itself), and the modern by the metaphor of the *lamp* (which projected an original light from within itself), the postmodern paradigm is typified by the metaphor of the *looking glass* – or to be more precise, of an interplay between multiple looking glasses which reflect each other interminably. The postmodern paradigm is, in other words, that of a labyrinth or mirrors which extend infinitely in all directions – a labyrinth where the image of the self (as a presence to itself) dissolves into self-parody” (Kearney 1988a:253). In its own curious way, then, postmodern philosophies of imagination return us to the *mimesis* model, but in the form of an inversion and a self-parody. Instead of an imitation of some pre-existing truth, we are now concerned with an imitation of an imitation that offers no access and bears no witness to some original beyond it.

<sup>112</sup> The ambivalence with which much of Western philosophy and theology have viewed the power of art has its foundation in “the fact that as a depiction or likeness, the image remains other and less than what it depicts (the real), and it is the ‘real’ that theology and philosophy claims as its own. For most philosophers (and many theologians) *poiêsis* must become a *noêsis*. Our desire must be to move from ‘seeing through a glass darkly’ to ‘seeing face to face,’ if our suffering is to be converted into truth. On this view the poetic imagination is valuable only insofar as it is in the service of knowledge, and the image is necessary only as a sign of the ontological reality it represents” (Gedney 2006:90-91). Following a positivistic appreciation of the image and imagination in modern times, postmodern philosophy has completely detached imagination from its “ground in the transcendent and ahistorical real (ontology),” so that “the imagination slips into limitless self-parody, where images ground themselves only in other images (Gedney 2006:91). As Kearney points out in *The wake of the imagination*, postmodernism’s subversion of the opposition between the imaginary and the real to the point where they dissolve into an empty intuition of the other, begs the question whether we can still speak of imagination at all (Gedney 2006:91): “This is no idle question for, as we noted above, it is the imagination that enables us to reconfigure our immediate reality so that new possibilities come to view. It is the imagination, as Aristotle noted so long ago, that makes possible meaningful action. As such, Kearney worries that the impoverishment of imagination also means the impoverishment, if not absolute dissolution, of the human person. For Kearney, the work of the imagination is saved, as it was for his teacher, Ricoeur (and as it was in a different sense for Lévinas) by the practical demand of personal identity understood in terms of the desire to live well and responsibly” (Gedney 2006:91).

<sup>113</sup> Kearney shows how Aristotle already acknowledged the regulative role played by imagination in relation to time: “Imagination is temporal by virtue of its ability to recall our experience of the *past* and to anticipate our experience of the *future*” (1988a:110). The relationship between image and memory, as a reservoir of faded impressions, becomes somewhat more complex with regards to the future: “It is, of course, obvious that human behaviour is deeply affected by the capacity to imagine the outcome of our acts. We avoid certain types of action (e.g. murder) because we anticipate the pain that may result (e.g. punishment). And, contrariwise, we are propelled towards other types of action because we anticipate the good or happy outcome that may ensue. But such projections into the future would seem to suggest a certain ability of the image to move beyond the *given* sensible experience of our

facing the current context, Kearney's approach to postmodernism as no mere afterthought to modernity (1988a:27), but as an occasion to reflect upon the inner breakdown of modernity (1988a:26), explains his treatment of a postmodern imagination as envisioning "the end of modernity as a possibility of rebeginning" (1988a:27). Such a new beginning will necessitate arduous philosophical reflection and ethical responsibility, as well as discernment to distinguish between the destructive and enabling aspects of the modern legacy (1988a:26).

While Kearney fully endorses ridding imagination from the more naïve aspects of humanism (such as the confidence in the inevitability of historical progress and its elevation of and hope in the idealist subject), he warns that we should not let such healthy criticism deteriorate into "denying the creative subject any role whatsoever in the shaping of history. Deconstruction too has its limits and must acknowledge them" (Kearney 1988a:360).

But how can the postmodern imagination allow for meaningful interaction that is committed to realising a more just world when it has become deprived of its humanist ideologies of universal advancement and emancipation (1988a:27-28)? Kearney addresses questions such as these in his concluding chapter, where he advocates a model of a poetical-ethical imagination. He refuses a nostalgic return to the paradigms of either onto-theology or humanism, and proposes a postmodern imagination that is capable of preserving, through reinterpretation, the functions of both narrative identity and creativity (what he calls a poetics of the possible). Such a postmodern imagination would move beyond humanism, but would remain faithful to its humanitarian intentions. It would seek to incorporate the lessons learned from the excesses of both the *premodern tendency* to "repress human creativity in the name of some immutable cause which jealously guards the copyright of 'original' meaning," and the *modern tendency* to "overemphasize the sovereign role of the autonomous individual as sole source of meaning" (1988a:32-33). Avoiding the extremes of both

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past in order to prefigure *possible* modes of experience" (1988a:110-111). For this reason, Aristotle allows for kinds of cognitive images which rise above sensations. As the soul apprehends the forms in images, and thereby determines its value, it moves beyond sensation when it is concerned with such images. The images or thoughts in the soul enable humans to see the future, thereby enabling us to deliberate about the relationship of things future to things present (1988a:111).

<sup>114</sup> Kearney is concerned that the "postmodern obsession with the demise of imagination may consolidate the growing conviction that human culture as we have known it – that is, as a creative project in which human beings have an ethical, artistic and political role to play – is now reaching its end" (Kearney 1988a:359).

traditional quietism and modern voluntarism, the postmodern imagination will enter into “the labyrinth of parody and play” and dispossess itself of inherited certainties. In this way, it will create the possibility that, at the heart of the labyrinth, it may explore “possibilities of an *other* kind of *poiesis* – alternative modes of inventing alternative modes of existence” (1988a:33):

Disinherited of our certainties, deprived of any fixed point of view, are we not being challenged by such images to open ourselves to *other* ways of imagining? Is our bafflement at the dismantling of any predictable relationship between image and reality not itself an occasion to de-centre our self-possessed knowledge in response to an otherness which surpasses us: a sort of *kenosis* whereby our subjective security empties itself out, dispossesses itself for the sake of something else? Might we not surmise here an ethical summons lodged at the very heart of our postmodern culture? And also a poetic summons: to see that imagination continues to playfully create and recreate even at the moment it is announcing its own disappearance? (Kearney 1988a:397).

#### **4.7.1 An ethical imagination**

Kearney insists that, while the deconstruction of imagination may adhere to no epistemological limits in its denial of any decidable relationship between image and reality, it must recognize ethical limits. In the midst of the postmodern play of indeterminate networks endlessly reflecting each other, the other that the individual or the collective group faces in a concrete historical situation, demands an ethical response. “This call of the other to be heard, and to be respected in his/her otherness, is irreducible to the parodic play of empty imitations” (Kearney 1988a:361). Even if the epistemological status of the face of the other may remain undecidable, we may still – and should – acknowledge that we are being addressed by an other on an ethical level (Kearney 1988a:362).

Ethics has primacy over epistemology and ontology. Or to put it less technically, the good comes before the question of truth and being. At the most basic level of pre-reflective lived experience, the ethical face discloses a relationship to an other before knowledge and beyond being (Kearney 1988a:362).

But this primacy of the ethical response is not without its critical requirements, for a lack of critical discrimination that decides the difference between the face of a dictator and that of a slave, our ethical response might be manipulated for unethical purposes (Kearney 1988a:362-363). For this reason Kearney proposes a radical reinterpretation of the role of imagination as a relationship between the self and the

other as a fitting response to the postmodern dilemma. Such an approach will allow us to benefit from deconstructionism's demystification of the excesses of both premodern<sup>115</sup> and modern<sup>116</sup> paradigms of imagination (Kearney 1988a:363). But lest deconstructionism degenerate into "an apocalyptic nihilism of endless mirror-play," it must remain subject to (ethical) critique due to our (ethical) respect for the other (Kearney 1988a:364).

As a first response to the other, the ethical imagination is responsible and able to respond to the ethical appeal of the other even in the midst of "the euphoric frissons of apocalyptic mirror play" (Kearney 1988a:364). Kearney remains critical of the tendency of deconstructionism to eclipse ethical dimensions:

It sometimes forgets that the images of all signifying systems of play and parody, of *difference* and dissemination, of aporia and apocalypse, remain ultimately answerable to the concrete ethical exigency of the *face to face relation*. Behind and beyond the image a face resides: the face of the other who will never let the imagination be. ... It is here in the everyday claim of the face to face relation that we discover the still small voice which bids us continue the search for an ethical imagination – even when it is being pronounced dead (Kearney 1988a:365-366).

#### **4.7.2 A poetical imagination**

An ethical imagination must give full expression to its poetical potential if it is to resist degenerating into "ensorious puritanism or nostalgic lamentation" (Kearney 1988a:366). To ensure that it is ethical in a liberating way, the imagination needs to play – in the broad sense of "inventive" making and creating entailed by the word *poiesis* (Kearney 1988a:366). Kearney illustrates how the imagination in both its premodern and modern variations has always maintained some link between the claims of the ethical and the poetical. The postmodern imagination needs to explore this relation, because it must be equally able to laugh as to suffer with the other (1988a:366-367). The postmodern paradigm of play, often used by deconstructionism in its negative apocalyptic aspects, may now be positively construed "as tokens of the poetical power of imagination to transcend the limits of egocentric, and indeed anthropocentric, consciousness – thereby exploring different possibilities of existence" (Kearney 1988a:367)

<sup>115</sup> "(A)n onto-theological imitation of the imperialist other" (Kearney 1988a:363)

<sup>116</sup> "(A) humanist cult of the transcendental self" (Kearney 1988a:363)

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Kearney calls the language of the unconscious, expressed as imaginary and symbolic, the “portal to poetry”:

Psychoanalysis revealed the unconscious as a playground of images and symbols which defy the laws of formal logic. [...] This logic of the imaginary is one of *both/and* rather than *either/or*. It is inclusive and, by extension, tolerant: it allows opposites to stand, irreconcilables to co-exist, refusing to deny the claim of one for the sake of its contrary, to sacrifice the strange on the altar of self-identity. [...] Poetry is to be understood here in the extended sense of a play of *poiesis*; a creative letting go of the drive for possession, of the calculus of means and ends. [...] Poetics is the carnival of possibilities where everything is permitted, nothing censored. (Kearney 1988a:368)

It is this aspect of poetry – allowing oneself to be imagined in another’s skin – that ties the poetical imagination to its ethical counterparts, for it empowers us to identify with the marginalised and to refuse “the condescending intolerance of the elite towards the preterite, the saved towards the damned” (Kearney 1988a:369). The space of the Other that the ethical imagination safeguards may thus be seen as precondition to the poetical imagination, for otherness is essential to both the life of *poiesis* and that of *ethos* (Kearney 1988a:369):

In both cases it signals a call to abandon the priority of egological existence for the sake of alternative modes of experience hitherto repressed or simply unimagined. Indeed without the poetical openness to the pluri-dimensionality of meaning, the ethical imagination might well shrink back into a cheerless moralizing, an authoritarian and fearful censorship. And, likewise, a poetical imagination entirely lacking in ethical sensibility all too easily slides into an irresponsible *je me’en foutisme*: an attitude where anything goes and everything is everything else because it is, in the final analysis, nothing at all. This is where the poetical readiness to tolerate the *undecidability* of play must be considered in relation to the ethical readiness to *decide* between different modes of response to the other ...” (Kearney 1988a:369).

Seen in this way, ethics and poetics open us to the otherness of the other in two different but complementary ways (Kearney 1988a:369-370). By bringing us to the threshold of the other, and by exploding both the chains of imposed reality and the *imagos* that keep us bound in a spiral of self-obsession, fixation and fear, the poetical imagination releases us into a play of desire for the other and so “discloses the language of the unconscious as the desire of the other” (Kearney 1988a:370). But here poetics must admit to its limitations. At the point of actually transcending the symbolic projects of unconscious desire and encountering the other in his/her

otherness, the poetical imagination must defer to its ethical counterpart. The other that is disclosed through the image of the face, bids me also to move beyond desire and accept responsibility to and for the other.

If a poetics of imagination is what keeps desire alive as an interminable play of possibility, it is an ethics of imagination which distinguishes between the desire which remains imprisoned in my subjective projects and the desire which responds to the otherness of the other's face (i.e. not the other that I envisage but the other that envisages me) (Kearney 1988a:370).

Finally, committed to exploring different possibilities of social existence, a poetical imagination must *on the one hand* seek to move beyond both the "humanist fallacy of wilful mastery (voluntarism) and the onto-theological fallacy of submissive obedience (quietism)," and *on the other* to oppose the "inflation of pseudo-images which paralyzes our contemporary social consciousness (consumerism)" (Kearney 1988a:370). Most effectively, the poetic imagination nourishes the conviction that things can be changed by imagining that our current reality can be otherwise (Kearney 1988a:370-371).

#### **4.7.3 An ethical-poetical imagination: moving beyond the labyrinth**

Kearney turns to his appeal for an ethical-poetical imagination when he seeks to find a way out of the mirrored labyrinth that is postmodernism. Its discontent with a mere mapping of the postmodern logic would, he holds, guide us toward (i) an openness to the concrete needs of the other in the postmodern context, and toward (ii) exploring ways to effectively engage in the transformation of our social existence (Kearney 1988a:386-387). Furthermore, it would accept that which it stands to learn from the postmodern deconstruction of the centralised human subject, but it would do so as a *via negativa*, as a "purgation which is not an end in itself but a point of departure for something else" (Kearney 1988a:387):

After the disappearance of the self-sufficient imagination, another kind must now reappear – an imagination schooled in the postmodern truth that the self cannot be 'centred' on itself; an imagination fully aware that meaning does not originate within the narrow chambers of its own subjectivity but emerges as a response to the *other*, as radical interdependence (Kearney 1988a:387).

Sketching such radical interdependence as a source of meaning means, by implication, that alienation need not speak the last word in our society, and that after

the *impasse* of choice, we may “eventually decide for a practice of imagination capable of responding to the postmodern call of the other reaching towards us from the mediatized image” (Kearney 1988a:387).

While deconstructionism may object, on the basis of the indeterminate nature of the representational relationship between the image and its original (the status of the image cannot be decided and we are therefore unable to discriminate between images), Kearney insists that epistemological undecidability does not necessitate ethical undecidability: “Perhaps we have to renounce the traditional habit of establishing ethical judgements upon epistemological foundations. For even where epistemological distinctions no longer seem available, we are still compelled to make ethical distinctions” (Kearney 1988a:388). If the postmodern crisis (and its sense of impending catastrophe) is interpreted ethically instead of just epistemologically, it may be seen as a protest against the inhumanity of our times. By the same line, the postmodern demystification of humanist claims for sovereign subjectivity may denote a disguised ethical demand to recognise the irreducible alterity of the other (Kearney 1988a:389). “Viewed in this light,” Kearney states that

(w)e would be in a position to say that after Virtue there is still the possibility of ethics, that after Man there is still the possibility of humanity – and more than a self-parodying post-man wandering about in an anonymous communications system devoid of real senders or addressees. But the ability to grasp such possibilities remains the task of an ethical-poetical imagination, an imagination radically de-centred in the sense of being opened to the demands of the other in the postmodern here and now (Kearney 1988a:389).

### *The hermeneutic, historical, and narrative tasks*

The ethical-poetical imagination draws some truth from each of the perspectives on imagination that Kearney has narrated by way of the historical epochs,<sup>117</sup> and yet it cannot be reduced to these paradigms of mimesis (premodern), production (modern) or parody (postmodern) (Kearney 1988a:389).<sup>118</sup> Because the ethical status of an

<sup>117</sup> “From the *mimetic* paradigm of onto-theology it learns that imagination is always a response to the demands of an other existing beyond the self. From the *productive* paradigm of humanism it learns that it must never abdicate a personal responsibility for invention, decision and action. And from the *parodic* paradigm of its own postmodern age, it learns that we are living in a common Civilization of Images – a civilization which can bring each one of us into contact with each other even as it can threaten to obliterate the very ‘realities’ its images ostensibly ‘depict’” (Kearney 1988a:390).

<sup>118</sup> “Rather than construing the premodern and modern interpretations of imagination as *either/or* alternatives, our postmodern hermeneutic would seek ways of integrating them – combining the

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image does not derive from its function (mimetic, productive or parodic) but from the secondary level of reflective interpretation (where the epistemological problem arises), an ethical-poetical imagination calls for a *critical hermeneutics* that can identify the hidden interests that motivate specific interpretations of images in specific contexts (Kearney 1988a:390). Such a hermeneutic should aim at discriminating between a “liberating and incarcerating use of images, between those that dis-close and those that close off our relation to the other, those that democratize culture and those that mystify it, those that communicate and those that manipulate” (Kearney 1988a:390). To accomplish this, imagination will need to engage hermeneutically with its own genealogy by critically reassessing its traditions and retelling its stories and reading them against the grain, “allowing repressed voices to speak out, neglected texts to get a hearing” (Kearney 1988a:390). In the diverse spiritual writings of the Judeo-Christian tradition, Kearney finds

evidence of what might be described as a counter-current to the official onto-theological tradition: neglected movements which highlight the positive eschatological role of imagination as the property of *homo ludens* co-creating a Kingdom with a *deus ludens* (Kearney 1988a:391).

And it is just such counter-currents that Kearney re-engages hermeneutically in *The God who may be* and in the essay under discussion, “Re-imagining God,” to provide the content for his post-metaphysical and ethical-poetical approach to eschatology.

Because the poetico-ethical imagination is capable of envisioning what things were like before, and might be like after postmodernism, it is fundamentally *historical*. It resists the grave error of anti-historical postmodernism to “neglect the hermeneutic task of imaginative recollection and anticipation,” and instead critically shatters the paralysing fetish of a timeless present (Kearney 1988a:392-393). By

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ethical emphasis of the former with the poetical emphasis of the latter. A new alliance would be forged where the hidden or officially neglected dimensions of each paradigm (premodern and modern) might converge and breathe new life into an ostensibly dying imagination. Moreover, the openness to alterity – exacted by both the ethical and poetical needs of imagination – may well signify a timely aptitude to also look beyond the narratives of Western culture. ... Here again we are reminded that the poetico-ethical imagination we are advancing is above all an empathic imagination: versatile, open-minded, prepared to dialogue with what is not itself, with its other, to welcome the difference (*dia-legein*), to say even to its sworn adversary – *mon semblable, mon, frère*” (Kearney 1988a:392).

“refiguring” lost narratives from the past<sup>119</sup> and “prefiguring” narratives of the future, the historical imagination aims at “transfiguring” the postmodern present.<sup>120</sup> Paul Ricoeur’s “depth hermeneutic” of historical imagination therefore entails a necessary commitment to cultural memory that is able to counter the “apocalyptic aporias of postmodernism by introducing an ‘oppositional’ perspective nourished by the recollection of the struggles for a just society reaching right back to the very beginnings of Western history” (Kearney 1988a:393).

In the face of postmodern deconstructions of the ‘self,’ an ethical imagination, while remaining responsive to the demands of the other, and even out of fidelity to the other, urges the human subject to tell and retell the story of him/herself (Kearney 1988a:394-395). It is the other that demands that I remain responsible, for no ethical relation can exist where there is no self to remain faithful to its promises. Ethics presupposes, then, the existence of a certain *narrative identity*:

a Self which remembers its commitments to the other (both in its personal and collective history) and recalls that these commitments have *not yet* been fulfilled. This narrative self is not some permanently subsisting substance (*idem*). It is to be understood rather as a perpetually self-rectifying identity (*ipse*) which knows that its story, like that of the imagination which narrates it, is never complete. It is because it is inseparable from the activity of a poetical-critical imagination which sustains it, that the self’s commitment to the other – the other who addresses me at each moment and asks me *who I am* and *where I stand* – is never exhausted (Kearney 1988a:395).

Because the identity of the narrative self must be ceaselessly reinterpreted by imagination, narrative identity (as opposed to the permanent “sameness” of egological identity), implies and includes change and alteration within selfhood. As the narrating self reinterprets his/her own story in relation to larger narratives transmitted by cultural memory, the notion of personal identity is enlarged to encapsulate communal identity, so that “(t)he self and the collective mutually constitute each other’s identity by receiving each other’s stories into their respective histories” (Kearney 1988a:395-396). This implies that the poetical and ethical

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<sup>119</sup> Realising that the “project of freedom can easily degenerate into empty utopianism unless guided in some manner by the retrieval of past struggles for liberation,” the historical imagination is committed to such historical interpretation (Kearney 1988a:393).

<sup>120</sup> This does not entail, of course, invoking tradition as some kind of Master Narrative to be re-imposed on the present, thereby reducing the diversity of the past to a single, all-embracing plot. It does, however, “insist on the need to record the formative narratives of the past as invaluable archives of human suffering, hope and action” (Kearney 1988a:393).

aspects of this narrative task suggest a political project where the imaginative self comes to recognise more clearly – by narrating his/her story to the other – the unlimited nature of its responsibility to others. Encompassing both personal and collective histories, this responsibility does not derive from an abstract duty, but

is a responsibility solicited in each hour of the historical present by others who address and obsess me, reminding me that the self is never sufficient unto itself. Narrating itself to the other, the imagination realizes that it is forever in *crisis*; and that this very crisis of conscience is a revelatory symptom of its inability to reduce others to the representational form of any given image – be it *mimetic*, *productive* or *parodic*. This is why we feel bound to continue the search for a postmodern imagination, one willing to accept that whatever particular narrative it chooses or whatever image it constructs, there is always some dimension of otherness which transcends it” (Kearney 1988a:396).

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### NEW POSSIBILITIES: KEARNEY'S INVITATION TO SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

*The God who may be* and "Re-imagining God" serve as two most excellent examples of the way in which a dialogue between philosophy and religion can be utilised to the benefit of both philosophy and theology. With the philosophical question of God being far from dead, Kearney's utilisation of phenomenology and hermeneutics is a very creative attempt to contribute to the "religious turn" in contemporary philosophy that "strives to overcome the metaphysical God of pure act and ask the question: what kind of divinity comes after metaphysics?" (Kearney 2001:2). In this regard, Kearney himself believes that thinking of God in terms of possibility makes a difference in three ways:

Firstly, "it means that the presuppositions and prejudices that condition our everyday lives are put into question in the name of an unprogrammable future" (Kearney 2001:4). The God of *posse* reminds us that God depends on us to be, and that no Word can be made flesh without us. If we refuse the kingdom, it will not come. The divine "perhaps" hovers over "every just decision or action that ensures that history is never over and our duty never done (Kearney 2001:4-5).

Secondly, "the God-who-may-be reveals that since no die is cast, no course of action preordained, we are free to make the world a more just and loving place, or not to" (Kearney 2001:5). Opting for a God of *esse* rather than a God of *posse* is to finally say "no" to theodicy, for it reveals history as a divine venture and human adventure. The presence of evil in our societies does not testify to the pre-established will or destiny of God, as is the case in the metaphysical thinking of God as pure act and necessity. Instead, it reminds us of our responsibility (Kearney 2001:5). For if evil is the absence of God and the lack of divine goodness, then its presence testifies to the consequence of our "refusal to remain open to the transfiguring call of the other *persona* – the summons of the orphan, widow, or stranger, the cry of the defenseless one: 'where are you?'" (Kearney 2001:5).

Finally, "the God-who-may-be reminds us that what seems impossible to us is only seemingly so" (Kearney 2001:5). In the light of God's transfiguring power, what hitherto seemed impossible now appears to be possible as the eschatological

potentials latently inscribed in the historically im-possible are disclosed. As such the *posse* keeps us open to hope, even if it must be a hope in spite of injustice and despair, that the *posse* may become increasingly incarnated in *esse*, “transmuting being as it does so into a new heaven and a new earth” (Kearney 2001:5).

Another way in which we may sensibly inquire about the sort of benefits that Kearney himself envisions for his post-metaphysical approach, is by considering his attempts to name the kind of philosophy he adumbrates in *The God who may be*. He offers three tentative quasi-names or “methodological pseudonyms,” which offer us a glimpse into his own evaluation of his thought:

*Dynamatology*. The neologism, which derives from the Greek δυναμις (potentiality, potency), and was used by both Aristotle and Scriptural authors and commentators, was born out of a conversation with an Irish playwright friend, Tom Murphy. Kearney and Murphy had been discussing ideas for a new play in which a character wished to teach people to “sing like Gigli,” the great Italian opera singer, and the term conveyed for them the “logic of the dynamizing possible” whereby this character invited the others to make contact with their innermost potential (2001:6).

*Metaxology*. Also a neologism, Kearney borrows this word from William Desmond, a philosopher and another one of Kearney’s Irish friends, whose use of the term in his attempt to rethink transcendence in largely Platonic-Augustinian terms differs somewhat from Kearney’s understanding of the term. Yet both scholars are determined to choose a middle way (Greek, *metaxy*) between the polar extremes of absolutism and relativism. Kearney chooses this middle space, or *mi-lieu*, as an alternative to the polar opposites in thought about God: on the one hand the “hyper-ascendant deity of mystical or negative theology,”<sup>121</sup> and the “consigning of the sacred to the domain of abyssal abjection”<sup>122</sup> on the other (2001:6-7). Both these positions, in Kearney’s opinion, share a common aversion to narrative imagination and any mediating role that it might play, and so for both the divine remains “utterly

<sup>121</sup> Here, “God can take the form of a divinity so far beyond-being (Levinas, Marion, and at times even Derrida) that no hermeneutics of interpreting, imagining, symbolizing, or narrativizing is really acceptable. Indeed God’s alterity appears so utterly unnameable and apophatic that any attempt to throw hermeneutic drawbridges between it and our finite means of language is deemed a form of idolatry” (Kearney 2001:7).

<sup>122</sup> In this instance, “the divine slips *beneath* the grid of symbolic and imaginary expression, back into some primordial zero-point of unnameability which is variously called ‘monstrous’ (Campbell, Zizek), ‘sublime’ (Lyotard), ‘abject’ (Kristeva), or ‘an-khorite’ (Caputo)” (Kearney 2001:7).

unthinkable, unnameable, unrepresentable – that is, unmediatable.” By contrast, it is exactly such a mediating function that his hermeneutic approach to religion seeks to promote.

*Metaphorology.* With this pseudonym, Kearney expresses his understanding of religious language as an endeavour (albeit hesitant and provisional) to say something about the unsayable (Kearney 2001:7). We will return to this issue below when we consider Kearney’s contribution to contemplating the nature of religious discourse (5.2).

Apart from Kearney’s own evaluation of his God-of-the-possible, the following potentialities for theological reflection that are opened up by Kearney’s work also deserve to be mentioned:

## 5.1 Ecumenics

Kearney is of the opinion that the sort of reflections that he advances in *The God who may be* are “vigorously” ecumenical when it comes to interfaith dialogue. So, for instance, he believes that “the kind of detachment from excessive ego drives and obsessions which a liberating *posse* solicits” is shared by all “genuine” spiritual movements across cultures (2001:6).

The imagination, for Kearney, serves as a special agent of inter-religious hospitality, in that it “suggests that a spiritual imaginary operating at the level of metaphor, narrative, symbol and epiphany can traverse the closed border of dogma and ideology and open genuine conversations between wisdom traditions” (Kearney 2008:3). So, for example, some of the “breakthrough events” of the great wisdom narratives illustrate the power of trans-religious imagination (Kearney 2008:7).<sup>123</sup> It is the “process of mutual disclosure where imagination and spirit go hand in glove” – what Kearney calls cross-reading or an “endless and reversible process of

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<sup>123</sup> “(C)onsider [...] Kabir welcoming the ‘uninvited guest’; Abraham and Sarah receiving the three strangers under the mamre tree; Moses taking an African spouse; Solomon embracing the Shulammitte woman (in fact, three of the earliest books of the Hebrew bible are about *strangers* – Job, Ruth, and the Song of Songs!); Jesus greeting the Samaritan woman at the well and knocking like a stranger at the door of our hearts (Rev. 3:20); Buddha welcoming all outcasts from the caste elites; or in the Greek tradition, the famous instance of Baucis and Philomen receiving Zeus and Hermes as disguised ‘strangers’” (Kearney 2008:8).

translation between one religion and the next” – that has proven itself a precious key to an “inter-religious hermeneutics of the heart” (Kearney 2008:8).<sup>124</sup>

Furthermore, in *Anatheism: returning to God after God*, Kearney manages to steer clear of homogenising, deducing or inferring all religions as one, and instead opts to let his respect for difference shine through in his choice to begin the book by exploring the idea of the divine Stranger (Soultouki 2010:446). Offering examples from the Abrahamic religions, where the reception of the Stranger and response to the otherness of the Other define stories of divine visitations, Kearney proposes that “accepting the condition of not-knowing and welcoming the divine Stranger is integral in reconsidering God as (an) Other” (Soultouki 2010:446).

In his essay on new directions for Christian ethics in the twenty-first century, Arthur Dyck emphasises the need for interdisciplinary discussion, and in emphasising the contribution that Christian ethics stands to make, he claims that, however rich its history, the future of Christian ethics promises to be even richer (2009:565).<sup>125</sup> In a sense, the work of Richard Kearney already espouses such an interdisciplinary approach, since he enters the discussion from the philosophical side, but opens many new avenues for theological thought, which in turn has also contributed richly to his creative process. Inter-religiously, his proposal holds great potential for dialogue, since it is rich in its use and appreciation of narrative, symbol, and imagination, moving in a poetic fashion between symbols such as the *eschaton*, which is found a many religions.

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<sup>124</sup> He illustrates by means of a question: “What happens, for instance, when we read the text about Shiva’s pillars of fire alongside Biblical passages on the Burning Bush (Exod. 3:15) or the Christian account of Pentecostal fire? What new sparks of understanding and compassion fly up when we read Hindu texts on the *guhā* alongside the Buddhist invocation of the ‘void’ (in the Heart Sutra) or Biblical references to Elijah in his cave, Joseph in the well, Jonah in the whale, Jesus in the tomb? What novel possibilities of semantic and symbolic resonance are generated by juxtaposing Sanskrit invocations of the sacred bird (*hamsa*) alongside the dove of Noah’s ark or of the Pentecost? Not to mention the ways in which the Islamic invocation of the Lote Tree (in Mohammed’s *mi’raj* of nocturnal ascent through the seven heavens) inter-animates with the tree of paradise, the thorn bush of Exodus 3:15, Jesus’ crown of thorns, or the famous *axis mundi* tree of Vedantin cosmogonies and Buddhist mandalas. In the case of our own pilgrim experience, it was remarkable how sculpted images of the Hindu *trimurti* keenly reinvented our understanding of Abraham’s three strangers or the three persons of the Christian Trinity. It was as if Andrei Rublev of Zagorsk was consorting with the sculptors of Ellora!” (Kearney 2008:9).

<sup>125</sup> With regards to the interdisciplinary dialogue between ethics, psychology, and the neurosciences, which Dyck claims will vindicate much of what Christian ethics has to offer (2009:565 ff.), he fails to address the difficult question of how one is to chisel out the road between the descriptive and the normative.

## 5.2 The nature of religious discourse

As we have seen above, Kearney employs the pseudonym “metaphorology” to denote his understanding of religious discourse as “an endeavor to say something (however hesitant and provisional) about the unsayable” (Kearney 2001:7). Here he is influenced heavily by Ricoeur’s proposal that “inventive hermeneutic readings of religious texts can spark off a rich play of metaphoricity resulting in a radical semantic augmentation (or ‘surplus of meaning’)” (Kearney 2001:7). Discussing hermeneutic approaches to Song of Songs, Ricoeur claims that no single writing or no single reading can capture the meaning of divine desire as espoused in this book. The way to proceed is therefore to “interanimate” this text with other Biblical texts and other traditions of interpretation. It is then “that we can begin to approximate to some notion of divine desire with live metaphors that conjoin heterogeneous semantic fields” (Kearney 2001:7).

Other than the (solely) vertical transfer from the sensible to the intelligible and from the human to the divine that the Platonizing use of allegory allows for, Ricoeur’s new model of religious hermeneutics has a two-way production of metaphorical meaning in mind (Kearney 2001:7). The intersecting of metaphors results in a double “seeing as” that enables a “saying otherwise,” so that the “power of love” is marked by its ability to move in both senses and in both directions along the spiral of metaphor, so that every level of love’s emotional investment may intersignify with every other level (Kearney 2001:7-8):

To acknowledge the deeply diverse ways in which we metaphorize the desire of God is already to admit that no one of them can be held hierarchically superior to any other. Indeed it is from the productive friction of their “intersignification” that some transfer (*metaphora*) of meaning is eventually, if always tentatively, achieved. It is, moreover, by recognizing the fecund metaphorical interplay at work in the reading of all great religious text that we become more capable of hermeneutically retrieving certain lost meanings – in this case, eschatological ones – within and between (*metaxy*) the texts themselves (Kearney 2001:8).

In more theological terms, Kearney sees this “metaphorizing role of hermeneutic mediation” as charting a winding path between the apophatic and cataphatic approaches to God. Between the apophatic tradition (stressing the impossibility of saying anything meaningful about God, thus placing God so far beyond being that there is “no way back to the flesh of the face”), and the cataphatic

tradition (running the “risk of embracing overly ‘positive’ and foundationalist propositions,” thus reducing God to being – either as the most general [ὄντος ὄν] or the highest being [θεοῦ]), Kearney navigates a third channel that approaches God as neither non-being nor being, but as the possibility-to-be (2001:8):

This third way, where the infinite eschaton intersects with the finite order of being, I call onto-eschatology. It is here that we encounter the nuptial nexus where divine and human desires overlap. The still point of the turning world where the timeless crosses time. The milieu where, in T.S. Eliot’s words, the fire and the rose are one. This is a frontier zone where narratives flourish and abound. It is a place where stories, songs, parables, and prophecies resound as human imaginations try to say the unsayable and think the unthinkable (Kearney 2001:8).

### 5.3 Kearney’s post-metaphysical God and post-religious faith

The remainder of the chapter will explore the exciting and fruitful interdisciplinary contact occasioned by the “religious turn” in Continental Philosophy (Gregor 2008:150).<sup>126</sup> It will consider the possibilities opened up by a deeper and more explicit relation between theology and philosophy, and specifically, the new avenues of thought revealed to theology by Kearney’s post-metaphysical project.

An interesting development in Continental Philosophy has been to – while accepting Pascal’s distinction between the God of the philosophers and the God of the patriarchs – give precedence to the latter. This indicates a movement toward a God who transcends old onto-theological and metaphysical categories (Manoussakis 2006a:xvii). To this, critical hermeneutics has added a dual movement of both suspicion and affirmation. In particular, Kearney’s diacritical hermeneutics attempts to mediate between Schleiermacher’s Romantic hermeneutics that “retrieves and reappropriates God as presence,” and Derrida and Caputo’s radical hermeneutics that “elevates alterity to the status of undecidable sublimity” (Manoussakis 2006a:xvii).

<sup>126</sup> As John Panteleimon Manoussakis puts it in his introduction to *After God: Richard Kearney and the religious turn in Continental Philosophy*: “Who or what comes, then, after God? Such was the question that befell philosophy following the proclamation of the ‘death of God.’ In the wake of God, as the last fifty years of philosophy have shown, God comes back again, *otherwise*: Heidegger’s last God, Levinas’s God of Infinity, Derrida’s and Caputo’s *tout autre*, Marion’s God without Being, Kearney’s God who may be” (2006a:xv).

In *Anatheism: returning to God after God* (2010), Kearney has attempted to reposition religious faith in a “postmodern world that becomes characterised by either insipidity or dogmatic extremity” (Soultouki 2010:445). He uses anatheism to denote his moving in the space in-between theism and atheism,<sup>127</sup> but without seeking a synthesis and without proposing anatheism as a new religion (Soultouki 2010:445). Instead, it is in the re-encounter with and the recapturing of what we were under the impression to have already possessed or had relinquished that anatheism finds its reference (Soultouki 2010:446):<sup>128</sup>

Anatheism is a movement back and beyond God, a concept that revisits the idea of God as a gift and suggests faith as a matter of reception and interpretation, rather than a teleological choice. What can be regained by the anatheistic movement, according to Kearney, is a new understanding of God in both secular and spiritual terms (Soultouki 2010:446).

In a 2009 essay on the topic of anatheism, Kearney reviews the contributions that Levinas and Derrida<sup>129</sup> have made to the atheistic critique of the traditional God

<sup>127</sup> “For Kearney, the anatheistic movement recognises the dichotomy of dogmatism and atheism but goes beyond it, not in order to reconcile the two opposing stands, but to set them in a dialogic relation. In fact, Kearney is careful to distinguish the concept of anatheism from both theism and atheism: anatheism comes as a remedy to dogmatic thought; similarly, anatheism is not just another form of atheism (*an*-atheism) in that it cannot accept the teleological and absolute position of a complete rejection of God. The anatheistic movement begins with a dialogue between oppositional conditions, a true dialogue that does not aim for synthesis or compromise but communication and interrelation” (Soultouki 2010:446).

<sup>128</sup> “Kearney draws on Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, among others, to examine the movement away from God as a condition that enables an encounter with the otherness of the Other and its reintegration in everyday life. He turns to Paul Ricoeur to suggest that his idea of a philosopher suspended between the secular and the sacred opens up the space for hermeneutics: ‘ana-theism may be said to express both existential desire and eschatological faith’ (p. 75). Kearney is proposing that the secular and the sacred need not be adversaries. Anatheism seeks to host the transcendent in everydayness and the anatheistic movement becomes a ‘sacramental return’, the ‘retrieval of the extraordinary in the ordinary’ (p. 86). Kearney argues that in rejecting God we allow for the possibility for another incarnation, that of a God whose body becomes the embodiment of *logos* within a secular world. For Kearney, anatheism ‘does not say that the sacred is the secular, it says it is *in* the secular, *through* the secular, *toward* the secular’ (p. 166). This is how the Word may become flesh, today (Soultouki 2010:447).

<sup>129</sup> For Kearney, Derrida made one of his most significant contributions to the ana-theist question in his 1993 essay, *Sauf le Nom*. Here, “he speaks of how we may save the divine ‘name’ by refusing to determine its content. This abstentionist gesture, this discretion about naming the divine, borders on a certain style of a-theism, a way of saving the name of God by not naming God at all. But we are not dealing here with militant anti-God talk, any more than we are dealing with a subtle apologetics for apophatic theology ... Derrida seems, in fact, to be excavating a space for what might be called ‘mystical atheism.’ And while he does not use the term, he does point to a curious reversibility between mysticism and atheism. Avowing that he ‘rightly passes for an atheist,’ Derrida still calls our attention to a moment of radical receptivity that he terms ‘messianic’ – a moment when one abandons all inherited certainties, assumptions, and expectations (including religious ones) in order to open oneself to the radical surprise, and shock, of the incoming Other” (Kearney 2009:169). In Kearney’s assessment, “Derrida might be said to be offering here a post-Holocaust translation of Meister Eckhart’s prayer to God to rid him of God. Unless we let go of God as property and possession, we

of onto-theology, and then discusses Ricoeur's<sup>130</sup> work to show "how the atheistic critique is a necessary moment in the development of genuine faith that involves a renunciation of fear and dependency as well as a reaffirmation of life and a return to existence" (2009:167).<sup>131</sup> He then discusses how such a return to God is possible, the ethical position that enables it, the reinterpretations of biblical traditions that it entails, the revival of God as an enabling God, and considers what the relationship between an atheist philosopher and theologian would entail (2009:167). Kearney considers Levinas, Derrida and Ricoeur to have been partial to an "ana-theist" movement that involves a "double and supplementary gesture of abandonment and retrieval of God" (2009:167):

This view holds that one cannot begin to return to a new – "messianic" or "eschatological" – sense of the holy until one has left the old God of

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cannot encounter the Other as radical stranger. Such a Derridean desire of God, as 'desire beyond desire,' is an important theo-erotic dimension of what we call atheism. The felt absence of the old God (the God of death) ushers in a sense of emptiness that may provoke a new desire, a seasoned desire for the return of the Other God – the divine guest who brings life" (Kearney 2009:170). Ultimately, however, Derrida's "deconstructive ascesis of traditional messianisms and religions" calls for a "religion beyond religion" in which God can scarcely be named: "At times, it seems as if Derrida is embracing a notion of 'messianicity' beyond the concrete, historical messianisms of the Abrahamic tradition – a messianicity that serves less as a sacred, incarnate presence in the world than as an abstract structure for the condition of possibility of religion in general, that is, religion understood as an endless waiting with no sense of what kind of divine (or undivine) Other might appear. There is no room here for a 'discernment of spirits.' No real option of a hermeneutics of interpretation or commitment to holy, rather than unholy, ghosts. [...] Faith in messianicity (*sic*), for Derrida, seems at times to mean a radical absence of any historical instantiation of the divine – no epiphanies, songs, testimonies, no sacred embodiments or liturgies. [...] The messianic, by contrast, is a waiting without any horizon of expectation. Ascesis without epiphany. Derrida refers to this abstention as an 'epoché [bracketing] of the content' of faith; so much so, I think, that faith becomes an empty waiting, what he himself calls the 'formality of a structural messianism, a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism'" (Kearney 2009:170-171).

<sup>130</sup> For Ricoeur, faith was "the joy of yes in the sadness of no," and he described his own Protestant faith as a "chance converted into destiny by a constant choice" (Kearney 2009:172). In "Religion, Atheism, Faith," where he developed some aspects of a post-critical faith, he suggests that "an atheistic purging of the negative and life-denying components of religion needs to be taken on board if a genuine form of faith is to emerge in our secular culture" (Kearney 2009:172). He identifies *taboo* (specifically the fear of divine punishment) and *alibi* (the need for protection and consolation) as two aspects of religion that call for such radical critique. In the context of his understanding of religion as a "primitive structure of life which must always be overcome by faith and which is grounded in the fear of punishment and the desire for protection," atheism is justified as both destructive and liberating: "For as it exposes the dissimulating mechanisms of religious fear and infantile dependency – thereby destroying its destructiveness – it can emancipate new possibilities of existing. And one of these possibilities, suggests Ricoeur, involves a faith situated beyond accusation and escapism. In this manner, atheism may be said to emancipate religion from itself, opening the promise of a living faith curled within the shell of historical religion. That at any rate seems to be Ricoeur's wager regarding a 'post-religious faith'" (Kearney 2009:172-173).

<sup>131</sup> Kearney sees the so-called "religious turn" in contemporary French philosophy to have been deeply informed by Levinas, Derrida and Ricoeur – all three schooled in the phenomenological tradition. He finds it curious "how these three precursors of the movement held that any philosophical approach to theism must engage with atheism as its authentic and indispensable counterpart" (Kearney 2009:167).

metaphysical causality and theodicy behind. God cannot advene until we have resigned our attachment to divine omnipotence. God cannot come until we have said our final adieu<sup>132</sup> (Kearney 2009:168).

Ricoeur urges us to acknowledge the critique of ethics and religion undertaken by the school of suspicion. This is because, post-critique, it will be impossible to return, in Ricoeur's words, to a "moral life that would take the form of naïve submission to commandments or to an alien or supreme will, even if this will were represented as divine" (Kearney 2009:174). It is from the hermeneutics of suspicion that "we learn to understand that 'the commandment that gives death, not life, is a product and projection of our own weakness'" (Kearney 2009:174). For Ricoeur, Levinas, and Ricoeur, then, Kearney envisions the option (not the necessity) of anatheism, offering the possibility of belief after atheism, for a return to a post-religious theism purged by the criticism of Freud and Nietzsche (Kearney 2009:175).

Kevin Hart has pointed out that Christianity carries out her own deconstructions, even if they be partial in the sense of either not being systematically carried out or not going as far as one could go. Mystical or apophatic theologies serve as examples of such deconstructions, illustrating that God always transcends closed doctrinal concepts such as any "ontic, ontological or epistemic determinations of presence" (Hart 2009:726). But the "deconstructive moments" that he identifies in Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, etc., does not "disengage the faith from presence. Not at all: they show that God has other modes of presence than the ontic, ontological, and epistemic" (Hart 2009:726).

#### 5.4 Working out Kearney's philosophy theologically

The methodological status of Kearney's hermeneutics of theology has often been questioned. In Gregor's words, for example:

Where exactly does it stand in terms of doctrinal commitments? Is it still phenomenology? Can phenomenology even make the sort of moves Kearney makes, or should he reckon with the fact that he cannot avoid making

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<sup>132</sup> With this formulation, Kearney plays on Levinas' A-Dieu: "Without this movement of atheistic separateness, the other as irreducibly alien and strange cannot be recognized as *other*. And that, for Levinas, rules out the possibility of a genuinely religious relationship with God understood as absolute Other. We must, Levinas concludes accordingly, be *contre-dieu* before we can be *à-dieu* – in the double sense of taking leave from the old God as we turn to (*à*) a coming God" (Kearney 2009:168).

metaphysical claims? Can this sort of philosophy sidestep a deeper encounter with theology proper? (Gregor 2008:149).

As the section headings in *After God: Richard Kearney and the religious turn in Continental Philosophy* show (“Philosophy facing Theology,” and “Theology facing Philosophy”), Kearney’s work has commitments to both the philosophical and the theological communities, with the result that both are questioned (Gregor 2008:149). While he emphasises throughout that he works as a philosopher and is not attempting theological analysis, his “God-who-may-be” project cannot avoid making theological moves, and some are concerned about the theological implications of his claim that humans must “enable” God to be God (Gregor 2008:149).

Another theological concern has been Kearney’s lack of locating the cross and suffering within his Christology and eschatology (Gregor 2008:149). The powerless nature of the God-who-may-be is relevant to this point, for the God who appears to Moses does not simply deliver his people in a grand illustration of majesty, but instead invites Moses’ participation in enabling love and justice. For Gedney, Kearney has, with this “account of God’s powerful powerlessness,”

created not only a significant summation of his recent thinking on narrative and hermeneutics but also a space for renewed conversations with Ricoeur’s many accounts of the ‘suffering servant,’ as well as with the difficult religious possibilities inherent in Derrida’s thinking; renewed conversations that show not only the possibilities for understanding among friends engaged in the struggle with human suffering but also the rich possibilities for new conflicts of interpretations” (Gedney 2006:98).<sup>133</sup>

But from a theological perspective, this admittedly doesn’t go far enough, and therefore the invitation is open for theology to develop the possibilities for re-imagining the suffering God in post-metaphysical terms. Kevin Hart’s point that theology is grounded in the “in between,” and that its starting point must therefore

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<sup>133</sup> In dialogue with Kearney, Derrida also comments on the powerlessness of the God-who-may-be in light of his notion of *Khôra* as the indifferent space of possibility: “... I would like to tell you that I found your book powerful; it is powerful in its powerlessness. ... Your book formalizes questions in a way that is absolutely wonderful. I read your book in agreement all the time with this tiny difference on the question of power. The “may-be.” There are two ways to understand the “may.” “I may” is the “perhaps”; it is also the “I am able to” or “I might.” The “perhaps” (*peut-être*) refers to the unconditional beyond sovereignty. It is an unconditional which is the desire of powerlessness rather than power. I think you are right to attempt to name God not as sovereign, as almighty, but as precisely the most powerless. Justice and love are precisely oriented to this powerlessness. But *Khôra* is powerless too. Not powerlessness in the same sense as poor or vulnerable. Powerless as simply no-power. No power at all (Manoussakis 2004:10-11).

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always be the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (i.e. the centre of salvation history) and not creation or *eschaton*, is a valid one indeed (Hart 2009:730).<sup>134</sup> And while it must be kept in mind that writing a theology is not Kearney's aim, and that he indeed invites theologians to work out the contribution of philosophy theologically (Kearney 2009:167-183), Hart's point remains sobering: While theology will involve philosophy in all manner of ways, we should not limit our playfield by thinking that

the duet between religion and philosophy is the only or the most fundamental piece to appreciate. Christianity has come to have many partners, but there is no Christianity without a perpetual return to Jesus of Nazareth who, after all, taught us no philosophy yet told us parables that prompted and still prompt the reduction to the Kingdom. If phenomenology has religious significance, as Tillich thought, it may turn out to be because it is there to be seen, outside philosophy, in the New Testament (Hart 2009:731).

While Hart may go too far in limiting the contribution of philosophy to that found in Scripture, his criticism should remind us that post-metaphysical or postmodern theologies will be the richer for finding their structure and content from hermeneutically re-engaging their foundational narratives, and especially that of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Kearney notes how Ricoeur saw the philosopher as a responsible thinker that remains suspended between atheism and faith, and between the sacred and secular. In the space opened up by a critical hermeneutic, the "prophetic preacher"

may envisage a retrieval of a liberated faith within the great religious traditions. Ricoeur imagines in this context a "radical return to the origins of Jewish and Christian faith," a journey at once "originary and postreligious," which speaks to our time. The philosopher dreams of a prophet who would realize today the liberating message of Exodus 20:2 (RSV) that exists prior to the law: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Such faith speaks of freedom and proclaims the Cross and Resurrection as invitations to a more creative life, a belief that articulates the contemporary relevance of the Pauline distinction between Spirit and Law and interprets "sin" less as the breaking of taboo than as the refusal of life. In such a

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<sup>134</sup> "The resurrection is the Father's vindication of Christ's preaching, a declaration that it is the truth, that its object is not one more human kingdom but the Kingdom of *God*. If this is so, it follows that Christian theology should look first to literary criticism rather than philosophy in order to elaborate itself. The preaching of the Kingdom is conducted by the telling of parables, in metaphors and narratives, and not in concepts and arguments. There we learn about God the Father, and on the understanding of revelation given there we can begin to frame a teaching that is answerable to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the formula of Chalcedon, a teaching that will inevitably involve philosophy in all manner of ways (Hart 2009:731).

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scenario, sin would be exposed as a life lived fearfully “in the infernal cycle of law, transgression and guilt.” (Kearney 2009:175).

The realisation of such a faith does not fall with philosophers, however, but with post-religious believers. The time occupied by philosophers in this regard is merely intermediate, for while they may look forward to positive hermeneutics as a recreation of the biblical kerygma, they must remain on the border of the promised land without entering it, even if they might prepare the way by thinking through the present antinomy until they have “discovered the level of questioning that makes possible a mediation between religion and faith by way of atheism” (Kearney 2009:176). Kearney holds this argument by Ricoeur to be deeply anatheistic, suggesting that “to think religiously is to think post religiously,” and acknowledging the place of the anatheist philosopher as a giving attention to “a primordial event of word and meaning,” even if while philosophising, they may bracket out metaphysical questions of God and religion (Kearney 2009:176):

It is a form of existential hearkening to the coming and going, the being and nonbeing, of meaning prior to any confessional or institutional identification of the nature of that word. But in attending to this landing site, this disposition to listen and receive (often in silence) from something beyond one’s own mastering will, the anatheist philosopher can prepare the ground for believers who may later wish to release the kerygma of their faith from the prison-house of obligation and trepidation (Kearney 2009:176).

Despite the gap that will always remain between a philosophical exploration of new possibilities in existence and a religious practitioner’s proclamation of a return to God’s word, Ricoeur holds that between “a theology that retrieves its own origins and a philosophy that embraces atheism’s critique of religion, there may appear a certain ‘correspondence’” (Kearney 2009:177).<sup>135</sup> It is exactly a response to such a correspondence that Kearney has in mind with his use of the term “anatheism” (Kearney 2009:177).

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<sup>135</sup> Ricoeur describes his dream of what such a recovery might entail: “It would return to the roots of Judeo-Christian faith while also being a new beginning for our time.... It would be a faith that moves forward through the shadows, in a new ‘night of the soul’ – to adopt the language of the mystics – before a God who would not have the attributes of ‘Providence,’ a God who would not protect me but would surrender me to the dangers of a life worthy of being called human. Is not this God the Crucified One, the God who, as Bonhoeffer says, only through his weakness is capable of helping me?” (Kearney 2009:177). Ricoeur concludes his essay on religion and atheism: “The night of the soul means above all the overcoming ... of fear, the overcoming of nostalgia for the protecting father figure. Beyond the night, and only beyond it, can we recover the true meaning of the God of consolation, the God of Resurrection” (Kearney 2009:177).

Nothing is lost in anatheism. Or rather, what is lost as possession can be retrieved as gift, revisited after the salutary night of atheistic critique – just as Job received back all that he lost, and Abraham received back Isaac, and Jesus received his life after death. Even the loving “father” of creation may be anatheistically retrieved as a symbol of life. For if Biblical religion represented God as a Father and atheism bids us renounce the fetish of the father, anatheism suggests that, once overcome as idol, the image of the Father may be recovered as symbol” (Kearney 2009:177).

Kearney concludes his essay on anatheism by expressing Ricoeur’s post-religious view of God in terminology we have come to expect from him:

God thus becomes, for Ricoeur, a God *after* God, a God who no longer is but who *may be* again in the form of renewed life. Such a divinity is “capable” of making us “capable” of sacred life; and it does so by emptying divine being into nonbeing so as to allow for rebirth into more being: life more fully alive. In this option for natality over mortality, the dichotomy between before and after death may be refigured. The space of anatheism opens onto this “may be.” But it is a space of free possibility – beyond impossibility; it is never a *fait accompli* but a wager to be made and remade again and again (Kearney 2009:183).

Continental philosophy of religion, typically “less formal” than its Anglo-American counterpart, and more open to engagement with theology, is likewise more deeply invested in constructive reflection on religious texts, practices and phenomena, often approaching, in Hart’s words, a philosophical religion rather than a mere philosophy *of* religion (Gregor 2008:150).<sup>136</sup> It is for this reason that Continental Philosophy is often considered more existentially significant than much of Anglo-American philosophy, and also why it should be in closer dialogue with theology (Gregor 2008:150). The importance of Kearney’s work should be seen in this context, is indeed “signals one of the most compelling and challenging engagements” with the “theological turn” in philosophy (Manoussakis 2006a:xvi-xvii).<sup>137</sup>

<sup>136</sup> John Panteleimon Manoussakis also notes how religion and the question of God have always received attention in Continental Philosophy: “Whether theistic or atheistic, intellectual movements such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, existentialism, structuralism, and poststructuralism have all engaged in various ways with questions of ultimacy, transcendence, and alterity (2006a:xvi).

<sup>137</sup> Manoussakis shows how, while the questions of God have always been an integral part of Continental Philosophy, it is with the advent of phenomenology that “normative questions about theistic claims – for example, the debate about the existence of God – are often bracketed (a method known as the phenomenological *epoché*) for the sake of a different and arguably more meaningful set of questions: Could God be given to consciousness as a phenomenon? What kind of phenomena are religious experiences? What sort of phenomenological method is needed in order to describe them?

One can only hope that this type of dialogue between theology and philosophy will continue and be further developed, for Marion has also pointed, following Barth and Bultmann, to the continuity between hermeneutics' general structure and the case of faith. He emphasised the "deep rationality in the operations of faith, understanding, interpretation," which, although irreducible to the usual rules of hermeneutics and phenomenology, is still connected to it:

I think we are no longer in a situation where you have "reason or faith." Reason is a construct. It is not optional, it is done. *I would say that the difficulty for Christian theology now is perhaps that Christian theology assumes too much of the former figure of metaphysics and philosophy, which is already deconstructed. And this opens, I think, new fields for creative theology. But many theologians, if I may say so, have not taken quite seriously the end of metaphysics, and deconstruction, and so they miss these open opportunities.* It is perhaps surprising that philosophers are maybe more aware of new possibilities for theology than theologians (or at least some of them) (Marion, during a 2003 dialogue with Kearney published by Manoussakis [2004:25]; my italics).

One of the most urgent questions springing from Kearney's hermeneutics of religion that will have to be analysed and evaluated by theological reflection is of whether this God-who-may-be is a God at all, or merely a "regulatory concept" (William Desmond), a unifying idea (Craig Nichols) that serves as centre for Kearney's newly constructed "ethical monotheism" (Jeffrey Bloechl) (Manoussakis 2006a:xix). And the demanding task of giving definition to God that follows from this question raises the question whether Kearney can avoid metaphysics altogether.<sup>138</sup> Furthermore, while Kearney's hermeneutical and phenomenological approach certainly opens many possibilities for novel thinking in terms of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the question of whether this tradition informs Kearney to the extent that his findings are no longer purely phenomenological observations, is a valid one.<sup>139</sup>

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In recent years, this questioning of God has assumed such acute and arresting proportions as to prompt some scholars to speak of a 'theological turn' in philosophy" (2006a:xvi).

<sup>138</sup> Olthuis asks, for instance, whether Kearney's religious hermeneutics offers an alternative to onto-theology, or whether it is just another version of it – an onto-eschatology, and with Hart he asks whether the possible isn't a category of metaphysics (Manoussakis 2006a:xx).

<sup>139</sup> As Manoussakis puts it in his introduction to *After God*: "Both Ó Murchadha and O'Leary interrogate the Judeo-Christian commitments that, in their view, inform Kearney's hermeneutical and phenomenological reading. Kearney's pledge to an understanding of God that would promote love and justice does not derive (as Janicaud argues in his essay ...) from a purely phenomenological observation; and thus it seems to vitiate his claim to find God in phenomena such as *posse* or the 'face' of the Other: phenomena which, if 'allowed to unfold on their own terms and without theological interference, do not necessarily point to the God of Scripture' (O'Leary). As Ó Murchadha observes,

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But let us return briefly to the question of metaphysics in Kearney's post-metaphysical project. Patrick Masterson has noted how Kearney's phenomenological perspective "abstracts from theological claims and precludes traditional metaphysical ones" (2008:259), describing, instead, the interaction between humankind and God from the viewpoint of human religious attention (Masterson 2008:259). Kearney avoids ontological questions and descriptions:

The metaphysical consideration of God's own independent existence is not an issue. From a phenomenological viewpoint it is put out of play or 'in parenthesis', it is his religious significance *for humankind* which is the englobing focus of attention and discussion (Masterson 2008:259).

But Masterson insists that Kearney's phenomenological consideration of divine transcendence as eschatological possibility "needs to be qualified and complemented by certain metaphysical considerations which Kearney disputes" (2008:247). He holds that

unless such discourse is open to reflective metaphysical reappraisal and qualification, one is exposed to a dilemma involving either idolatry or atheism. For a God inextricably inscribed in human experience is inextricably a human god, and a God not so inscribed must ultimately not even be a possibility from a strictly phenomenological viewpoint. On the one hand, the relative dependence of God, described in phenomenological terms as a possibility co-relative to human desire (rather than in terms of his independently possessed actual existence – his *esse*) appears to compromise his alleged radical transcendence. On the other hand, insistence on the radical alterity of his transcendence calls in question the claim that he is most appropriately spoken of as 'possibility' or 'the God Who May Be', which refers inextricably to his reality for mankind (Masterson 2008:260).

Masterson's objection concerns the limits of phenomenology for describing transcendence, for phenomenologically given transcendence is essentially a transcendence that is accessible to human experience, and therefore a transcendence that is relativized as "transcendence-for-humans" (Masterson 2008:261). An "experientially inscribed transcendence," he holds, "... cannot be phenomenologically legitimated as experience of divine transcendence," and thus it calls for a different approach (2008:261). What Masterson proposes, is that the

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'the things to come' (eschatology) are not quite the same as 'the things themselves' (phenomenology)" (2006a:xx).

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approach to finding the ultimate foundation of experiential transcendence should proceed along the way of

indirect metaphysical analysis of the implications of this experience to arrive finally at a non-experiential affirmation of God as its ultimate real foundation... Here one is in the realm, not of a God Who May Be, but a God whose actual existence is a metaphysical presupposition of his phenomenological intimation (2008:262).

For Masterson, Kearney's proposal is more pre- than post metaphysical, and must be complemented by a "more fundamental metaphysical level of discourse" (2008:263). But Masterson may have gone too far in imposing on Kearney's *Philosophy at the Limit* what he wanted to avoid in the first place – the constraints of metaphysical categories of *esse*, as opposed to the ethically creative (and co-creating) experience of God as transfiguring and eschatological *posse*. And yet his remarks are valid, and the question of metaphysics not entirely out of place, for if Kearney envisions an eschatological kingdom, actualised in our world through the many small seeds of love and justice, he has yet to explain on what basis any act can be described as loving and just, so that it seems his ethically minded hermeneutics can hardly avoid metaphysical categories as a whole.

It seems, then, that the playfield is open for philosophy and theology to engage anew around the themes of eschatology, metaphysics and its deconstruction, ethics, imagination, and religion. We can only hope that Kearney's invitation to theology to appropriate his wagers and work out its implications for confessional circles will not go unanswered. But we would hope for more, still. We would dream, namely, of a two-way discourse between theology and philosophy. Or to use Kearney's image in a different context, we would be as Jacob on the ground, dreaming of angels moving in both directions up and down the ladder, so that the twin disciplines may be mutually enriched by their explorative play.

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## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION

The overview of Kearney's work in **Chapter 2** painted a picture of a scholar whose interdisciplinary approach to philosophy is characterised by a desire to negotiate between extremes and binary opposites in order to articulate middle ways. His diacritical hermeneutic and his proposal to re-imagine God as *posse* serve as excellent examples in this regard. Kearney's participation in the "religious turn" in Continental Philosophy has been characterised by a hermeneutical exploration of the possible as an imaginative way of informing philosophical issues (Masterson 2008:247).

**Chapter 3** considered Kearney's 2007 essay, "Re-imagining God," as a portal into Kearney's post-metaphysical proposal of re-imagining God eschatologically, that is to say as neither Being nor non-Being, but as the *possibility-to-be*. The chapter outlines his hermeneutical consideration of God-as-possibility in three stages: biblical tradition, the testimonial circle, and the literary circle, and discusses his understanding of the meaning of the possible and *dunamis* eschatologically as gracious giving that possibilises love and justice in the world. Kearney's question of how the existence of God as *posse* might be conceived in light of the possibility that we might destroy the earth is also discussed as a means of gaining insight into his understanding of a God that is understood eschatologically. Such a God remains forever as possibility, even in the absence of human response, and with all the minute acts of love and justice preserved in divine memory, no such act will be lost in any future that may proceed from God's freedom to begin again.

Recognising that the spatial and temporal constraints of a conference paper may cause the main elements of Kearney's reasoning in "Re-imagining God" to appear somewhat disconnected and ungrounded, **Chapter 4** examined some of the implications and/or questions of the essay discussed in Chapter 3. This examination proceeded, under various headings, along the lines of a literary study, mainly focusing on Kearney's own writing in the various themes, and seven main aspects of Kearney's thought received attention:

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*Posse and esse: Kearney's post-metaphysical God.* This section drew especially from *The God who may be* to shed light on the hermeneutical and phenomenological foundations of Kearney's wager. Both metaphysical and eschatological readings of the epiphany in Exodus 3:14 is considered to expound Kearney's appellative (rather than predicative) understanding of God's self-revelation in the form of a promise of God's presence to all future generations – a reading that convinced him to avoid hypostatizing the name and to read it instead as a dynamic mandate that espouses both a human and a divine side to the promise, for God's gift is continuous giving to persons who are free to accept it, or not to. From here the section moves on to consider both metaphysical and post-metaphysical readings of the possible. Whereas metaphysics understood possibility in terms of being, and then as latency or lack that is yet to be realised into act, Kearney explores the thoughts of Husserl, Bloch, Heidegger, and Derrida in search of pointers for a new eschatological understanding of the divine as the eschatological may-be. Finally, Kearney proposes that a sort of "nuptial chiasm" can negotiate between *posse* and *esse*, where *possest* contains the possibility and necessity of *esse* within itself, so that Kearney's *possest* may be seen as advent and *eschaton* rather than arche and principium.

*Enabling God: Kearney's God of small things.* Based on his eschatological reading of Exodus 3:14, Kearney envisions an indissoluble communion between God and humans: a commitment to a shared history of "becoming," where God *becomes* with humans and is as such dependent on humanity even as humanity is dependent on God. Such an interpretation necessitates that the orthodox onto-theological categories of God (omnipotence, omniscience, self-causality) be revisited and revised. Kearney terms the new hermeneutic of God as May-Be an *onto-eschatological* hermeneutics, or a *poetics of the possible*. But even if God's future being may depend on human actions in history, Godself remains unconditional, for as a gift, God's love remains as unconditional giving. By opening ourselves to the transfiguring power of transcendence, i.e., by recognising our own powerlessness and thereby being enabled to respond to God's own primordial powerlessness, humanity is invited to realise a promised kingdom of justice and love through small acts of love and mercy (and not through any grandiose schemes).

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*Presence from the beyond: Kearney's eschatological God.* Kearney's understanding of the divinity as the constant gifting of the possibility of the Kingdom can be interpreted simultaneously as the eschatological Kingdom at the end of history, and as the Kingdom manifested here and now in small and seemingly insignificant acts of love and kindness. The coming of the Messiah in history does not bring the end of everything, for the Messiah always comes and goes – always already here and always yet to come. This leads Kearney to describe the *eschaton* in terms of messianic time that subverts and supersedes the linear, causal time of history and reveals impossible-possibilities that promises an advent that is so infinite that it is never final, and that possibilises the Kingdom out of the future into every moment – from beyond time, against time, into time.

*Love and justice: Kearney's theological ethics.* In many ways, ethics can be viewed as the integrating force of Kearney's hermeneutics of religion that envisions God as the possibility that enables humans to respond ethically to an eschatological call. Avoiding ontological questions, Kearney speaks of God (phenomenologically) as the not yet accomplished fulfilment of ethico-religious desire, where the God that always arrives from the eschatological future as transformative possibility, turns our attention to other persons in the world. This leads Kearney to a phenomenological treatment of the otherness of the "other," where he explores the theme of transfiguration in terms of a phenomenology of the *persona*. Having considered the *persona* as the figure of the other, as *eschaton*, as that which resists fusion, as chiasm, and as *prosopon*, Kearney addresses the topic of transfiguration by rereading the events on Mount Tabor as a biblical example of the act of transfiguration, and also by a brief treatment of Paul's presentation on the topic. He then proceeds to discuss transfiguration by speaking of the desire of God, through which the God of *posse* finds voice through many different *personas*. This he does by re-engaging the Song of Songs to picture God as a "desire beyond my desire" that is the reward of excess, gift, and grace, rather than indicating lack of any kind. The significance of this elaborate treatment of the other and of desire is to be found in the conviction that all expressions of otherness (including the understanding of God as the transcendent Other) must be somehow accessible to human consciousness if an ethical appraisal of experience is to be maintained. It is precisely this encounter with the other that, for Kearney, opens up new possibilities for critical

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reflection and feeds the passion for eschatological hermeneutics. It was concluded that the question of metaphysical and post-metaphysical ways of doing theology and ethics will need further attention in any attempts to further develop the implications of Kearney's hermeneutics of religion for theological ethics, including the question of whether any ethics can avoid metaphysical foundations.

*Poetics: naming the unnameable.* Kearney embraces poetic language to give expression to that which stretches language to the limit and even then still leaves it at a loss. By means of innovative and insubordinate language that resists both "allegorist abstraction" and "metaphysical dualism," a powerful religious poetic can "sing the unsayable and intimate the unnameable (Kearney 2001:57-58). Kearney's own attempt at speaking the unsayable poetically and of searching for metaphors, figures and images from both our philosophical and theological heritages, leads him to explore, by means of a hermeneutic retrieval, Aristotle's *nous poetikos*, Nicolas of Cusa's *possest*, Schelling's *Seyn-könnende*, and the metaphors of *godplay* and *perichoresis*.

*Circles of meaning: Kearney's hermeneutics.* For Kearney, the focus in appropriating ancient texts to contemporary contexts falls on a mutual convergence of horizons, where old and new minds meet to the mutual enrichment of both. Such a process of interpretation entails a two-way process where the foreign becomes familiar, and the familiar foreign. Kearney's diacritical hermeneutics is worked out in *Strangers, gods, and monsters* as a negotiation between a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of suspension. Kearney's creative interpretation of texts has both archaeological and teleological reference, so that a recounting of our present situation in the light of past memories (including the biblical stories) and future expectations brings about what we dare to imagine: a kingdom of justice and love. For Kearney, the self knows itself as "a *narrative* identity that perdures and coheres over a lifetime" (Kearney 2002b:4). With narrative plotting scattered events into a new paradigm, it offers a newly imagined way of existing in the world and as such purges us of fear through the catharsis that we experience as we identify with the characters of a story. With historical communities being constituted by the stories they tell themselves, a culture's sense of constancy is accompanied by an imperative of innovation that results from the inventive openness of collective memory. This

window into Kearney's hermeneutics provides us with a key by which to approach his probing of biblical traditions to speak, tell and narrate themselves anew and thereby disclose new possibilities for living – a process that bears witness to Ricoeur's triple *mimesis* of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration. Kearney also emphasises the ethical role of storytelling which, as a mode of discourse, enables the ethical sharing of a common world with others. In this context he also emphasises the intrinsically interactive nature of storytelling over against the postmodern focus on textual indeterminacies and anonymity challenges, proposing that a model of narrative selfhood is able to satisfy anti-humanist suspicions of subjectivity without obliterating the possibility of the ethical-political subject.

*Imagination now: producing new worlds.* It is Kearney's phenomenological and hermeneutical account of the imagination that enables his exploration of the possible. Kearney understands imagination as an intentional act of consciousness fashions meaning and truth (Masterson 2008:250). In *The wake of the imagination: toward a postmodern culture*, Kearney takes a historical approach to illustrate that the human ability to "image" or "imagine" has been mainly understood in the history of Western thought as a representational faculty (reproducing images of some pre-existing reality) or as a creative faculty (producing images which often lay claim to an original status in their own right) (1988a:15). He traces the views of imagination from the Hebraic and Greek cultures through Medieval and modern perspectives to the postmodern voices of structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction, and illustrates how the

creative power of imagination which biblical culture identified with Adamic man, and Greek culture with Promethean or demiurgic man, reaches its ultimate humanist conclusion with existentialist man. And the logical implication would seem to be that the human imagination will disappear as man himself disappears. The concept of imagination cannot, apparently, survive the postmodern age of deconstruction (1988a:30).

But Kearney is concerned that talk about the demise of the human imagination may fuel a kind of apocalyptic pessimism that will accelerate the end of humanity itself. He agrees that the imagination should be purged of the more naïve aspects of humanism, but at the same would prefer to not see healthy criticism deteriorate to the point where the creative subject is denied any role whatsoever in the shaping of history. He proposes a model of a poetical-ethical imagination as a

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way for the postmodern imagination (having been deprived of its humanist ideologies) to allow for meaningful interaction that is committed to realising a more just world. While such a postmodern imagination would move beyond humanism, it would remain faithful to its humanitarian intentions. For Kearney, the poetical-ethical imagination's discontent with a mere mapping of the postmodern logic would, he holds, guides us toward (i) an openness to the concrete needs of the other in the postmodern context, and toward (ii) exploring ways to effectively engage in the transformation of our social existence (Kearney 1988a:386-387). While deconstructionism may object, on the basis of the indeterminate nature of the representational relationship between the image and its original, Kearney insists that epistemological undecidability does not necessitate ethical undecidability. Because the ethical status of an image does not derive from its function (mimetic, productive or parodic) but from the secondary level of reflective interpretation (where the epistemological problem arises), an ethical-poetical imagination calls for a *critical hermeneutics* that can identify the hidden interests that motivate specific interpretations of images in specific contexts (Kearney 1988a:390). Because the poetico-ethical imagination is capable of envisioning what things were like before, and might be like after postmodernism, it is fundamentally *historical*. By "refiguring" lost narratives from the past and "prefiguring" narratives of the future, the historical imagination aims at "transfiguring" the postmodern present. As the narrating self reinterprets his/her own story in relation to larger narratives transmitted by cultural memory, the notion of personal identity is enlarged to encapsulate communal identity. This implies that the poetical and ethical aspects of this narrative task suggest a political project where the imaginative self comes to recognise more clearly – by narrating his/her story to the other – the unlimited nature of its responsibility to others.

**Chapter 5** considers the previous chapters with the question in mind of how Kearney's hermeneutics of religion creates new possibilities for systematic theology. For Kearney himself, speaking of God in terms of possibility makes a difference in that:

- (i) it puts the presuppositions and prejudices that condition our everyday lives into question in the name of a future that is unprogrammable;

- (ii) it refuses a god of theodicy in that it recognises that, in a world where no course of action is pre-ordained, we are free to construct a more loving and a more just world, or not to;
- (iii) God's transfiguring power helps us to remain hopeful, since what has up to now appeared impossible now appears to be possible as the eschatological potentials latently inscribed in the historically im-possible are disclosed.

Four areas were identified where Kearney's proposals hold great promise for dialogue with theology:

*Ecumenics.* The imagination, for Kearney, serves as a special agent of inter-religious hospitality, in that it "suggests that a spiritual imaginary operating at the level of metaphor, narrative, symbol and epiphany can traverse the closed border of dogma and ideology and open genuine conversations between wisdom traditions" (Kearney 2008:3).

*The nature of religious discourse.* Kearney employs the pseudonym "metaphorology" to denote his understanding of religious discourse as "an endeavor to say something (however hesitant and provisional) about the unsayable" (Kearney 2001:7). Here he is influenced heavily by Ricoeur's proposal that "inventive hermeneutic readings of religious texts can spark off a rich play of metaphoricity resulting in a radical semantic augmentation (or 'surplus of meaning')" (Kearney 2001:7). Ricoeur's new model of religious hermeneutics has a two-way production of metaphorical meaning in mind (Kearney 2001:7). In more theological terms, Kearney sees this "metaphorizing role of hermeneutic mediation" as charting a winding path between the apophatic and cataphatic approaches to God. Between these traditions, he navigates a third channel that approaches God as neither non-being nor being, but as the possibility-to-be

*Kearney's post-metaphysical God and post-religious faith.* Kearney has proposed anatheism as a description of his moving in the space in-between theism and atheism. Having reviewed the contributions that Levinas and Derrida have made to the atheistic critique of the traditional God of onto-theology, he then discusses Ricoeur's work to show "how the atheistic critique is a necessary moment in the development of genuine faith that involves a renunciation of fear and dependency as

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well as a reaffirmation of life and a return to existence” (2009:167). He then discusses how such a return to God is possible, the ethical position that enables it, the reinterpretations of biblical traditions that it entails, the revival of God as an enabling God, and considers what the relationship between an atheist philosopher and theologian would entail (2009:167).

*Working out Kearney’s philosophy theologically.* Kearney’s work has commitments to both the philosophical and the theological communities, and while he emphasises throughout that he works as a philosopher and is not attempting theological analysis, his “God-who-may-be” project cannot avoid making theological moves. But even if he is sometimes criticised for this, the fact remains that it is the place and function of theology to work out the theological possibilities disclosed by Kearney’s philosophy. Kearney notes how Ricoeur saw the philosopher as a responsible thinker that remains suspended between atheism and faith, and between the sacred and secular. The realisation of an atheistic faith does not fall with philosophers, however, but with post-religious believers. Despite the gap that will always remain between a philosophical exploration of new possibilities in existence and a religious practitioner’s proclamation of a return to God’s word, Ricoeur holds that between “a theology that retrieves its own origins and a philosophy that embraces atheism’s critique of religion, there may appear a certain ‘correspondence’” (Kearney 2009:177). It is exactly a response to such a correspondence that Kearney has in mind with his use of the term “atheism” (Kearney 2009:177). Continental philosophy of religion, typically “less formal” than its Anglo-American counterpart, and more open to engagement with theology, is likewise more deeply invested in constructive reflection on religious texts, practices and phenomena. The importance of Kearney’s work should be seen in this context, and indeed “signals one of the most compelling and challenging engagements” with the “theological turn” in philosophy (Manoussakis 2006a:xvi-xvii). One of the most urgent questions springing from Kearney’s hermeneutics of religion that will have to be analysed and evaluated by theological reflection is that of whether this God-who-may-be is a God at all, or merely a “regulatory concept” (William Desmond), a unifying idea (Craig Nichols) that serves as centre for Kearney’s newly constructed “ethical monotheism” (Jeffrey Bloechl) (Manoussakis 2006a:xix). And the demanding task of giving definition to God that follows from this question begs the question if

Kearney can avoid metaphysics altogether. Furthermore, while Kearney's hermeneutical and phenomenological approach certainly opens many possibilities for novel thinking in terms of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the question of whether this tradition informs Kearney to the extent that his findings are no longer purely phenomenological observations, is a valid one.

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This study has explored the post-metaphysical possibilities for reflecting on God's relationship with his creatures that flow from Kearney's utilisation of the imagination as a way of negotiating between the oppositional understandings of God as either Being or Non-Being. It has aimed to understand his essay "Re-imagining God" within the larger context of his other publications on the subjects of the imagination, narrative, and "thinking God" post-metaphysically.

Kearney's chosen strategy of hermeneutical poetics has accorded him much freedom to explore new possibilities for thinking God in a postmodern world. His development of "an alternative account of theism that defends a notion of God's power grounded in the notion of possibility rather than in the traditional categories of actuality and omnipotence" (Gedney 2006:98). The study has found that Kearney's notion of possibility engenders new prospects for discourse about God that moves us beyond metaphysical categories to allow for an eschatological understanding of God in terms of post-metaphysical thought. Kearney's eschatological approach mediates between the polar opposition of thinking God as either Being or Non-Being, and as such provides post-metaphysical avenues for re-imagining God as the God-who-may-be.

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